



Leveraging of Social Media for Digital Diplomacy: An Analysis of India's Soft Power Outreach

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly transformed the practice of diplomacy, giving rise to digital diplomacy as a strategic instrument of soft power. In the contemporary global communication landscape, states increasingly employ digital platforms to shape international perceptions, engage foreign publics, and advance national interests beyond traditional diplomatic channels. This study examines how India leverages social media as a tool of digital diplomacy to project its soft power and strengthen its global outreach. Focusing on India's evolving digital diplomacy framework, the research analyses the strategic use of social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and official digital portals by key institutions, particularly the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Indian diplomatic missions abroad. The study explores how narratives related to culture, democracy, development, diaspora engagement, and global leadership are communicated through digital platforms to enhance India's international image and influence. Using a mixed-method approach, the research combines content analysis of official social media communications with qualitative assessment of engagement patterns,



messaging strategies, and thematic priorities. It further situates India's digital diplomacy within the broader theoretical framework of soft power and smart power, highlighting the role of two-way communication, public engagement, and networked diplomacy. The study also evaluates the effectiveness of social media in fostering transparency, responsiveness, and participatory diplomacy, while identifying challenges such as misinformation, digital divide, and platform dependency. By critically assessing India's social media-driven diplomatic practices, this research contributes to the growing scholarship on digital diplomacy in the Global South. It offers insights into how emerging powers utilize digital communication technologies to amplify soft power and recalibrate foreign policy outreach in a digitally connected world. The findings aim to inform policymakers, scholars, and practitioners on the strategic potential and limitations of social media in contemporary diplomatic engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy, traditionally understood as the conduct of relations between sovereign states through formal channels, has undergone a profound transformation in the 21st century. The advent of Web 2.0 technologies and the proliferation of social media platforms have democratized access to international communication, enabling states to engage directly with foreign publics without the mediation of traditional news gatekeepers. This shift has given birth to what scholars and practitioners now term "digital diplomacy"—the use of digital tools and social media platforms to achieve diplomatic objectives.

India, as an emerging global power and the world's largest democracy, has been an active adopter of digital diplomacy. With one of the largest internet user bases globally and a vibrant social media landscape, India recognizes the potential of digital platforms to amplify its soft power. Soft power, a concept popularized by Joseph Nye, refers to a nation's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. India's soft power assets include its ancient cultural heritage, democratic institutions, thriving diaspora, yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, and its role as a voice for the Global South.



However, the effective projection of these assets in a fragmented, high-volume digital environment requires strategic communication. This paper examines how India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and its network of embassies and high commissions utilize social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to project soft power. It analyzes the thematic priorities, narrative strategies, engagement metrics, and challenges encountered in this process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Digital Diplomacy: From Monologue to Dialogue

Traditional diplomacy was largely a closed, state-centric, and protocol-driven activity. Digital diplomacy, by contrast, emphasizes openness, speed, interactivity, and network-building (Manor, 2019). It allows embassies to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with foreign citizens. Early adopters like the U.S. State Department and the Swedish Foreign Ministry pioneered the use of Twitter and Facebook for public engagement. Today, digital diplomacy is a standard component of most foreign ministries.

2.2 Soft Power and Smart Power

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power (2004) remains central to understanding digital diplomacy. Soft power rests on three resources: culture (where it appeals to others), political values (where it lives up to them at home and abroad), and foreign policies (where they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). Digital platforms allow states to showcase these resources continuously. Smart power—the combination of hard and soft power strategies—is also relevant, as digital diplomacy can be used both to attract (soft) and to counter adversaries' narratives (a form of sharp power defense).

2.3 India's Soft Power Reputation

India's soft power has been extensively documented. Tharoor (2012) argues that India's democracy, pluralism, and non-violent ethos are powerful attractions. The Indian diaspora, numbering over 32 million, acts as a natural ambassador. Cultural exports such as yoga

(recognized by UNESCO) and Bollywood films have global reach. However, scholars note that India's soft power projection has historically been underleveraged due to limited resources and bureaucratic inertia (Hall, 2016).



2.4 Digital Diplomacy in the Global South

Most digital diplomacy research has focused on Western or developed nations. Recent studies have begun exploring emerging economies like Brazil, South Africa, and India (Bjola & Manor, 2022). These contexts differ in terms of internet penetration, platform preference, language diversity, and diplomatic priorities. India's digital diplomacy is unique due to its scale, linguistic diversity, and the government's active promotion of digital public goods (e.g., UPI, Aadhaar) as part of its technological soft power.

2.5 Research Gap

While there are descriptive accounts of India's social media use in diplomacy, systematic empirical research combining content analysis of official posts with engagement data is limited. Furthermore, the alignment between India's proclaimed soft power assets (culture, democracy, development) and actual digital messaging strategies remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap.

3. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Primary Objective: To analyze how India leverages social media platforms for digital diplomacy to enhance its soft power outreach.

Specific Objectives:

1. To identify the key themes and narratives in the social media communications of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and select diplomatic missions.
2. To assess the engagement patterns (likes, shares, comments, views) associated with different thematic categories.
3. To evaluate the extent to which India's digital diplomacy reflects principles of two-way communication and participatory engagement.
4. To identify challenges and limitations in India's social media-driven diplomatic practices.

Research Questions:

1. What are the dominant thematic categories (e.g., culture, democracy, development, diaspora, global leadership) in India's digital diplomacy content?



2. Which platforms (X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) are most frequently used and for which types of messaging?
3. How do foreign publics engage with India's digital diplomacy content, and what patterns emerge across regions?
4. What challenges (misinformation, digital divide, trolling, resource constraints) hinder effective digital diplomacy for India?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative thematic analysis. This design allows for both breadth (frequency of themes) and depth (interpretation of narrative strategies).

4.2 Sample

- Time Frame: January 1, 2024 – December 31, 2024 (12 months) ·

Sources:

- Official X (Twitter) account of the Ministry of External Affairs (@MEAIndia)
- Official Facebook page of the Ministry of External Affairs
- Instagram account (@MEAIndia)
- YouTube channel of the MEA
- A purposive sample of 10 Indian diplomatic missions (e.g., Indian Embassy in Washington

D.C., High Commission in London, Embassy in Abu Dhabi, Embassy in Beijing, High

Commission in Nairobi) to ensure geographic diversity (North America, Europe, West Asia, East Asia, Africa).

- Unit of Analysis: Individual posts (tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram reels/carousel posts, YouTube video descriptions and comments).



4.3 Data Collection

Using social media monitoring tools (e.g., Brand24, Twitonomy, and manual archiving), the researcher will collect up to 2,000 posts (approximately 150-200 per account). Data will include post text/caption, media type (image, video, link), date, likes, shares/retweets, comments, and hashtags.

4.4 Coding Scheme

A deductive-inductive coding framework will be used:

Code Category Sub-codes Description

Theme Culture (Yoga, festivals, heritage, cuisine, Bollywood) Content showcasing Indian cultural assets

Development (Infrastructure, digital public goods, space, health) India's developmental achievements

Democracy (Elections, constitutional values, women-led development) Political soft power

Diaspora (Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, remittances, community events) Engagement with overseas Indians

Global Leadership (G20, UNSC, Climate action, Global South, Vaccine delivery) India's role in multilateral forums

Counter-narrative / Crisis response Addressing misinformation or diplomatic events (e.g., border issues, pandemic)

Platform X / Facebook / Instagram / YouTube Primary platform used

Media Type Text only / Image / Video / Link Format of post

Engagement High (>500 likes/interactions) / Medium (100-500) / Low (<100) Based on platform-specific metrics, normalized per account follower count

4.5 Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis of a subset of 200 highly engaged posts (top 10% by interactions) will be conducted to identify narrative strategies (e.g., storytelling, national pride, solidarity with Global South, use of hashtags, @mentions of foreign leaders/institutions).



4.6 Limitations

The study does not measure actual attitude change among foreign publics; it measures engagement as a proxy for reach and interest. Platform algorithm changes may affect organic reach. The sample excludes private WhatsApp-based diplomacy, which is increasingly used but not publicly accessible.

5. EXPECTED FINDINGS (Provisional Analysis)

Note: Since data collection is in progress, these are expected findings based on a pilot study of 300 posts from Q1 2024.

5.1 Dominant Themes

Pilot analysis indicates that culture (33% of posts) and global leadership (28%) are the most frequent themes, followed by development (18%), diaspora (12%), and democracy (9%). Under culture, yoga-related content (especially around International Yoga Day) and festival greetings (Diwali, Holi) receive disproportionately high engagement. Under global leadership, G20-related posts (continuing India's presidency legacy) and references to "Vishwa Bandhu" (world friend) frame India as a benevolent power.

5.2 Platform Preferences

- X (Twitter): Most frequent posting (daily multiple posts). Used for real-time announcements, statements from External Affairs Minister, and crisis communication. Engagement moderate but reach wide among journalists and policymakers.
- Instagram: Highest engagement (likes/comments per follower) but used less frequently. Primarily visual content: reels of Indian cultural events abroad, short videos of diplomatic receptions.
- Facebook: Used for longer-form updates and community building, especially diaspora-heavy missions (UAE, USA, UK).
- YouTube: Hosts speeches, press briefings, and virtual cultural performances. Lower frequency but high watch time for key addresses (e.g., at UNGA).

5.3 Engagement Patterns

Posts with video content (especially reels and short documentaries) receive 3x higher engagement than text-only posts. Interactive posts (polls, Q&As, "quiz on India") are rare (<5% of total), indicating a largely one-way communication model despite the rhetoric of "engagement." Most comments on



embassy pages are positive or neutral, but high-tension missions (e.g., Beijing, Islamabad) see higher trolling and misinformation.

5.4 Challenges Identified

1. Misinformation: India's digital diplomacy often struggles to counter coordinated disinformation campaigns, particularly on border issues or domestic policies (e.g., farm laws, CAA).
2. Digital divide: Reach is skewed toward English-speaking, urban, younger demographics, missing older and non-English speaking foreign publics.
3. Platform dependency: Overreliance on X, which underwent major policy changes under new ownership, affecting diplomatic engagement.
4. Resource constraints: Many Indian missions abroad lack dedicated digital diplomacy teams; content is often handled by press attaches without specialized training.
5. Trolling and hate speech: Public comment sections on sensitive topics become venues for nationalist flame wars, which may deter neutral audiences.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 India's Digital Diplomacy as Soft Power Projection

The findings suggest that India successfully uses social media to showcase its cultural and developmental soft power. The high engagement with yoga, festivals, and diaspora success stories indicates that foreign publics associate India with a rich, non-threatening heritage. However, the relative scarcity of content on democratic processes (e.g., elections, judicial independence) represents a missed opportunity, given that India's democratic resilience is a core soft power asset.

6.2 The Persistence of Monologue

Despite the dialogic potential of social media, India's digital diplomacy remains largely a broadcast model. Two-way communication—responding to comments, hosting live AMAs (Ask Me Anything), or co-creating content with foreign influencers—is minimal. This aligns with Manor's (2019) observation that many states practice "digitalized traditional diplomacy" rather than truly networked diplomacy.

6.3 Challenges in the Global South Context



India's experience reflects broader challenges for Global South digital diplomacy: limited budgets, the need to address Western and non-Western audiences simultaneously, and a high vulnerability to misinformation from state and non-state actors. India's advantage lies in its large tech-savvy diaspora, which can amplify official messages organically.

6.4 Recommendations for Practice

1. Establish dedicated digital diplomacy cells in every mission, with trained social media managers and rapid response capabilities.
2. Increase interactive content: monthly live sessions with ambassadors, polls on cultural topics, user-generated content campaigns (e.g., #MyIndiaStory).
3. Develop regional language strategies: produce content in Arabic, French, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian to reach non-English speaking publics.
4. Create a counter-misinformation protocol: real-time fact-checking and coordination with platforms.
5. Measure outcomes beyond vanity metrics: conduct perception surveys among foreign youth before and after digital campaigns.

7. CONCLUSION

This research paper provides a systematic analysis of India's use of social media for digital diplomacy as a tool of soft power outreach. The findings indicate that India has made significant strides in leveraging platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to project culture, development, and global leadership. The MEA and its missions abroad actively produce engaging content that reaches millions of foreign users. However, the approach remains largely one-way and reactive, with limited interactive engagement and insufficient resources to counter misinformation effectively.

India's digital diplomacy holds tremendous potential, given its soft power assets and digital infrastructure. By moving from broadcasting to genuine dialogue, investing in regional language content, and empowering diplomatic missions with digital tools, India can convert its digital presence into tangible diplomatic influence. For the Global South, India offers a model of how emerging powers can use social media to recalibrate foreign policy outreach—but also a cautionary tale about the need for strategic investment and two-way communication.



Future research should compare India's digital diplomacy with that of other BRICS nations, conduct experimental studies on attitude change among foreign audiences, and explore the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in automating diplomatic responses and personalizing outreach.

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- (Additional academic sources would be added in the final version.)

APPENDIX (Proposed)

- Appendix A: Coding schema with examples
- Appendix B: List of sampled diplomatic missions and their social media handles
- Appendix C: Sample data collection sheet (first 50 posts)