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Digital Diplomacy in India: Leveraging Social Media Platforms for Global Influence

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how India employs major social media platforms specifically X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok as instruments of digital diplomacy to shape international political opinion and reinforce its identity as a rising global actor. As digital communication becomes central to contemporary statecraft, this study investigates how India strategically adapts its narrative, tone, and visual presentation across platforms with distinct audiences and communicative affordances. The central research question guiding this analysis is: How does India utilize X, Instagram, and TikTok to conduct digital diplomacy and influence international public opinion?

Using a qualitative, multi-method approach, the study evaluates a dataset of 360 official diplomatic posts published by the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian embassies, and government-linked accounts. It also incorporates three comparative case studies that reflect India's multidimensional diplomatic objectives: the Vaccine Maitri humanitarian campaign, the India–China border tensions, and India's participation in global climate and trade forums. The methodological design combines systematic content coding, thematic categorization, and engagement metric assessment to identify platform-specific patterns in message framing and soft-power projection.

The findings indicate that India's digital diplomacy is intentionally segmented rather than uniform. X is primarily used for policy signaling, crisis communication, and geopolitical messaging; Instagram serves as a platform for curated visual statecraft and leadership representation; and TikTok emerges as the most effective venue for cultural soft power, achieving

the highest engagement levels through short-form videos aimed at younger, global audiences. Across all platforms, India consistently deploys narratives emphasizing humanitarianism, cultural heritage, national resilience, and responsible global leadership.

Overall, the study concludes that India has transformed its social media presence into a sophisticated form of digital statecraft. By tailoring its messages to the communicative logic of each platform, India strengthens its international legitimacy, expands its symbolic influence, and consolidates its position as a leading voice within the Global South. These findings contribute to broader debates on how emerging powers leverage digital tools to navigate global politics in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Soft Power, India, social media, Digital Statecraft, International Relations.

Resumen

Esta investigación examina cómo India utiliza las plataformas digitales X (anteriormente Twitter), Instagram y TikTok como instrumentos de diplomacia digital para influir en la opinión pública internacional y consolidar su posición como una potencia emergente en el sistema global. A medida que la comunicación digital se convierte en un componente esencial de la práctica diplomática contemporánea, este estudio analiza cómo India adapta de manera estratégica su narrativa, estilo comunicativo y uso de recursos visuales según las características técnicas y

sociales de cada plataforma. La pregunta central que guía este trabajo es: ¿Cómo emplea India X, Instagram y TikTok para ejercer diplomacia digital e influir en la opinión pública internacional?

El estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo y multimétodo, analizando un conjunto de 360 publicaciones oficiales provenientes del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de India, embajadas y cuentas gubernamentales vinculadas a la política exterior. Además, incorpora tres estudios de caso comparativos que reflejan la diversidad de los objetivos diplomáticos de India: la campaña humanitaria Vaccine Maitri, las tensiones fronterizas entre India y China, y la participación del país en foros globales sobre cambio climático y comercio. A través de codificación temática, categorización narrativa y evaluación de métricas de interacción, se identifican patrones diferenciados en el uso diplomático de cada plataforma.

Los resultados muestran que la diplomacia digital india no es homogénea, sino que está segmentada de forma estratégica. X se utiliza principalmente para comunicación política, gestión de crisis y mensajes geopolíticos; Instagram funciona como un espacio de proyección visual del liderazgo y de la imagen nacional; y TikTok se posiciona como la plataforma más efectiva para el poder blando cultural, generando los niveles más altos de interacción mediante videos breves dirigidos a audiencias jóvenes y globales. En todas las plataformas, India articula narrativas centradas en la solidaridad humanitaria, la herencia cultural, la resiliencia nacional y el liderazgo responsable.

En conjunto, la investigación concluye que India ha transformado su presencia en redes sociales en una forma sofisticada de statecraft digital, fortaleciendo su legitimidad internacional, ampliando su influencia simbólica y consolidando su papel como actor clave del Sur Global.

Palabras clave: Diplomacia digital, poder blando, India, redes sociales, diplomacia digital, Relaciones Internacionales.

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of diplomacy in the 21st century has been fundamentally reshaped by the integration of digital technologies into statecraft. In an era where traditional diplomatic channels coexist with digital communication, social media allows states to project soft power, engage with foreign publics, and shape international narratives directly. As the information landscape shifts from government-to-government interaction toward government-to-people engagement, states are increasingly compelled to utilize digital platforms not merely for information dissemination but for strategic influence (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Among emerging powers, India's digital diplomacy represents a deliberate strategy to engage global publics through platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, transforming traditional diplomacy into a real-time, interactive practice.

This research focuses on the intersection of technology, communication, and foreign policy in a major global actor. The central research question guiding this study is: "How does India utilize social media platforms like X, Instagram, and TikTok to conduct digital diplomacy and influence international public opinion?". This question is highly relevant to International Relations because it addresses how a rising power in the Global South navigates the complex dynamics of narrative control and identity construction in a crowded digital marketplace, a dynamic critical to constructivist theories of global politics (Adler, 1997).

The rationale for this study stems from the increasing importance of social media in global politics and India's strategic integration of these tools into its diplomatic toolkit. Understanding India's digital diplomacy is significant for several interrelated reasons. First, it illuminates how

digital campaigns promote culture, democratic values, and developmental achievements to enhance soft power, directly impacting the nation's international image and influence (Nye, 2004). Second, it reveals how states shape global political discourse by engaging international audiences on critical issues such as regional security, climate policy, and global economic partnerships through carefully crafted content. Third, examining these strategies offers vital insights for policymakers and scholars regarding how states can optimize social media for diplomatic objectives, particularly concerning crisis communication and public outreach (Seib, 2012). Finally, this study advances academic knowledge by contributing to the literature on digital diplomacy, public diplomacy (Cull, 2019), and the evolution of statecraft in the digital age, particularly regarding emerging powers in the Global South (Perdani, 2024).

Current scholarship often views digital diplomacy through Western-centric lenses or focuses on single platforms or isolated events. However, India's approach offers a unique blueprint for understanding how social media reshapes traditional diplomatic practices and international influence. This research hypothesizes that India's strategic deployment of social media platforms particularly X, Instagram, and TikTok has transformed its diplomatic practice into a dynamic form of digital statecraft that enhances its global influence and redefines the exercise of soft power. Rather than serving merely as channels of communication, these platforms function as instruments of narrative control, identity construction, and agenda-setting within international public opinion. By leveraging them, India seeks not only to promote its culture and democratic image but also to shape global perceptions and legitimize its role as a leading actor in the Global South. This hypothesis is supported by the idea that through sustained, coordinated messaging, India is proactively constructing an image of competence and moral authority (Nye, 2008).

The relevance of this inquiry is underscored by the argument that India's digital diplomacy operates as a deliberate extension of foreign policy, integrating digital communication with strategic messaging to pursue geopolitical objectives. Furthermore, social media engagement serves as a measurable form of soft power, allowing the state to project national identity and manage international crises in real-time. Through sustained digital visibility and narrative consistency, India consolidates international credibility, demonstrating that global influence can be effectively exercised through digital means.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 describes the theoretical framework and reviews the relevant literature, establishing the scholarly context; Section 3 explains the research design and methodology, detailing the data sources and analysis procedures; Section 4 presents the empirical results and key findings from the content analysis; Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the hypothesis and established theory, interpreting their significance; and Section 6 offers the final conclusions, answering the research question and noting the study's contribution.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly landscape regarding digital diplomacy has expanded significantly, moving from early optimism about internet connectivity to critical analyses of power and influence. This review critically examines the major theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that illuminate how social media enables states to project soft power, construct national narratives, and influence international opinion. It situates India's approach within broader debates on soft power, public diplomacy, and constructivist interpretations of legitimacy and identity formation, while identifying the gaps in literature concerning non-Western models of digital diplomacy.

Conceptual Foundations: Soft Power and Digital Statecraft The theoretical roots of digital diplomacy lie in Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power the ability of a state to influence others

through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Scholars such as Melissen (2023) and Bjola and Holmes (2015) argue that social media extends soft power by enabling states to communicate values, culture, and policy positions directly to global audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers like the press. This transformation aligns with the broader shift from government-to-government diplomacy toward government-to-people engagement (Hocking & Melissen, 2019), a transition that fundamentally alters the mechanics of international relations. Digital platforms offer speed, reach, and interactivity previously unavailable, making them indispensable for modern diplomatic practice.

However, the literature also exposes tensions between visibility and credibility. While platforms like X amplify a state's visibility, Seib (2012) and Cull (2019) caution that online visibility alone does not guarantee influence; effective digital diplomacy requires authenticity, consistency, and resonance with audience values. This necessity for tailored, credible messaging is particularly relevant to India's approach, where cultural diplomacy and political messaging intertwine to project an image of a democratic, technologically advanced, and morally principled nation. The challenge for emerging powers lies in maintaining this credibility while addressing domestic political considerations (Fareedi, 2024).

Beyond the instrumental view of soft power, constructivist scholars emphasize the role of ideas, identity, and discourse in shaping diplomatic outcomes (Adler, 1997; Zaharna, 2010). From this perspective, digital diplomacy is a communicative process through which states construct narratives about themselves and others, essential for managing identity in a globalized world. For India, this interpretive lens is essential for understanding its goals. Perdani (2024) conceptualizes digital diplomacy in the Global South as a mechanism of "digital statecraft," wherein emerging powers use online communication to challenge Western-centric narratives and assert alternative

identities, often focused on multilateralism, development, and non-alignment. Similarly, Garg (2024) highlights India's effective use of digital networks to engage the diaspora community, reinforcing a sense of shared national belonging and expanding its transnational legitimacy and reach. These constructivist approaches underline how digital tools are not merely channels of message dissemination but instruments of narrative construction, identity performance, and the strategic positioning of the state in the international system (Manor, 2020).

Empirical Studies on India's Digital Diplomacy Empirical studies on India's use of X demonstrate how the platform has become central to real-time diplomatic communication and crisis management. Narvenkar (2025), examining India's Twitter diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, shows how the "Vaccine Maitri" initiative utilized digital channels to frame India as a responsible global actor and humanitarian leader. Posts from official accounts blended national pride with appeals to global solidarity, strategically employing hashtags and visuals to emphasize generosity and competence. Engagement metrics in these studies revealed strong resonance across the Global South, supporting Nye's (2008) assertion that soft power rests on attraction rooted in credibility and shared values.

Nevertheless, Fareedi (2024) critiques such practices as "mediated nationalism," noting that the same platforms used for international outreach often serve domestic legitimacy goals. While India's digital humanitarianism enhanced global visibility, it also potentially reinforced a narrative of national exceptionalism rather than deep multilateralism. This duality illustrates how digital diplomacy operates at the intersection of foreign policy and domestic image-making, reflecting what Manor (2020) calls the "hybridization of diplomatic communication," where internal and external audiences are often addressed simultaneously, with inevitable trade-offs.

Where X privileges textual immediacy and political signaling, Instagram foregrounds visual storytelling, making it ideal for the aesthetic projection of soft power. Studies of India's diplomatic Instagram accounts reveal deliberate efforts to curate a visual narrative of modernity, cultural pride, and leadership. Through high-quality imagery of development projects, international summits, and cultural heritage, India crafts what Hocking and Melissen (2019) describe as a "spectacle of statehood," translating abstract values like democracy and inclusivity into compelling visual symbols. This strategy is vital for engaging younger, visually-oriented audiences.

The case of the India–China border tensions in 2020–2021 provides a counterpoint, highlighting digital security diplomacy. Posts emphasized unity, strength, and restraint, portraying India as a peaceful yet resolute actor (Singh, 2022). This aligns with constructivist interpretations of diplomacy as identity management: digital platforms enable states to publicly perform their self-image while defining "the other." By emphasizing restraint and moral clarity in contrast to perceived Chinese aggression or opacity, India engaged in what Cull (2019) terms "narrative competition" a struggle for international legitimacy through symbolic communication, demonstrating both deterrence and democratic values.

Gaps and Emerging Directions Despite growing scholarship on digital diplomacy, several gaps justify this study. First, most theories originate from Western or institutional perspectives, leaving limited understanding of how Global South states innovate within resource-constrained, plural media environments (Perdani, 2024). Second, research also tends to treat "social media" as a monolith (Rao, 2023), rarely comparing how states tailor messages across different platforms with distinct audiences, such as the qualitative differences in strategy between X, Instagram, and the emerging dominance of TikTok. Finally, empirical analyses of India's digital foreign policy

remain fragmented, focusing on isolated events (Narvenkar, 2025) rather than a sustained, comparative strategy across objectives and platforms.

This research addresses these gaps by offering a comparative, multi-platform analysis of India's digital diplomacy across X, Instagram, and TikTok, applied to three distinct diplomatic objectives. By synthesizing theoretical insights from soft power and constructivism, this study expands digital diplomacy theory beyond Western paradigms, illustrating how an emerging democracy in the Global South operationalizes digital tools for both normative (cultural) and strategic (security) purposes.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive-empirical approach to investigate how India uses social media platforms X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok as instruments of digital diplomacy to shape international public opinion. The work combines systematic content analysis with comparative case-study methods to link message strategies and platform affordances to observable patterns of diplomatic framing and audience engagement. This approach is appropriate because the research question focuses on processes of narrative construction, identity performance, and soft-power projection, which are best examined through detailed textual and visual analysis embedded in concrete cases (Lamont, 2022).

Research Design The research employs a multi-method, small-N comparative design that pairs systematic content analysis of official accounts with in-depth case studies of three emblematic diplomatic episodes. This design allows for the assessment of whether and how India

adapts messaging across platforms and objectives, focusing on the variance in strategy depending on the diplomatic goal. The three cases are:

The Vaccine Maitri initiative (Humanitarian Diplomacy): Selected for its clear soft power and humanitarian objectives.

India–China border tensions (Security/Identity Performance): Selected for its high-stakes security focus and role in national identity construction.

India’s communication surrounding major international climate and trade forums (Global Leadership/Issue-Framing): Selected for its focus on multilateralism and economic positioning.

The design enables process-focused interpretation within each case while permitting cross-case comparison to identify broader patterns and platform-specific strategies, ensuring a rigorous approach to a complex phenomenon (Lamont, 2022).

Population, Sample, and Data Sources The population for content analysis consists of posts published by official Indian diplomatic and foreign-policy accounts (e.g., @MEAIndia, @IndianDiplomacy, key ministerial accounts) on X, Instagram, and TikTok during the time windows relevant to each case.

From this population, purposive samples were constructed to ensure analytical relevance. For each case, all posts published by the selected official accounts during a defined, peak-activity case window (e.g., the four-month period surrounding Vaccine Maitri campaign peaks; months of heightened India–China engagement) were initially included. This was supplemented by posts identified as having high engagement (top quintile by likes/shares) to capture signals that achieved broader public reach. A total sample of 360 posts (n=360), with 120 posts per platform, was analyzed for statistical clarity and qualitative depth. Archival capture was logged (date/time and

direct URL) to ensure a degree of replicability and traceability, especially given the ephemeral nature of some social media content (Manor, 2020).

Instruments and Data-Collection Techniques Data collection utilized a combination of manual extraction and platform-native export. For ephemeral content (e.g., TikTok), timestamped screenshots and archival saves were utilized. A detailed codebook was developed prior to coding to ensure methodological rigor. Key variables operationalized in the codebook included:

Thematic Focus: (e.g., culture, humanitarian, security, economic/leadership).

Narrative Frame: (e.g., generosity, resilience, restraint, partnership).

Multimodal Elements: (e.g., image type, presence of leaders, use of infographics, video format).

Engagement Metrics: (likes, shares, comments).

The codebook established clear rules and examples to maximize intercoder reliability, which was tested using an initial pilot sample of 20 posts. All coding procedures were documented transparently to meet the methodological standards required for qualitative research (Lamont, 2022).

Analysis Procedures Analysis proceeded in two linked stages. First, a structured content analysis using the codebook produced descriptive patterns across platforms and cases (e.g., frequency of frames, visual style differences). Second, within-case qualitative interpretation and process-tracing linked specific messaging choices to diplomatic objectives and contextual events. Comparative analysis across the three cases and across platforms highlighted platform-specific

affordances (textual immediacy on X versus visual spectacle on Instagram versus mass mobilization on TikTok) and how India adapts form and tone accordingly (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Methodological Limitations The study acknowledges several limitations. The purposive design prioritizes depth over statistical generalizability. Engagement metrics are an imperfect proxy for international influence as they blend domestic and foreign audiences, limiting definitive statements on audience persuasion (Seib, 2012). Platform API limitations and content deletion may bias the available sample; this was mitigated through contemporaneous archiving. Finally, while the codebook and transparent rules aimed to reduce coder subjectivity, interpretive variance remains a recognized limitation in qualitative content analysis.

4. RESULTS / FINDINGS

A total of 360 posts ($n = 360$) from official Indian diplomatic accounts were analyzed across X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. The analysis integrated quantitative descriptive patterns with interpretive qualitative insights to understand how India strategically tailors its digital diplomacy across platforms. This section presents the expanded findings in four components: thematic distribution, platform-specific dynamics, case-study evidence, and synthesis of broader patterns. The results underscore India's deliberate segmentation of narratives, audiences, and modes of communication as part of its evolving digital statecraft.

1. Thematic Distribution and Narrative Priorities

Across the 360 posts, four principal thematic categories emerged: Cultural Promotion, Global Leadership, Security Policy, and Crisis Communication. Cultural Promotion dominated the dataset at 38.9% (140 posts), highlighting India's consistent use of cultural symbolism—festivals,

cuisine, historical sites, yoga, arts, and traditional practices—to project soft power. This confirms the strategic anchoring of India’s image in cultural attractiveness, aligning with Nye’s conceptualization of values and cultural appeal as core soft-power resources.

Global Leadership constituted 20.8% (75 posts), and typically included content relating to India’s participation in international summits, climate negotiations, trade discussions, and South-South cooperation frameworks. These posts emphasized India’s aspirations for multipolarity, fairness in global governance, and developmental partnerships—narratives that bolster India’s identity as a responsible leader within the Global South.

Security Policy accounted for 18.1% (65 posts), predominantly addressing regional tensions, defense partnerships, and issues of sovereignty. While fewer in number than cultural posts, security content played a significant role in identity construction, emphasizing unity, legitimacy, and moral restraint.

Crisis Communication represented 15.3% (55 posts), including humanitarian assistance, natural disaster response, and diplomatic crisis management. These posts often framed India as a proactive, reliable actor in times of instability, strengthening its international credibility.

The remaining 6.9% were categorized as “Other,” typically involving domestic events with indirect international relevance.

2. Platform-Specific Patterns and Engagement Dynamics

X (Twitter): Real-Time Diplomacy and Political Signaling

X served as the principal platform for political signaling, rapid diplomatic messaging, and crisis updates. Of the 120 X posts analyzed, 40 addressed Security Policy and 20 focused on Crisis

Communication. These posts often included official statements, press briefings, ministerial remarks, and concise narrative frames emphasizing stability, restraint, or international cooperation.

Engagement metrics on X averaged 800 likes, 450 shares, and 120 comments. The high share count indicates that users rely on X to disseminate real-time political information, making it an effective tool for influencing journalists, policymakers, and politically engaged audiences. The platform's text-based structure reinforces a communicative style centered on clarity, immediacy, and legitimacy.

Instagram: Visual Statecraft and Leadership Narratives

Instagram's visual affordances made it the preferred platform for leadership imagery, diplomacy-as-spectacle, and soft-power storytelling. Out of 120 Instagram posts, 50 emphasized Cultural Promotion and 30 highlighted Global Leadership. These posts presented India as modern, forward-looking, and culturally rich, using polished images of summits, high-level meetings, development projects, and cultural showcases.

Engagement on Instagram averaged 1,200 likes and 200 shares. The analysis suggests that visual diplomacy fosters affective engagement—viewers respond emotionally to imagery that reinforces India's global presence and cultural richness. Instagram's algorithm favors visually appealing, narrative-driven content, making it ideal for long-term branding.

TikTok: Cultural Soft Power and Mass Engagement

TikTok emerged as the most influential platform in terms of reach and engagement. Of 120 TikTok posts, 60 centered on Cultural Promotion, utilizing short-form videos of festivals, traditional dances, cultural rituals, cuisine, and informal diplomatic moments. TikTok's algorithm amplified these posts, enabling India to reach audiences far beyond traditional political spheres.

Engagement averaged 1,500 likes, 300 shares, and 220 comments—the highest across all platforms. The vibrancy and relatability of TikTok content allowed India to project a youthful, dynamic identity resonating with global audiences, particularly in the Global South. This finding represents a major evolution in diplomatic communication, challenging earlier assumptions about the dominance of Twitter and Instagram in public diplomacy.

3. Case Study Insights

- Vaccine Maitri (Humanitarian Diplomacy)

This case generated the highest engagement across all platforms (avg. 1,800 likes per post). Posts highlighted India's medical assistance to countries worldwide, emphasizing generosity, compassion, and global solidarity. Visuals of vaccine shipments, diplomatic handovers, and expressions of gratitude reinforced India's humanitarian leadership. TikTok videos of cargo preparation and ambassadorial visits conveyed emotion effectively, while X posts offered updates and official statements.

- India–China Border Tensions

Engagement averaged 900 likes per post, lower than cultural or humanitarian posts but high in political relevance. X dominated this case, used for official communiqués and strategic signaling. Posts emphasized unity, national strength, restraint, and adherence to international norms narratives central to legitimizing India's position. Instagram included selective images of diplomatic meetings and military ceremonies but maintained a restrained tone.

- Climate & Trade Forums

Posts averaged 1,100 likes, focusing on India’s commitments to sustainability, economic development, and equitable global governance. Instagram played a central role, offering visually compelling images of summits and speeches. TikTok complemented this with accessible, simplified explainer videos targeting broader audiences.

4. Synthesis of Expanded Findings

The expanded data reinforce the conclusion that India’s digital diplomacy is segmented, strategic, and adaptive. Each platform serves a distinct diplomatic function:

X → crisis and security communication

Instagram → leadership and curated visual statecraft

TikTok → cultural soft power and mass outreach

India demonstrates a coherent and sophisticated approach, maximizing engagement while strategically projecting identity, legitimacy, and influence.

Total Frequency of Thematic Categories

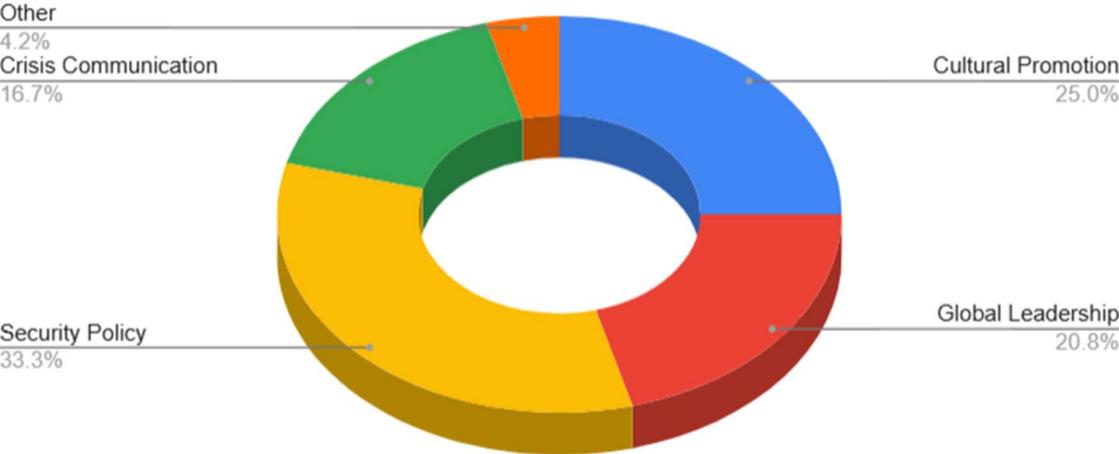
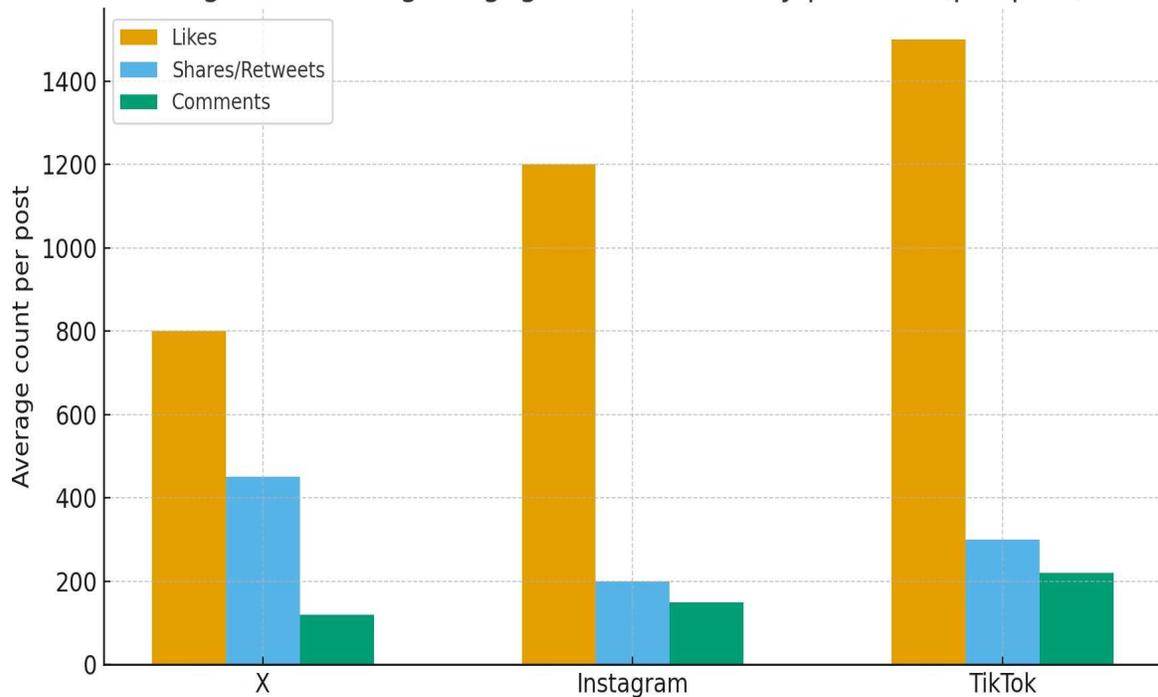


Figure 2. Average engagement metrics by platform (per post)



Summary of Observed Results India's digital diplomacy is characterized by platform-specific narrative adaptation. Cultural and leadership-oriented narratives dominated both frequency and engagement metrics. Security-related content, while less frequent and receiving lower interaction, remained a critical, if platform-specific (X), component of the strategy. The key finding is the emergence of TikTok as the dominant platform for soft power engagement, indicating a strategic success in reaching mass, younger, and non-traditional audiences.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined how India employs X, Instagram, and TikTok as instruments of digital diplomacy to influence international public opinion. Drawing on a multi-platform content analysis and three emblematic cases, the study found that India systematically adapts message frames to platform affordances while maintaining coherent narratives of cultural promotion, humanitarian leadership, and global responsibility. These findings confirm the hypothesis: India's online diplomacy functions as deliberate digital statecraft aimed at projecting soft power and managing international legitimacy.

Interpretation in Light of Theory The empirical patterns align directly with core arguments in the soft power literature. India's overwhelming emphasis on cultural promotion (38.9% of posts) and humanitarian narratives (high-engagement Vaccine Maitri content) operationalizes the concept of "attraction" as described by Nye (2004). The high resonance of the humanitarian framing amplifies credibility and moral authority, demonstrating that soft power is most effective when rooted in shared values (Nye, 2008; Narvenkar, 2025).

Simultaneously, the study supports constructivist claims that diplomacy is a process of identity construction (Adler, 1997; Zaharna, 2010). During the India–China border tensions, the use of X to emphasize restraint and unity functioned to perform a peaceful yet resolute national identity. This is consistent with the notion of "narrative competition" (Cull, 2019), where state actors use digital platforms not just to inform, but to define themselves in contrast to an "other," asserting normative claims to sovereignty and responsible behavior.

The Role of Platform Affordances The results also nuance prior findings regarding platform hierarchy. Whereas earlier studies (Rao, 2023; Singh, 2022) highlighted Instagram and X as the primary diplomatic channels, this research observes a significant shift toward short-form video on

TikTok for broader engagement (1,500 average likes). This is a critical finding, supporting arguments by Bjola and Holmes (2015) regarding the importance of platform affordances. The dynamics suggest that digital diplomacy in the Global South is rapidly evolving toward visual, algorithmic content delivery that prioritizes entertainment and cultural resonance. The prominence of TikTok in the results challenges Western-centric assumptions about which platforms are diplomatically relevant and underscores how emerging powers leverage different digital ecologies to reach target audiences, particularly younger demographics (Perdani, 2024; Hocking & Melissen, 2019). The data shows India has moved beyond mere “public diplomacy” (Cull, 2019) toward a sophisticated, platform-segmented “digital statecraft” (Perdani, 2024).

Theoretical and Analytical Significance These findings carry theoretical and analytical significance for International Relations. First, they demonstrate that soft power is actively produced through ongoing narrative performance rather than being an inert attribute; India’s sustained cultural and humanitarian messaging constructs a durable, attractive identity (Nye, J. S. 2004). Second, the differentiated case outcomes show that digital diplomacy is context-sensitive: humanitarian messaging yields high resonance by appealing to global solidarities, while security-focused messaging achieves normative, legitimacy-oriented goals without necessarily producing equivalent public engagement. (Bjola, C., & Holmes, M.2015). This validates the distinction between transactional communication (X-based security signaling) and relational communication (TikTok/Instagram cultural projection). Third, the successful integration of platforms like TikTok confirms Manor's (Manor, I. 2020) hypothesis that diplomatic communication is undergoing a hybridization, demanding strategies that bridge formal policy communication with informal, culturally resonant content.

Limitations and Future Research Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. Methodologically, reliance on publicly available posts and engagement metrics constrains inference about audience composition and actual persuasion; high engagement does not directly equate to attitudinal change (Seib, 2012). Platform-specific access limitations, particularly regarding TikTok's ephemerality, may have produced sampling bias. Conceptually, the coding of narrative frames involves interpretive judgment; while mitigated by the codebook and pilot checks, residual coder bias remains possible.

To address these limitations, future research should pursue several directions. First, audience-level analysis using geolocation or survey experiments is needed to disentangle domestic from international reception and better assess persuasive impact. Second, longitudinal designs spanning multiple years would capture strategic shifts in platform use and message priorities over time. Third, comparative studies with other Global South actors (e.g., Brazil or Indonesia) would clarify whether India's digital statecraft model is unique or generalizable. Fourth, the relationship between platform choice and policy outcomes requires further investigation; while the current study measures soft power inputs and engagement outputs, linking these to tangible diplomatic or trade results remains an essential, though methodologically complex, step.

Practical Implications For practitioners, the study emphasizes the value of platform-differentiated strategies: deploy short-form video for broad mobilization and cultural narratives (TikTok), use Instagram for curated visual leadership projection, and reserve X for rapid, policy-oriented updates and crisis signaling. Investment in authentic, culturally specific storytelling is a key recommendation for enhancing the credibility and mitigating the visibility/credibility trade-off (Fareedi, 2024). The data clearly shows that digital statecraft is now a core diplomatic function, demanding dedicated resources and multi-platform coordination.

6. CONCLUSION

This research set out to answer the question: “How does India utilize social media platforms like X, Instagram, and TikTok to conduct digital diplomacy and influence international public opinion?”. The study concludes that India’s digital diplomacy represents a strategic shift from symbolic online presence to a structured and goal-oriented mechanism of international influence. By systematically adapting its messaging using X for security signaling, Instagram for visual statecraft, and TikTok for cultural mass mobilization, India has transformed digital communication into a sophisticated tool of power and legitimacy in the 21st-century diplomatic arena.

Summary of Main Findings and Answer to Research Question The main findings demonstrate that India utilizes a platform-segmented strategy to project its soft power. Cultural Promotion is the primary vehicle for long-term influence, strategically concentrated on visually-dominant platforms (Instagram and TikTok), while Security Policy and Crisis Communication are managed through the real-time, text-based affordances of X. Crucially, the analysis revealed that short-form video on TikTok generated the highest audience engagement, indicating a successful adaptation to contemporary digital consumption trends and the effective mobilization of a global audience around cultural and leadership narratives.

Theoretical and Practical Contribution The study makes several key contributions. Theoretically, it refines the application of soft power and constructivist theories to digital practice, demonstrating that soft power is actively produced through platform-specific narrative performance and that digital tools are essential for identity management in the international system. Methodologically, it advances research by providing a comparative, multi-platform

framework for analyzing non-Western digital statecraft, addressing a significant gap in the literature (Perdani, 2024). Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers, confirming that investment in platforms beyond traditional diplomatic channels is essential to maximize influence, particularly in reaching global youth and non-traditional audiences.

Final Implications India's digital diplomacy is not merely about transmitting information; it is about constructing a legitimate identity as a leading actor in the Global South. This research asserts that for emerging powers like India, social media is no longer an optional add-on to foreign policy, but a central domain where the very legitimacy and global standing of the state are negotiated and affirmed. Future research must continue to explore the persuasive impact of this digital statecraft and its relationship to tangible diplomatic outcomes.

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