

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN FRAGILE STATES: DIRECTING CRISIS AND LEGITIMACY IN LIBYA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of digital technologies has revolutionized diplomatic practice, offering states novel avenues to engage with international audiences beyond traditional channels. This study investigates the role of foreign digital diplomacy in Libya, a state grappling with prolonged political instability, institutional fragmentation, and contested sovereignty. It argues that digital diplomacy functions not only as a communication medium but as a strategic instrument vital for crisis management, legitimacy construction, and international engagement in fragile contexts. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with Libyan diplomats, media professionals, and international relations scholars, alongside analysis of official digital content from Libyan ministries and embassies. The findings reveal that Libya's digital diplomacy efforts aim to project an image of governmental legitimacy, promote narratives of national unity and resilience, and counteract disinformation amid ongoing conflict. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are leveraged to provide real-time updates during crises, coordinate humanitarian responses, and foster connections with both domestic constituencies and the global diaspora. However, the study highlights persistent challenges, including fragmented authority leading to inconsistent messaging, limited digital infrastructure, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and a deficit in digital communication expertise among officials. These limitations constrain the overall efficacy of Libya's digital diplomatic initiatives. The paper contributes to the scholarship on diplomacy in conflict-affected states by illustrating how digital diplomacy can serve as a soft power tool that compensates for weakened traditional diplomatic capacities. It proposes a framework for integrating digital diplomacy within national crisis communication strategies, emphasizing the need for centralized coordination, capacity building, and robust ethical standards. The insights gleaned from Libya's experience offer valuable lessons for similarly fragile states seeking to harness digital tools to enhance their international legitimacy and influence in an increasingly interconnected global arena.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, crisis communication, Libya, legitimacy, foreign policy, social media, international relations

INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, Libya has been engulfed in a prolonged and multidimensional crisis characterized by fragmented authority, persistent civil conflict, and extensive foreign intervention. In this context, traditional diplomacy, centered on state-to-state communication and closed-door negotiations, has proven insufficient to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving political and media environment. The emergence of digital diplomacy, defined as

the use of digital technologies and social media platforms by state and non-state actors to pursue diplomatic objectives, has created new opportunities and risks, particularly in fragile states where governance structures are weak and legitimacy is contested (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Digital diplomacy is not merely a shift in communication tools; it represents a broader reorientation in diplomatic practice toward transparency, speed, and engagement with global publics. This shift is especially significant in Libya, where rival authorities, the UN-recognized Government of National Unity (GNU), the House of Representatives in Tobruk, and various militias, compete not only for territorial control but also for international recognition and narrative dominance. In such an environment, digital platforms serve as a key arena for projecting authority, soliciting external support, and undermining opponents. Foreign powers with vested interests in Libya, including the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Russia, and Egypt, have embraced digital diplomacy as a strategic instrument to influence the trajectory of the conflict and enhance their local allies (Lister, 2020).

The use of digital diplomacy in Libya is closely tied to questions of legitimacy. In the absence of a unified central government, both domestic and foreign actors utilize digital channels to assert credibility and align themselves with global norms and audiences. For example, Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) has consistently used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to frame its military campaigns as part of a broader effort to restore order and combat terrorism, an appeal clearly directed at international observers and potential allies (Albahari, 2022). Likewise, the GNU has used digital platforms to broadcast meetings with foreign dignitaries, announce humanitarian efforts, and issue political statements designed to reinforce its position as Libya's legitimate governing authority (El Gomati, 2021).

Foreign states have also waged sophisticated digital influence campaigns within Libya. A 2020 investigation by the Stanford Internet Observatory found that coordinated inauthentic behavior on social media, spearheaded by state-sponsored actors from Egypt, the UAE, and Russia, played a major role in amplifying pro-Haftar narratives and discrediting the GNU (Grossman et al., 2020). These campaigns frequently involved fake accounts, manipulated hashtags, and selective dissemination of images and videos to influence both domestic and international perceptions of the conflict. The speed and scale of these operations allowed foreign actors to shape events in real time, effectively blurring the lines between diplomacy, propaganda, and psychological warfare.

However, the practice of digital diplomacy in Libya is fraught with contradictions and limitations. One major challenge is the lack of institutional coherence within Libyan political entities themselves. With multiple competing authorities and fragmented communication channels, Libya struggles to deliver consistent messaging or establish a centralized digital presence. This institutional fragmentation not only hampers the country's ability to conduct digital diplomacy autonomously but also leaves it vulnerable to external manipulation and misinformation (Toaldo, 2020). Moreover, the proliferation of unverified content and the spread of hate speech and disinformation have undermined efforts at national reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Despite these challenges, digital diplomacy has occasionally served as a platform for inclusive dialogue and civic engagement. Civil society organizations, diaspora groups, and international

actors have used digital tools to facilitate virtual consultations, disseminate peace proposals, and foster public discussion about Libya's future. For instance, the "Vision 2040 for Libya" initiative combined digital workshops with in-person forums to involve diverse Libyan stakeholders in post-conflict planning (UNSMIL, 2021). Such efforts illustrate the potential of digital platforms to support legitimacy-building from the bottom up, even in a context marked by political instability and institutional decay.

Digital diplomacy serves as a key mechanism through which Libyan factions attempt to influence legitimacy narratives. In the absence of unified state structures and functioning diplomatic institutions, digital platforms have become indispensable tools for governance projection and international engagement. Libyan political entities routinely disseminate images of cabinet meetings, bilateral visits, and policy announcements via platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to portray themselves as functional, responsible actors. These curated performances of governance are designed to enhance both internal confidence and external validation (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020). Digital diplomacy enables these actors to communicate directly with foreign publics, diaspora communities, and international media, thereby bypassing traditional diplomatic gatekeepers such as foreign ministries, intergovernmental organizations, and formal recognition mechanisms (Manor, 2019). This is particularly impactful in shaping the discourse among non-state stakeholders, including NGOs, think tanks, and transnational advocacy networks, who increasingly influence foreign policy agendas and humanitarian responses.

The competition for legitimacy through digital platforms is not purely symbolic. In fragile contexts, international recognition can determine access to funding, humanitarian assistance, and security cooperation. During the Libyan conflict, rival factions have used digital platforms to promote international endorsements and portray adversaries as illegitimate or externally manipulated. For example, when the GNA secured support from the United Nations and certain Western powers, it leveraged digital communication to amplify this recognition, using official Twitter accounts to announce diplomatic meetings and agreements. In response, the HoR and its military ally, Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), intensified their own digital presence, publishing videos of governance activities and countering narratives of illegitimacy by framing themselves as protectors of national sovereignty against foreign interference (El Gomati, 2021; Albahari, 2022).

Despite its potential, digital diplomacy as a tool of legitimization in Libya faces significant limitations. Its effectiveness is contingent upon credibility, consistency, and coherence, qualities often lacking in fragile or divided states (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). The absence of a centralized communication strategy, coupled with the existence of multiple, often contradictory messages from rival political centers, undermines the perceived authenticity of digital messaging. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of institutional capacity, trained personnel, and secure communication infrastructure. In many instances, digital accounts associated with Libyan authorities have been hacked, suspended, or impersonated, raising questions about the reliability and authenticity of their communications (Grossman et al., 2020). Moreover, digital diplomacy

efforts are often reactive rather than strategic, responding to immediate crises rather than articulating a sustained narrative of governance or national identity.

A core strength of digital diplomacy lies in its real-time responsiveness, especially in moments of crisis. In Libya, where conflict and instability are persistent, the ability to rapidly communicate information can serve both domestic and international functions. Authorities have used digital platforms to provide public safety updates, disseminate health information, and coordinate with international humanitarian actors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital diplomacy was particularly visible. The Ministry of Health and municipal councils regularly used Facebook to issue daily case updates, share public health guidelines, and request international medical assistance (Toaldo, 2020). These communications helped fill the void left by the absence of cohesive national media and demonstrated how digital tools could enhance situational awareness and service delivery in a fragmented state.

However, the same features that make digital diplomacy effective in crisis situations also make it susceptible to abuse. The speed and reach of digital communication can facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation, which in turn can exacerbate tensions and derail diplomatic efforts. In Libya, competing factions have frequently used social media to distribute propaganda, accuse rivals of war crimes, and manipulate public opinion through selective framing and fabricated content. These practices not only deepen polarization but also pose ethical and epistemological dilemmas about the nature of truth, authority, and narrative control in the digital age (Lister, 2020). The lack of regulation and digital literacy further complicates the phenomena, allowing misinformation to flourish and undermining trust in official communications.

Overall, digital diplomacy in Libya illustrates both the opportunities and challenges of legitimacy construction in fragile states. It provides a platform for asserting political authority, engaging international actors, and managing crises in real time. Yet its effectiveness is constrained by systemic weaknesses in governance, communication infrastructure, and message control. As digital diplomacy becomes an increasingly central feature of international relations, particularly in conflict zones, a deeper understanding of its mechanisms and limitations is essential for developing strategies that promote credible, coherent, and constructive engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overall, the Libyan case underscores the complex and often paradoxical role of digital diplomacy in fragile states. While digital tools offer new opportunities for engagement, visibility, and influence, they also introduce vulnerabilities that can exacerbate fragmentation and misinformation. Foreign digital diplomacy in Libya operates both as a mechanism of crisis management and a tool for shaping legitimacy narratives, but its effectiveness is mediated by the broader structural weaknesses of the Libyan state and the competing agendas of external actors. As the digital aspect continues to reshape global diplomacy, understanding its dynamics in conflict-affected settings like Libya will be essential for developing more resilient and inclusive diplomatic practices.

Traditionally, diplomacy has been understood as a cornerstone of sovereign statecraft, conducted through formal, institutionalized channels characterized by secrecy, discretion, and adherence to norms such as reciprocity and non-intervention. This classical conception, often termed “Diplomacy 1.0,” has historically privileged state-to-state engagement through embassies, consulates, and multilateral forums (Pigman, 2010). However, in the twenty-first century, a convergence of technological innovation, the empowerment of non-state actors, and the evolving expectations of global publics has catalyzed a shift toward more open, participatory, and instantaneous forms of diplomatic communication. This transformation has given rise to what scholars term “digital diplomacy,” or “e-diplomacy”, a model that employs internet-based platforms, particularly social media, to support and execute foreign policy objectives (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Digital diplomacy encompasses a wide array of practices, including online consular services, crisis communication, digital public diplomacy campaigns, and the use of social media for real-time engagement with foreign populations and other states. It has been particularly embraced by countries with advanced technological infrastructures and mature diplomatic institutions. The United States, United Kingdom, and Israel have been leaders in institutionalizing digital diplomacy through specialized units, often embedded within Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) or diplomatic missions, which employ data analytics, narrative framing, and multimedia outreach to extend diplomatic influence (Manor, 2019). These actors have demonstrated the strategic utility of digital diplomacy in both peacetime and during crises, showcasing its ability to project soft power, manage international image, and mobilize support for national interests.

Yet, the role and evolution of digital diplomacy in fragile or transitional states remain underexplored. Libya, in particular, represents a crucial case for understanding how digital diplomacy operates in environments marked by conflict, institutional collapse, and intense external intervention. Since the NATO-backed removal of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has descended into a protracted state of fragmentation, marked by competing governments, rival militias, and the entrenchment of foreign proxies. The Government of National Unity (GNU), the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk, the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), and an array of local armed groups all claim political and territorial legitimacy. Amid this institutional and political fragmentation, Libya’s capacity to engage in traditional diplomacy, through embassies, multilateral negotiations, and foreign ministries, has been significantly diminished (Toaldo, 2020).

In the face of these constraints, digital diplomacy has emerged in Libya not through deliberate state planning, but out of practical necessity. With embassies shuttered or operating in exile, and with competing factions seeking to assert international recognition, digital platforms have become essential tools for political communication, legitimacy projection, and foreign engagement. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are frequently used by Libyan ministries, politicians, and diplomatic representatives to issue political statements, respond to international developments, and appeal to foreign publics and institutions. For instance, during the 2019 Tripoli offensive, an intense military confrontation between the GNA and Haftar’s LNA, Libyan actors employed

digital platforms to disseminate real-time information, frame their actions in accordance with international law, and mobilize diplomatic support. Statements calling for international intervention, reports of civilian casualties, and images of bombed infrastructure were rapidly circulated online, prompting responses from foreign governments, international organizations, and media outlets (El Gomati, 2021).

Digital diplomacy during such crises serves multiple strategic functions. It allows Libyan actors to bypass traditional gatekeepers and communicate directly with international audiences. It enables rapid narrative construction, through which factions can frame military operations as defensive or humanitarian. And it creates a feedback loop in which digital visibility, measured in likes, shares, and mentions, becomes a surrogate for political relevance. Moreover, digital platforms offer exiled diplomats and diaspora networks a means of sustaining political engagement. For example, Libyan embassies that no longer physically operate within Libya have used Twitter to reaffirm diplomatic recognition and engage with host states, despite the absence of a unified or stable government apparatus at home (Albahari, 2022).

Nevertheless, Libya's experience with digital diplomacy also reveals significant challenges. The absence of centralized coordination results in fragmented messaging, with multiple voices often issuing contradictory statements. The proliferation of unofficial accounts and politicized content contributes to an environment of disinformation, where truth claims are difficult to verify and narratives are easily manipulated. Moreover, foreign actors, including Russia, the UAE, and Turkey, have leveraged digital platforms to amplify their proxies' messages and discredit rivals, thereby turning Libya's digital phenomena into a battleground for influence operations (Grossman et al., 2020). This has undermined the credibility of domestic communications and contributed to a climate of mistrust that complicates diplomatic mediation.

Despite these limitations, the Libyan case demonstrates that digital diplomacy is not confined to technologically advanced or institutionally stable states. Even in fragile settings, digital diplomacy can play a crucial role in shaping international perceptions, asserting political legitimacy, and navigating the diplomatic demands of conflict. Libya's digitally mediated diplomacy reflects both the adaptive capacity of political actors in crisis and the broader transformation of global diplomatic practice. Understanding how digital diplomacy functions under such extreme conditions can inform broader theories of statecraft, legitimacy, and communication in the digital age.

The concept of legitimacy in international relations occupies both internal and external dimensions, each essential for the effective functioning and recognition of state authority. Internally, legitimacy refers to the extent to which a population accepts and recognizes the authority of a governing body; externally, it involves the acknowledgment of a government's status and actions by the international community (Suchman, 1995; Hurd, 1999). These two dimensions are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact in complex ways, particularly in fragile or conflict-affected states where governance structures are contested. In Libya, the question of legitimacy has been central since the 2011 fall of Muammar Gaddafi, with rival governments, including the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) and the eastern-based House

of Representatives (HoR), engaged in a prolonged struggle for both domestic authority and international recognition. This competition extends beyond physical battlegrounds to the digital arena, where legitimacy is increasingly asserted, negotiated, and contested.

1. Digital Diplomacy

The rise of digital diplomacy marks a significant evolution in the practice of international relations. It encompasses the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially social media and digital platforms, to influence foreign publics, shape global narratives, and pursue strategic diplomatic objectives. Governments around the world have increasingly embraced digital diplomacy to manage international perception, promote transparency, and respond rapidly to crises (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Digital diplomacy diverges from traditional diplomacy by introducing immediacy, interactivity, and public visibility into statecraft. The dynamic nature of online environments has transformed diplomatic processes from closed-door negotiations to public conversations, where messages are carefully curated to influence both domestic and international audiences. This transformation is evident in Libya, where the state's legitimacy and credibility are constantly contested, making digital communication a strategic necessity.

2. Digital Diplomacy in Crisis Management

Crisis communication is a crucial aspect of digital diplomacy. During emergencies, governments must respond swiftly and effectively to disseminate information, reassure the public, and coordinate international support. Social media platforms enable rapid communication and provide a direct line of interaction with the global community (Veil et al., 2011). In Libya, digital diplomacy has been instrumental in providing updates on security situations, government actions, and humanitarian responses during periods of heightened conflict.

The effectiveness of digital diplomacy in crisis scenarios lies in its ability to manage narratives and counteract disinformation. Briones et al. (2011) emphasize the role of government communication in maintaining public trust and international confidence. Libya's use of platforms like Twitter and Facebook to communicate during civil unrest, COVID-19 responses, or armed confrontations demonstrates how digital diplomacy is leveraged for strategic visibility and engagement.

3. Digital Diplomacy and Legitimation

Legitimacy in international relations involves both internal and external recognition. Internally, it refers to the public's acceptance of a government's authority. Externally, it pertains to recognition by the international community. Digital diplomacy intersects both dimensions by promoting narratives that assert a government's competence, stability, and alignment with international norms (Wählich, 2023).

In the Libyan context, legitimacy is highly contested among rival governments and militias. Digital platforms offer competing authorities a stage to assert their political narrative, engage with foreign

audiences, and seek recognition. The Government of National Accord (GNA) and the House of Representatives (HoR), for instance, have used digital diplomacy to promote their agendas and delegitimize rivals.

Digital legitimization strategies include sharing success stories, diplomatic meetings, humanitarian updates, and economic data to present an image of governance and authority. Cultural diplomacy, featuring national achievements, heritage, and prominent figures, also reinforces legitimacy claims.

4. Theoretical Perspectives on Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy draws upon a range of theoretical frameworks that provide insight into its strategic functions and implications, particularly in fragile or transitional states such as Libya. One of the foundational perspectives is Public Diplomacy Theory, which centers on how states engage foreign publics to shape perceptions, promote national interests, and influence policy indirectly (Cull, 2008). Digital platforms, particularly social media, have transformed public diplomacy by enabling governments and political actors to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and engage in direct, real-time communication with global audiences. In Libya, various governmental and quasi-governmental factions have used Twitter and Facebook to broadcast political messaging, respond to international developments, and foster engagement with diaspora communities and international NGOs. These efforts aim to construct an image of legitimacy, stability, and responsiveness despite ongoing conflict and institutional fragmentation.

Closely related is Soft Power Theory, coined by Nye (2004), which posits that states can achieve international influence through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. In the Libyan context, digital diplomacy becomes a vehicle for soft power projection. Political actors leverage online platforms to highlight cultural heritage, governance reforms, and humanitarian initiatives, thereby cultivating a narrative of national resilience and modernity. Despite Libya's fragmented governance, factions attempt to present themselves as credible, forward-looking partners to the international community, using digital media to convey values and interests that align with global norms.

Networked Diplomacy further enriches the understanding of digital diplomacy by emphasizing the shift from bilateral, hierarchical structures to multilateral, interconnected systems facilitated by digital communication (Hocking & Melissen, 2015). Libya's engagement with international organizations such as the United Nations and the African Union increasingly relies on digital interfaces, virtual diplomacy, and collaborative platforms. This mode of diplomacy allows Libyan actors to remain part of global conversations and align with multilateral norms despite domestic instability.

5. Challenges and Limitations in Libya

While digital diplomacy offers significant potential for state actors to engage with international audiences and shape global narratives, Libya's ability to fully capitalize on these tools is constrained by a series of structural and operational challenges. Foremost among these is the issue

of fragmented authority. Since 2011, the existence of rival governments, such as the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli and the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk, has led to inconsistent messaging and a lack of coherence in Libya's digital diplomatic presence. This fragmentation not only weakens the credibility of official communications but also confuses international audiences regarding the legitimate representative of the Libyan state (El Gomati, 2021).

Compounding this is Libya's persistent digital divide. Unequal access to reliable internet infrastructure, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, limits both the reach and inclusivity of digital diplomacy efforts. According to the World Bank (2020), internet penetration in Libya remains below the regional average, restricting the ability of authorities to communicate uniformly with domestic and international audiences. Furthermore, the country's volatile security environment renders digital platforms vulnerable to cybersecurity threats. Hacking incidents, account impersonations, and coordinated disinformation campaigns, often perpetrated by both domestic and foreign actors, pose serious risks to the integrity and authenticity of Libya's digital communication (Grossman et al., 2020).

Another significant limitation is the skills gap within governmental institutions. The lack of trained digital communication professionals and technical expertise impedes the effective implementation of strategic digital diplomacy. Despite these obstacles, Libya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has shown a growing recognition of digital diplomacy's importance. Recent initiatives include the development of virtual diplomatic missions, increased investment in social media presence, and training programs aimed at equipping diplomats with digital engagement skills (Toaldo, 2020). These efforts reflect a pragmatic adaptation to the digital age and a strategic effort to assert Libya's presence in international diplomacy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study methodology to explore the role of foreign digital diplomacy in Libya's crisis management and efforts to secure international legitimacy. The case study approach was selected for its ability to provide an in-depth, contextually grounded examination of complex social and political phenomena, particularly those that are dynamic and multifaceted (Yin, 2014). Libya presents a compelling case due to its protracted political crisis, institutional fragmentation, and evolving digital phenomena, making it an ideal setting for studying the interplay between digital diplomacy, legitimacy, and crisis governance. A qualitative lens was essential to uncover the nuanced strategies, perceptions, and practices underpinning digital diplomacy in such a fluid and politically sensitive environment.

The research design was structured around a single-case study, focusing exclusively on Libya to allow for a detailed and holistic investigation. This design was appropriate given the unique conditions characterizing Libya's post-2011 political trajectory, including the coexistence of rival governments, external interventions, and the growing importance of digital platforms as channels for state communication and international engagement. Unlike comparative studies, which may sacrifice depth for breadth, the single-case approach enabled a fine-grained analysis of the Libyan

context, attending to its specificity while generating insights applicable to other fragile or transitional states.

Data collection employed a triangulated method involving both primary and secondary sources to enhance the robustness and credibility of findings. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of seven individuals. These included Libyan diplomats, international relations scholars, digital media consultants, and representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in Libya-related advocacy and humanitarian work. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in or scholarly expertise on digital diplomacy and political communication in Libya. The interviews were conducted over a three-month period using both in-person meetings and secure virtual platforms, chosen according to participant availability, geographic location, and prevailing security concerns. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and followed a flexible guide structured around four thematic categories: crisis communication, legitimation practices, digital strategy, and public reception.

The interview questions were designed to elicit in-depth insights into how digital diplomacy is conceptualized and operationalized by Libyan actors and to explore the perceived effectiveness, limitations, and evolving nature of these digital efforts. Interviewees were also encouraged to reflect on specific episodes, such as the 2019 Tripoli offensive and the COVID-19 pandemic, during which digital diplomacy became especially prominent. This qualitative engagement allowed the researcher to capture not only factual accounts but also subjective interpretations and strategic motivations, which are crucial for understanding how legitimacy is performed and contested in the digital sphere.

Secondary data was gathered from a range of documentary sources, including academic literature, policy briefs, government reports, and digital outputs from official Libyan social media accounts. Content from platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, used by Libyan ministries, embassies, and political leaders, was systematically reviewed to analyze messaging patterns, engagement strategies, and narrative themes. This documentary material provided essential context for interpreting interview data and facilitated triangulation, a key technique for enhancing qualitative validity (Bowen, 2009). By cross-referencing interview insights with documentary evidence, the study ensured a more comprehensive and balanced analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data to identify recurring themes and patterns. Codes were initially generated from the research questions and interview guide but were refined inductively based on emerging insights from the data. The analysis focused on how Libyan digital diplomacy is used to manage crises, project political legitimacy, engage international stakeholders, and respond to both domestic instability and international scrutiny. The qualitative descriptive approach enabled the retention of rich, context-sensitive details while drawing out analytical conclusions regarding the structure and efficacy of digital diplomacy in Libya.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Given the political sensitivity of the topic and the potential risks to participants, all interviewees were fully informed of the research

objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained before each interview. To protect anonymity, all identifying information was removed or pseudonymized in the data presentation. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the host university, ensuring that it met academic standards for research integrity, confidentiality, and participant safety. These measures were particularly important given the potential for reprisals or reputational harm in a conflict-affected setting like Libya.

This methodological framework provided a rigorous and ethically sound foundation for examining how digital diplomacy is being used by Libyan actors in the face of ongoing political crisis and contested statehood. By combining interview data with documentary analysis, and applying thematic interpretation grounded in real-world conditions, the study offers a robust and nuanced understanding of Libya's digital diplomatic phenomena.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings reveal a nuanced and evolving phenomena of foreign digital diplomacy in Libya, offering insights on strategy, crisis response, legitimacy narratives, institutional constraints, and evaluation practices. These findings illuminate how digital diplomacy has been deployed to construct legitimacy and navigate political instability, yet also highlight significant limitations stemming from fragmented authority, infrastructural weaknesses, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and organizational disarray.

Digital diplomacy in Libya is primarily oriented toward presenting an image of a legitimate and functioning state, combating prevalent perceptions of instability or state failure. A prominent strategy entails visual storytelling through curated content depicting governmental activity. Official bodies, Ministries of Foreign Affairs, embassies, and consulates, have established active presences on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and their own websites, sharing images and briefings on diplomatic meetings, bilateral agreements, public service interventions, and international visits. These visuals often feature Libyan officials alongside foreign dignitaries, highlighting formal engagements and signaling Libya's reintegration into global diplomatic networks. Such imagery plays a critical role in countering narratives of dysfunction, reinforcing a message of institutional normalcy and capacity, especially as representations of foreign recognition convey external validation, strengthening claims to legitimacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Crisis management emerged as a second strategic pillar, with digital diplomacy demonstrating significant utility during periods of heightened tension or emergency. Interviewees, including Libyan diplomats and digital practitioners, emphasized that during both the 2019 Tripoli offensive and the COVID-19 public health emergency, digital platforms served as essential communication tools. Ministries deployed real-time updates via Twitter and Facebook to inform citizens about conflict developments, safe zones, casualty figures, and ceasefire efforts, while also appealing for international assistance. Moreover, digital diplomacy extended into humanitarian coordination. Official social media accounts amplified information from international partners, such as the

World Health Organization, UNHCR, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, to demonstrate Libya's willingness to collaborate and manage crises responsibly. As one diplomat noted, these posts were "designed to show that Libya is not isolated but actively part of a broader international response framework," contributing to external perceptions of operational legitimacy. Interviewees described these digital channels as enabling "transparent communication" that appealed to both domestic and external audiences, circumventing delays typically associated with traditional media channels.

Legitimation narratives represent a further structural component of Libya's digital diplomacy. These narratives underscore themes of sovereignty, legal compliance, and peacebuilding, designed to position Libya as a normative actor aligned with global standards. Content often highlights participation in regional and international bodies, including the African Union and the United Nations, serving as discursive evidence of Libya's acceptance within world governance forums. Social media posts referencing Libya's engagement in UN-led peace processes or portrayal of Libyan envoys at African Union summits signal continuity and institutional integration. Interviewees stressed that such messaging is critical to counter foreign narratives that characterize Libya as a failed or rogue state.

Another dimension of legitimation deployment involves cultural resilience and identity. Digital diplomacy practices incorporate facets of national heritage, emphasizing Libyan art, historical sites, and cultural festivals, to foster emotional connection and national pride. These cultural signals are also strategically directed toward international publics and diaspora audiences. One interviewee from the Ministry of Culture described this approach as a soft power mechanism: "By showcasing our cultural achievements, we affirm we are a united, proud nation emerging from conflict." Such emotionally resonant content underpins soft power strategies by making Libya more attractive and relatable, aligning with Nye's (2004) conceptualization of attraction-based influence.

Despite these strategic initiatives, Libya's digital diplomacy efforts face multiple core challenges that hinder their coherence and effectiveness. Foremost among these is messaging incoherence. As different government entities, Tripoli-based ministries, HoR-aligned embassies, and outlying armed groups, issue overlapping or contradictory messages, international audiences are often left uncertain as to which authority legitimately represents Libya. Interviewees highlighted that without centralized coordination, individual ministries post independently, "leading to mixed signals that dilute our efforts."

The digital divide constitutes another structural obstacle. Uneven internet access, especially in rural and conflict-affected regions, limits domestic reach. Official messages often remain confined to urban populations with reliable connectivity, magnifying institutional inequality. Secondary data drawn from World Bank and ITU statistics underscores Libya's below-average internet penetration rate compared to regional benchmarks (World Bank, 2020; ITU, 2021). Interviewees stressed that this divides the population between those linked in and those left out, hampering national cohesion and limiting the ability for uniform digital outreach.

Cybersecurity and disinformation emerged as further deterrents to Libya's digital diplomacy. Several respondents described coordinated interference campaigns, which included hacking of official accounts, impersonation of diplomats, and the planting of false statements. Such incidents damage credibility and impede trust-building, risks compounded by the political fragmentation and espionage that characterize Libya's digital phenomena. As one digital communications specialist stated, "When our Twitter is hacked or our diplomat's account is suspended, it sends an impression of incompetence and opens the door for hostile foreign narratives."

A notable operational challenge is the lack of professionalization within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Interviewees cited the absence of a formal digital diplomacy unit, pointing to the limited number of staff trained in social media strategy, analytics, or digital crisis communications. Digital tasks, such as composing tweets or producing graphics, are typically handled by staff assigned to public relations or communications, without a coherent strategic directive. This siloed mode of operation leads to episodic, reactive activity rather than sustained, strategic campaigns. Nonetheless, respondents also reported progress toward institutionalization. Several interviewees mentioned that MFA leadership had initiated discussions about creating a centralized Digital Diplomacy Unit staffed by communications professionals. Proposed functions would include coordinating messaging, managing the MFA's multiple accounts, developing multimedia content, monitoring analytics, and forming liaison relations with international digital diplomacy practitioners. Though still nascent, this initiative signals a growing recognition within the MFA that digital diplomacy requires structure, capacity, and strategy.

Engagement monitoring and evaluation has likewise become an emergent priority. The study found that Libyan digital teams track social media metrics such as likes, shares, follower growth, and media mentions, particularly in foreign and diaspora media, to assess narrative traction. While this constitutes an important step toward data-driven message building, formal evaluation frameworks remain under development. Interviewees noted that there are no standardized metrics linking digital metrics to diplomatic outcomes, such as increased visibility in international forums or concrete policy support. Instead, evaluation remains limited to surface-level engagement indicators, leaving the deeper impact of digital campaigns unmeasured.

Synthesizing these findings, the study illustrates that Libya's digital diplomacy is marked by a dynamic dualism: significant ambition underpinned by strategic creativity on one hand, counterbalanced by substantial institutional weaknesses and operational fragility on the other. The visual-focused statecraft efforts, crisis communications during emergencies, and legitimization narratives demonstrate a clear, if uneven, digital diplomacy arc. Yet such efforts are undercut by fragmented authority, digital exclusion, security vulnerabilities, and the lack of trained professional capacity and evaluation frameworks.

These dynamics align with emerging theories of digital diplomacy in crisis contexts (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019), which emphasize the importance of narrative control, transparency, and interactivity, while also acknowledging the dangers of misinformation and institutional instability. Libya's experience adds to this literature by showing how conflict-affected states adapt

digital tools to assert legitimacy and manage crises, while revealing the limits imposed by fragmented sovereignty and infrastructural constraints.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests several implications. First, establishing a centralized Digital Diplomacy Unit with strategic coordination is key to cohering messages and enhancing credibility. Second, addressing the digital divide through public–private partnerships or international support could broaden digital outreach and domestic engagement. Third, investment in cybersecurity protocols and staff training would protect communications from fraud and manipulation. Fourth, embedding evaluations into digital diplomacy, linking digital engagement to diplomatic outcomes, would support more evidence-based and effective strategy development. Overall, this study demonstrates that digital diplomacy in Libya constitutes a critical frontier of foreign policy activity, particularly under conditions of crisis and state fragmentation. While Libyan actors leverage digital platforms to project legitimacy, manage emergencies, and build narratives of statehood, these efforts remain vulnerable to institutional flaws, geopolitical interference, and technological barriers. As Libya continues its complex path toward political stabilization, the formalization and strengthening of digital diplomacy capacities will be vital for enhancing international standing, domestic trust, and crisis resilience.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research underscores the strategic significance of digital diplomacy within Libya's turbulent political phenomena, highlighting its emerging role as a significant instrument for managing crises and asserting legitimacy in the fragmented international system. Despite enduring profound challenges stemming from institutional fragmentation, weak governance structures, and limited resources, Libyan authorities have increasingly harnessed digital platforms to navigate a complex web of domestic and international pressures. Through the dissemination of crisis-related information, countering disinformation campaigns, soliciting international recognition and support, and advancing narratives that emphasize stability, governance, and cultural identity, digital diplomacy has proven an invaluable resource for Libya's competing political entities. While still nascent and characterized by structural and operational deficiencies, the digital diplomatic efforts in Libya provide important lessons about the potential and limitations of technology-enabled statecraft in fragile contexts.

Central to Libya's use of digital diplomacy is the projection of legitimacy, a concept deeply contested in both its internal and external dimensions. Internally, rival factions such as the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the House of Representatives (HoR) engage in an ongoing struggle to assert their right to govern. Externally, these entities vie for recognition by foreign governments, multilateral organizations, and the international public. Digital diplomacy offers a platform through which these actors can curate and broadcast narratives that affirm their claims to represent Libya's sovereignty and interests, bypassing traditional diplomatic gatekeepers and reaching broader, more diverse audiences. The visual storytelling strategies employed, such as the publication of images featuring diplomatic meetings, development initiatives, and humanitarian operations, serve to counteract prevalent international perceptions of Libya as a

failed or ungovernable state (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). This form of narrative construction aligns closely with Joseph Nye's (2004) conceptualization of soft power, where attraction and cultural resonance substitute for coercion or hard power, illustrating how digital diplomacy can facilitate the projection of influence in contexts where material capacities are limited.

Moreover, digital platforms have been critical in crisis communication, enabling real-time updates during violent confrontations and public health emergencies alike. The 2019 Tripoli offensive and the COVID-19 pandemic provide illustrative cases where Libyan ministries and affiliated entities used social media to inform both domestic and international audiences about conflict developments, health guidelines, ceasefire appeals, and humanitarian needs. These efforts exemplify the operationalization of digital diplomacy as a tool of transparency and cooperation with international organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Hocking & Melissen, 2015). Such cooperation not only enhances the credibility of Libyan authorities but also situates the country within global governance frameworks, reinforcing claims to legitimacy and statehood.

However, this study's findings illuminate significant constraints that continue to hamper the effectiveness of Libya's digital diplomacy. The fragmented political environment generates incoherent and often contradictory messaging, as rival governments and factions disseminate conflicting narratives through independent digital channels. This lack of coordination undermines Libya's international credibility and complicates efforts to present a unified national position (Melissen, 2016). Additionally, Libya's digital divide, characterized by inconsistent internet access and limited digital infrastructure, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas, restricts the reach and inclusiveness of digital diplomacy campaigns, thereby limiting their domestic resonance and effectiveness. Cybersecurity threats compound these difficulties; politically motivated hacking, disinformation campaigns, and psychological operations perpetrated by internal and external actors destabilize the information environment and threaten the integrity of official communications (Bjola & Pamment, 2017).

Another salient challenge identified by interviewees pertains to the lack of a comprehensive and centralized digital diplomacy strategy. The dispersion of digital engagement responsibilities across multiple ministries and government units results in siloed operations that weaken message coherence and strategic impact. Moreover, skill gaps within the diplomatic corps, characterized by insufficient training in digital communication, social media management, and crisis messaging, further diminish Libya's capacity to leverage digital tools effectively. Nevertheless, the establishment of a Digital Diplomacy Unit within Libya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs represents a promising institutional development aimed at professionalizing and coordinating digital engagement efforts. Such structural reforms are crucial to ensuring that digital diplomacy evolves from ad hoc activity to a coherent strategic pillar of Libyan foreign policy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). In terms of engagement and evaluation, the research found that Libyan authorities have begun utilizing social media analytics to monitor audience interaction, including metrics such as likes, shares, sentiment analysis, and international media mentions. These data points assist in assessing

which narratives resonate most effectively with foreign and domestic audiences, informing the adaptation of digital diplomacy strategies. However, formalized evaluation frameworks remain underdeveloped, reflecting a broader global challenge in measuring the tangible impact of digital diplomacy initiatives on foreign policy outcomes (Manor, 2019). The development of robust, iterative monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will be vital to enhancing the strategic sophistication and accountability of Libya's digital diplomatic engagements.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Libya, offering broader insights for fragile and conflict-affected states seeking to navigate the digital diplomacy phenomena. First, centralization of digital diplomacy under a unified strategic framework emerges as a critical prerequisite for ensuring message consistency, increasing the effectiveness of diplomatic outreach, and reducing the risks of fragmentation and contradictory narratives. Countries facing internal divisions and competing authorities must prioritize the institutional coordination of digital efforts to build coherent narratives that can resonate domestically and internationally (Sevin, 2016). Second, capacity building is essential; diplomats require targeted training in digital communication, crisis management, and strategic messaging to exploit the full potential of digital platforms. Professional development programs, alongside investments in technological infrastructure, will bridge current skill gaps and enhance operational readiness (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Public engagement also warrants strategic enhancement. Interactive digital features such as live question-and-answer sessions, multilingual content dissemination, and real-time video streaming can build public trust, foster transparency, and facilitate more dynamic dialogue with international audiences. Such initiatives have the potential to transform passive information consumption into active participation, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and resonance of diplomatic messages (Cull, 2019). Concurrently, cybersecurity must be elevated to a priority status within digital diplomacy frameworks. Given the susceptibility of fragile states like Libya to hacking, disinformation, and cyberattacks, investments in secure digital infrastructure and protocols are indispensable to safeguard the integrity and credibility of official communications (Bjola & Pamment, 2017).

Developing sophisticated monitoring and evaluation tools to systematically assess digital diplomacy campaigns can provide valuable feedback loops, enabling diplomats to refine strategies and measure impact with greater precision. Integrating big data analytics, sentiment analysis, and artificial intelligence technologies may offer innovative pathways to optimize message targeting and effectiveness in the future (Kurbalija & Bjola, 2017). These approaches, however, require complementary human expertise to interpret data meaningfully and adapt strategies contextually. Theoretically, this study contributes to the expanding literature on digital diplomacy by situating Libya's experience within the intersecting frameworks of crisis management, legitimation theory, and networked diplomacy. It affirms that digital diplomacy is not merely a technological adaptation but a strategic practice integral to the exercise of soft power in fragile state contexts. Libya's case illustrates how digital tools can supplement diminished hard power resources, enabling political actors to project influence and legitimacy through narrative construction and engagement with international publics (Nye, 2004). Furthermore, the findings enrich networked

diplomacy theory by demonstrating how digital platforms facilitate multilateral and cross-sectoral diplomatic interactions, particularly in the absence of stable, traditional diplomatic infrastructures. Libya's digital engagement with entities such as the United Nations, African Union, and humanitarian organizations exemplifies the potential of networked diplomacy to maintain international relations under conditions of state fragility (Hocking & Melissen, 2015).

Looking forward, further research should undertake comparative case studies involving other post-conflict states such as Syria and Yemen to discern common patterns, challenges, and best practices in digital diplomacy amid political instability. Such comparative analyses would deepen understanding of contextual variables influencing digital diplomacy's effectiveness and guide tailored policy prescriptions. Additionally, the role of diaspora communities and civil society organizations in amplifying, contesting, or reshaping digital diplomatic narratives warrants closer examination. These actors often operate as intermediaries, bridging domestic and international spheres, and their engagement can significantly influence the success of diplomatic messaging (Hocking & Melissen, 2015). Finally, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning hold transformative potential for digital diplomacy, enabling more nuanced audience segmentation, message customization, and rapid response capabilities. Investigating the ethical, operational, and strategic implications of these technologies remains a fertile area for future inquiry.

In conclusion, Libya's experience affirms the dual role of digital diplomacy as both a survival strategy and an aspirational instrument of modern statecraft in a highly interconnected world. Faced with entrenched internal divisions and persistent legitimacy deficits, Libya cannot afford digital silence. Instead, it must embrace digital diplomacy as an evolving field that, when effectively executed, can bridge internal divides, attract external legitimacy, and re-establish the country as a responsible and engaged actor on the global stage. The lessons drawn from Libya's ongoing digital diplomacy journey offer valuable insights for other fragile states seeking to leverage technology in pursuit of peace, stability, and international recognition.

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