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AN ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN FURTHERING SOUTH AFRICA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

BY

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27 November 2024

DECLARATION

I, Bizana Abiba Blyss Meyong, declare that this dissertation titled 'An Analysis of Digital Diplomacy in furthering South Africa's Foreign Policy in a post-Covid-29 World' is my work and has not been submitted by me for another degree at another university. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the Master of Arts in Diplomacy in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, traditional concepts of diplomacy have undergone significant transformation, largely driven by globalisation, which has reshaped how states engage in diplomatic relations. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded this shift by limiting physical diplomatic engagements and accelerating the reliance on digital tools for international communication and negotiation. In the case of South Africa, this shift presented both unique challenges and significant opportunities in leveraging digital diplomacy to advance its foreign policy objectives in the post-pandemic world. Despite the growing prominence of digital diplomacy across Africa, there is a distinct gap in research focused on how this form of diplomacy specifically operates within South Africa's geopolitical and socio-economic context.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the role of digital diplomacy in South Africa's foreign policy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative research approach, the study involved in-depth interviews with academics and practitioners who have more than five years of experience in the fields of diplomacy and foreign policy. Thematic analysis of the interview data, framed through a soft power lens, highlights the potential for digital diplomacy to enhance South Africa's international standing within the international system.

The findings reveal that digital diplomacy offers critical opportunities for South Africa, including enhancing direct communication with global actors, improving diplomatic responsiveness, and leveraging cultural diplomacy to reshape international perceptions, particularly through storytelling and digital engagement on platforms like social media. Furthermore, the digital realm provides South Africa with an avenue to strengthen its role in multilateral forums by fostering deeper regional cooperation and amplifying its leadership in addressing global challenges.

However, the study also identifies several key challenges that complicate South Africa's adoption of digital diplomacy. These include the digital divide, which exacerbates unequal access to technology and hampers broader participation in digital diplomatic initiatives, as well as concerns over cybersecurity, misinformation,

and risk of data privacy violations. Despite these challenges, the research underscores that digital diplomacy could play a transformative role in South Africa's foreign policy, enabling the country to navigate the complexities of the post-COVID world more effectively.

Key words: Digital Diplomacy, South Africa, Foreign Policy, Post-Covid-19, Soft Power.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the matriarch of my family, my beloved grandmother, Pamboudam Zenabou.

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“In true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace”

- Parker Palmer

To my mother, sister, partner and friends.

To my community.

Thank you for the kindness, patience, and understanding.

Thank you for the grace.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACE	Africa Coast to Europe
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
COVID-19	Coronavirus
DIRCO	Department of International Relations and Cooperation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICT	Information communication technology
IGO	Intergovernmental organisations
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NDP	National Development Plan
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
UN	United Nations

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Study

Hocking (2016: 67) contends that traditional conceptions of foreign policy have undergone profound changes in recent decades, with new agendas and evolving arenas shaping its practice. As Hocking et al. (2012) argue, the increasing complexity of the foreign policy environment and the structures in which diplomacy operates has led to what they describe as an "existential crisis" for diplomacy. This crisis is rooted in the swift societal transformations taking place in a highly digitised and interconnected global landscape. Globalisation, rapid technological advancements, and the speed at which information circulates have all contributed to the redefinition of diplomatic practice, challenging established conventions and roles within the field.

For South Africa, whose foreign policy is traditionally centred on principles such as multilateralism, peacekeeping, and development in Africa, this transformation in diplomacy presents both opportunities and challenges. South Africa's foreign policy, largely shaped by its post-Apartheid vision, seeks to balance its leadership role in Africa with broader global ambitions. This context makes South Africa particularly attuned to the evolving diplomatic landscape. As diplomatic norms and tools shift in response to global challenges, South Africa must adapt its foreign policy strategy to remain relevant in an increasingly digital world. The state's role in foreign policy is thus central but also undergoing a profound transformation due to digital diplomacy's growing significance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this transformation, underscoring the need for diplomacy to adapt to new realities. As Hocking et al. (2012) observe, the pandemic has prompted a revaluation of the purpose and practice of diplomacy, questioning its traditional forms and roles. This uncertainty extends beyond traditional state-to-state diplomacy, influencing international organisations and institutions that

must now navigate a radically altered global environment. While the pandemic may have initially created a sense of diplomatic uncertainty, it also highlighted the continuing relevance of diplomacy, albeit in a more flexible and digital form. As traditional forms of diplomacy, such as in-person meetings and travel, became increasingly impractical during the pandemic, digital platforms became vital for communication, collaboration, and decision-making at all levels of global governance.

In the case of South Africa, the crisis presented an opportunity to harness digital diplomacy to further its foreign policy goals. The South African government swiftly adopted digital tools for regional and international diplomacy, participating in virtual conferences, summits, and meetings to address pressing issues like the continent's response to COVID-19 and the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. These shifts were in line with South Africa's long-standing foreign policy priorities, which include promoting African unity and global justice, while also navigating the broader international system in a manner that enhances its global influence.

However, as Wekesa et al. (2021) point out, digital diplomacy remains a relatively nascent practice in Africa, and its implementation is often reactive rather than proactive. Despite the growing use of digital tools by diplomats and other international stakeholders such as business executives and civil society organisations, digital diplomacy in Africa lacks a systematic, strategic approach. South Africa, like many African countries, has yet to fully embrace the potential of digital diplomacy as a deliberate instrument to advance its foreign policy objectives. Although the use of information and communication technology (ICT) has become increasingly important, the concept of digital diplomacy itself remains underdeveloped, and the lack of a coherent digital strategy hampers its full potential.

Moreover, Wekesa et al. (2021) argue that there is a significant research gap in the study of digital diplomacy within African academia. As a result, few African scholars are considered experts in the field, and the lack of in-depth academic exploration further limits the ability of African diplomats to engage with digital diplomacy effectively. The absence of a theoretical framework tailored to African realities means that digital diplomacy is often not treated as a distinct, strategic tool within the broader foreign policy apparatus. This lack of scholarship results in a situation where the

challenges and opportunities of digital diplomacy are not sufficiently addressed, leaving African diplomats without the necessary training and expertise to utilize digital tools effectively in advancing national and continental foreign policy.

South Africa, as a key player in the African Union (AU) and a prominent member of the global South, has a vested interest in addressing this gap. Adesina (2022) argues that African countries, including South Africa, must fully embrace digital diplomacy not only as a supplement to traditional diplomacy but also as a primary means to expand their diplomatic reach and influence. This is particularly important for South Africa, given its historical emphasis on multilateralism and its role as a mediator in international conflicts. By adopting digital diplomacy, South Africa can further its foreign policy goals, extend its global influence, and better engage with both African and international audiences.

To effectively leverage digital diplomacy, South Africa must first invest in closing the research gap identified by Wekesa et al. (2021) and ensure that its diplomatic corps is trained in digital tools and platforms. South Africa's foreign policy strategy should incorporate digital diplomacy as an integral component, aligning it with its broader objectives of promoting peace, security, development, and multilateral cooperation. The full potential of digital diplomacy can only be realized if South Africa develops a clear, strategic approach to its use, one that recognises the challenges posed by misinformation, cyber threats, and the rapid pace of technological change.

It is without a doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has served as a catalyst for rethinking the role of diplomacy in a digitised world. For South Africa, digital diplomacy offers an opportunity to redefine its foreign policy in a way that aligns with the evolving global environment. As Adesina (2022) suggests, African countries must embrace digital diplomacy to enhance their global standing, and South Africa, with its rich diplomatic history and leadership role on the continent, is well-positioned to spearhead this transformation. However, to realise the full potential of digital diplomacy, there is a pressing need to address the gaps in academic research, diplomatic training, and strategic planning that currently limit its effectiveness in Africa.

1.2. Research Problem

Despite the practice of digital diplomacy by conventional diplomats on the African continent it remains limited compared to other regions (Wekesa et al., 2021). This gap is compounded by the lack of scholarly attention on digital diplomacy in Africa, leaving key questions about its application and potential unanswered questions. For South Africa, whose foreign policy objectives include promoting regional stability, peace, multilateralism, and sustainable development, the underutilisation of digital diplomacy represents a missed opportunity to enhance its diplomatic efforts in a rapidly evolving global landscape. South Africa's leadership in institutions like the AU and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) necessitates a deeper integration of digital tools to strengthen its engagement with international and regional stakeholders, yet the capacity to fully leverage these tools remain underdeveloped.

The limited research on digital diplomacy in Africa has created a critical knowledge gap, meaning that African diplomats, including those from South Africa lack the necessary expertise and training in this essential area of modern diplomacy. As a result, South Africa's ability to effectively utilise digital diplomacy to advance its foreign policy goals- such as advocating for African unity, economic development, and global justice- remains constrained. Without a concerted effort to bridge this gap through research and capacity-building, South Africa risks falling behind in leveraging digital diplomacy to address challenges like misinformation, cybersecurity and the digital divide, all of which are particularly pressing in the post-Covid-19 world.

1.3. Research Aims and Objectives

This research study aimed to contribute to the existing knowledge in the area of digital diplomacy, as it had been studied by leading scholars such as Wekesa (2012), Turianskyi (2012), Bjola (2020), and Mannor (2021). This research paper emerged at a time when very little was known about digital diplomacy from an analytical perspective, how it functioned, and the degrees of success and limitations it entailed (Adesina 2017: 1). Despite its increased popularity following the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, there remained a dire need for extensive research on digital diplomacy, its

usage, its impact on diplomacy, and its ability to further foreign policy within the international system.

Research Objectives

- Understand how digital diplomacy can advance South Africa's foreign policy objectives within the international system
- To examine how South Africa utilises digital diplomacy to further its public diplomacy.
- To explain digital diplomacy's opportunities and challenges for South Africa's foreign policy.

1.4. Research Questions

This research paper analysed how digital diplomacy can further South Africa's foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world.

- Can South Africa's use of digital diplomacy further its foreign policy objectives within the international system?
- How does South Africa utilise digital diplomacy to further its public diplomacy?
- What opportunities and challenges do digital diplomacy present for South Africa's foreign policy?

1.5. Research Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative research design to contribute to the knowledge of digital diplomacy and address gaps related to foreign policy in the post-COVID-19 context. Qualitative research was chosen for its emphasis on understanding social phenomena through words rather than numbers, enabling a deeper, nuanced analysis. The approach was particularly valuable as it allowed for the exploration of complex issues, such as the strategic use of soft power in the digital age. Through interviews with academics and practitioners in foreign policy, the study sought to capture insights into how digital diplomacy could enhance South Africa's foreign policy goals, offering

a richer understanding of the motivations and challenges involved in its implementation.

The data collection process combined semi-structured interviews with secondary desk research to provide comprehensive insights. The interviews provided rich, in-depth perspectives from experts, while secondary data from sources such as national policies and speeches helped contextualize the findings. Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse patterns across the data, allowing the study to address key research questions and explore how digital diplomacy South Africa's foreign policy could further. This methodological approach will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, where the research design, data collection, and analysis processes will be thoroughly explained.

1.6. Justification of case study

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in 2020 led to a complete halt as it fundamentally impacted global health and international trade. At its extreme, it restricted movement around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, also presented various opportunities for change within the entire international system. For instance, the pandemic drastically changed the methods of interaction, education, and diplomacy as it was known (Hosseini, 2021). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed how much the modern world depends on ICT and its various tools (Adesina, 2022). Diplomacy, like every aspect of life, became 'digital', similar to several activities transferred online due to pandemic-related gathering restrictions.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the domestic and global environment, South Africa ought to rethink its foreign policy's operational procedures and strategy and, most importantly, how it intends to pursue it in a post-COVID world (Le Pere, 2020). It, therefore, remains imperative that South Africa envisions an international system in which it can achieve its foreign policy but also influence the international system beyond COVID-19 with digital diplomacy. The primary justification

for this research study thus lies in the need for an in-depth analysis of how South Africa can further its foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world.

The second justification emerges from the fact that despite digital diplomacy being practised by conventional diplomats on the African continent and various stakeholders within the international system, the practice of digital diplomacy in South Africa remains limited in comparison to other regions of the world (Wekesa et al., 2021). If South Africa is to fulfil its foreign policy, which remains rooted in national liberation, African renewal and the drive towards combating the legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism (Wekesa et al., 2021), then it is of vital importance that it capitalises off the shift of diplomacy from the physical realm into the digital space. This research paper thus explains how South Africa can skilfully utilise digital diplomacy to further its public diplomacy. In conclusion, this research study justifies itself by demonstrating the need for an in-depth understanding of how South Africa can further its foreign policy goals within the context of a post-COVID-19 world, how it can also further its public diplomacy, and what opportunities and challenges lie ahead in its quest.

1.7. Significance of Study

Adesina (2022) asserts that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how much the modern world has become dependent on technology and digital tools. COVID-19 has undoubtedly propelled diplomacy into the digital space as several activities shifted online due to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic. While much has been written on digital diplomacy, most of the research published remains limited to the pre-COVID-19 period and Europe.

This study, therefore, aims to shift focus onto digital diplomacy in a post-COVID-19 context and explores how countries in the Global South, such as South Africa, can further their foreign policy using tools such as digital diplomacy. This research study is of great significance as it emerges at a time in which very little is known about digital diplomacy in Africa from an analytical perspective, how it functions and the degrees of success and limitations it entails (Adesina 2017: 1). And despite its increased popularity following the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, there still is a dire need for

extensive research on digital diplomacy and its impact on foreign relations after the pandemic.

1.8. Ethical Considerations

Protecting human subjects by adhering to ethical principles while undertaking a research study was paramount. Ethical considerations were especially important in qualitative studies due to the in-depth nature of the research process (Arifin 2018: 30). This research study used interviews as a means of data collection, so ethical issues became more salient.

While undertaking the research, it was the responsibility of the researcher to avoid causing harm to participants. Safeguards were taken to ensure the study did not harm any participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, detailing the purpose, procedures, benefits, and risks associated with the research study, and allowing participants to ask questions and withdraw at any time. After the data collection phase, the researcher ensured that all information gathered was kept confidential and protected. This approach safeguarded participants from any psychological, social, or legal harm.

1.9 Theoretical Framework

In this dissertation, soft power serves as a critical theoretical framework for analysing how South Africa can further its foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world. Soft power, as conceptualised by Joseph Nye (1990), refers to the ability of a nation to influence other states through attraction rather than coercion, leveraging cultural appeal, values, and the attractiveness of its foreign policies. In the context of the digital age, soft power extends to online platforms, allowing states to shape global perceptions, foster relationships and promote national values through digital diplomacy. Given the limitations on traditional diplomacy caused by the pandemic, digital tools such as social media and online communication have become essential for South Africa to engage with foreign audiences and strengthen its international presence.

The use of soft power in digital diplomacy thus becomes relevant in the post-COVID-19 context where online communication becomes the primary means of international engagement. South Africa's ability to build influence whilst attracting support at the international level hinges on its effective use of digital channels to promote its foreign policy objectives, enhance its image and establish relationships with states and non-state actors. This theoretical framework is appropriate as it highlights how digital diplomacy can serve as an extension of soft power, helping South Africa navigate the changing nature of the international environment, while strengthening its diplomatic reach and fostering relationships.

1.10. Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 began by introducing the study with a background, an outline, and the research problem. This chapter also highlighted the research questions, research objectives, research methodology, justification of the study, significance, ethical considerations, and chapter outline.

Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature on digital diplomacy to identify the gap in the existing literature that the research study aimed to fill. This chapter also comprised a theoretical framework using soft power to explain how South Africa's use of digital diplomacy could further its foreign policy objectives within the international system.

Chapter 3 provided a contextual background to the study, examining and comparing the state of digital diplomacy in South Africa before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. It further expanded on South Africa's pursuit of its foreign policy objectives with the use of digital diplomacy in the post-COVID-19 world.

Chapter 4 covered the research methodology. The first half of the chapter delved into the methods followed by the researcher in recruiting the research participants, the manner in which the interviews were conducted, and how the responses were used to triangulate the data and analyse. The second half of the chapter presented the findings

following the participants' interview responses. It also highlighted the major themes that emerged from the interviews while exploring whether South Africa could further its foreign policy objectives within the international system and the opportunities and challenges digital diplomacy may present.

Chapter 5 focused on the discussion and analysis of the interview findings. It reiterated the main research questions, summarised the key findings from the interviews, and reintroduced the theoretical framework. The chapter then answered the three main research questions and analysed them using the theoretical framework.

Chapter 6 provided a summary and conclusion while incorporating a recommendation section for further study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This chapter contains a review of the literature on digital diplomacy, foreign policy and the theoretical framework. The literature review is divided into two parts; the first section of this chapter begins by providing a conceptual review of diplomacy and its evolution within the international arena. It explores the discussions on the change in foreign policy and the influence of the digital era. The second section shifts focus on the various conceptualisations of digital diplomacy and its connection to the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical framework discusses soft power while looking to understand digital diplomacy.

2.2. Diplomacy

Traditional diplomacy is typically conceptualised as a peaceful engagement conducted by state officials to advance their foreign policy goals (Cull 2009; Berridge 2010; Du Plessis 2008). In essence, diplomacy serves as the primary mechanism through which states articulate and pursue their international objectives. While there is no universally accepted definition of diplomacy, it is generally understood as the conduct of human affairs, ideally through peaceful means, using techniques of persuasion and negotiation (Lee and Hocking 2011: 1). Fundamentally, diplomacy is a political endeavour, where skill and well-being are key components of state power (Berridge 2005: 1). In the context of the international system, diplomacy is the established method by which states define their foreign policy objectives and coordinate efforts to influence the behaviour and decisions of other actors (Azeez 2023: 190). Therefore, diplomacy remains central to the execution of foreign policy, functioning as the means through which states influence international dynamics.

Diplomatic relations have existed for centuries; however, formalised diplomatic practices began with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which established the institution

of the modern state. This historical foundation of diplomacy has evolved over time, particularly through the development of international conventions and agreements. The codes of diplomatic conduct were further solidified during the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) and were ultimately codified in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations in 1961 (Spies 2012: 83). Berridge (2010: 2) notes that, historically, diplomatic communication was often slow, unpredictable, and insecure, frequently influenced by political shifts. Despite these challenges, diplomatic communication has long been an essential part of how states navigate their relations and safeguard their national interests on the global stage.

Although diplomacy has long been state-centric, characterised by specialised personnel, codes of conduct, and formal protocols, it remains a system that emphasises exclusivity (Gilboa 2008; Kelly 2010; Langhorne 2005: 332). In addition to this traditional structure, diplomacy also relies heavily on the tools of power, which help states achieve their international goals. According to Morgenthau (1973: 521), diplomacy relies on three primary tools: “persuasion, compromise, and the threat of force,” which states use to gain leverage in the pursuit of their foreign policy objectives. Diplomacy thus represents a system of established norms, values, and standardised processes, with professional diplomats responsible for managing relations between states (Wiseman 2005: 410). Diplomatic activities are conducted in various forms, including bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, summit diplomacy, shuttle diplomacy, and parliamentary diplomacy (Bayne 1992: 27; Berridge 2010: 161; Dunn 1996; Satow 2009: 122). Nevertheless, in the face of emerging challenges, traditional diplomacy is evolving, with new tools and actors influencing how diplomacy is practiced.

However, modern diplomacy has undergone significant changes, profoundly altering its character. These shifts are largely attributed to technological advancements and the increasing participation of non-state actors in global affairs. These changes have affected both domestic and international politics, which were once largely outside the scope of diplomacy. Stanzel (2018: 5) argues that advances in communication have led to an increase in the number of domestic and international actors whose activities impact diplomacy. The public has become more engaged with foreign policy, while states are increasingly turning to digital diplomacy as a means of influencing global

affairs. Adesina (2017: 1), however, points out that there is still a lack of analytical understanding of digital diplomacy—its functions, successes, and limitations—leaving states in a state of uncertainty. Thus, while the digital era presents new opportunities for diplomatic engagement, it also introduces complexities that need to be fully understood and leveraged by states to enhance their foreign policy strategies.

2.3. Foreign Policy

In the field of international relations, scholars have offered various definitions and interpretations of foreign policy. To begin with, it is essential to recognise that foreign policy remains a highly contested and evolving concept in academic discourse. According to du Plessis (2006: 120), foreign policy is often plagued by ambiguities and a lack of definitional clarity. Broadly, it is understood as the objectives and interests of a state, which are projected to reflect its national interests within the international system. However, du Plessis (2006: 12) argues that this conceptualisation assumes the exclusivity of the state within the international system. This critique sets the stage for a broader exploration of the various actors now involved in foreign policy. Ultimately, foreign policy decisions, actions, and activities aim to "create, control, adjust, and alter external conditions" to achieve desired outcomes.

Over time, however, foreign policy has evolved from being solely a state prerogative to a more complex field that includes a range of international actors. As the international landscape has shifted, non-state actors have become increasingly influential in shaping foreign policy dynamics. These include intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multinational corporations, the media, civil society groups, and other independent actors, all of whom pursue and promote their objectives within the international system (Hamilton and Langhorne 1995; Pigman 2010; Barston 2013). Like state actors, these organisations have established independent structures that operate within a unique constitutional framework. These new dynamics highlight the diversification of power within international relations, which is reflected in the distinct operational frameworks of these actors. These frameworks are hierarchical and characterised by set goals, missions, and objectives specific to each institution.

It is important to note that, in the case of IGOs, their hierarchical structures and constitutional frameworks are typically shaped by agreements made between states. This connection between state interests and intergovernmental organisations further underscores the central role of states in shaping the direction of international relations. As a result, the objectives and policies of IGOs often reflect the foreign policies of member states. In this sense, the processes through which states engage in dialogue and negotiations to reach agreements can be seen as a form of shared knowledge formation (Wendt, 1999). This is evident in the way treaties are crafted, where the concepts and meanings must be defined broadly to ensure the results are valuable and meaningful to all parties involved. Through this collaborative process, states can leverage international agreements as part of their broader foreign policy strategies. This collaborative process represents just one of the many tools at states' disposal to achieve their foreign policy goals.

The rise of non-state actors and, in some cases, increased collaboration among states within the international arena has led to a shift in the dynamics of foreign policy. These changes suggest that foreign policy is increasingly shaped by a broader range of players, who introduce new challenges and opportunities for states. Hocking et al. (2012) highlight the growing complexity of the foreign policy environment, noting that diplomacy is currently undergoing an "existential crisis." This shift is part of the broader societal transformations underway, driven by profound processes such as globalisation and the accelerating pace of communication.

The uncertainty surrounding the future of diplomacy reflects a growing recognition that the international system, dominated by sovereign nations, ought to adapt to changes on several interconnected levels. Indeed, the ongoing transformation in global governance calls for a rethinking of traditional diplomatic norms and practices. Many of the conventions, guidelines, and roles that have traditionally defined diplomacy are no longer fit for purpose, despite the continuing need for states to play a central—albeit shifting—role in global affairs (Hocking et al., 2012). One key development in this transformation is the increasing emphasis on forming and preserving coalitions through networks that include both governmental and non-governmental actors. These shifts point to the increasing importance of alternative forms of diplomacy, including

public diplomacy. As Hocking et al. (2012) emphasise, public diplomacy has become a critical area of focus, with both its international and domestic dimensions playing an increasingly important role.

2.4. The Emergence of the Digital Age

The emergence of the internet brought about a profound transformation in the world. This transformation marked the beginning of a new era, fundamentally changing how information is shared and accessed globally. Initially, the internet and computer systems allowed for instant access to new information and the rapid transmission of written messages. At its inception, the internet was primarily used by government institutions and was a state-run initiative that relied on skilled programmers for its operation (Verrekia 2017: 13).

However, as the internet began to expand beyond government use, it soon became apparent that its potential was far greater than initially envisioned. The internet evolved into something far larger and more influential through advancements in technology, such as the development of the World Wide Web and the introduction of graphical browsers, which made it more accessible to the public. As broadband internet expanded and mobile technology advanced, the internet became integrated into everyday life, with social media and e-commerce platforms reshaping communication, business, and entertainment. The rise of smartphones further accelerated this transformation, making the internet portable and omnipresent, and solidifying its role as a critical global tool for communication, commerce, and governance.

Zaryn (2017) argues that the world is currently experiencing a "second revolution" in internet technology, commonly referred to as "web 2.0." This new phase of internet development has further reshaped how individuals interact with technology on a global scale. The rise of mobile technology has further accelerated this transformation. People are no longer confined to sitting in front of computers to access the internet; with the advent of smartphones, individuals can now stay connected and send messages instantaneously from virtually anywhere. This shift has had a profound impact, particularly in developing regions where mobile technology is more accessible than traditional computers. This mobility has been especially significant in less

developed parts of the world, where the proliferation of mobile satellites has enabled greater participation in global digital conversations.

The introduction of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Weibo, Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn have significantly advanced the internet revolution. In addition to technological advancements, the rise of social media has become a central component in shaping the modern digital landscape. A 2024 study by Data Portal found that internet users spend on average, two and a half hours per day on social media, which accounts for more than one-third of their total online time. Additionally, a 2017 study by Oxford University revealed that 47% of respondents access their news exclusively through broadcasters' or newspapers' websites, while an increasing number of people are turning to platforms such as Google (20%) and Facebook (25%) for news discovery. This shift in news consumption patterns underscores the growing influence of social media as a primary information source.

Social media platforms have become major players in this digital landscape. As these platforms continue to grow, their influence on communication, culture, and society has reached unprecedented levels. For example, Facebook boasts an estimated 3.065 billion monthly active users, and TikTok has reached 1.583 billion monthly active users (Data Portal, 2024). According to Costigan and Perry (2012), the widespread use of these platforms has fostered a more interconnected global society, where people from different regions have access to similar news, ranging from politics to pop culture and beyond. This interconnectedness has not only redefined global communication but also created new opportunities for digital diplomacy and international engagement.

2.5. The Evolution of Digital Diplomacy: A Global Perspective

Digital diplomacy has emerged as a transformative element in modern foreign policy, continuously redefined and conceptualised by scholars and practitioners alike (Sotiriu, 2015). This fluid understanding reflects the evolving nature of the field, as digital tools reshape how states engage with the global system. As the concept matures, there have been increasing calls for a more consistent framework to assess its implications, particularly in public diplomacy and foreign policy (Azeez, 2023). Scholars such as Azeez (2023) argue that current research fails to fully capture the operational

dynamics of digital diplomacy, suggesting that a more comprehensive theoretical approach is needed to evaluate its role. This highlights the importance of establishing clearer definitions, particularly with regard to the use of social media platforms, which have become critical for states to manage their global image and advance foreign policy (Bjola & Jiang, 2015).

The role of digital tools in diplomacy has progressed from a simple extension of traditional methods to a dynamic practice that allows for real-time communication, broad engagement, and a tailored approach to foreign policy. Manor and Segev (2015) argue that digital diplomacy is increasingly understood as a strategic use of platforms like social media to manage diplomatic messaging, with foreign ministries and embassies adjusting their tactics to engage specific audiences based on local cultures and values. This customization marks a shift toward more nuanced and effective diplomatic outreach, enabling states to not only communicate with foreign governments but also interact directly with the global public (Lewis, 2014).

As digital tools such as social media and mobile devices become central to diplomatic practices, the internet emerges as an indispensable component of modern diplomacy, bridging gaps between states and citizens (Prabandari & Rahyaputra, 2018; Potter, 2002). The growing recognition of the internet as a primary medium for addressing foreign policy challenges signals a pivotal shift in how diplomacy is conducted globally, enabling states to listen, engage, and respond to international issues more efficiently and flexibly (Azeez, 2023).

At the heart of this evolution is the increasing competition for influence in the digital realm, where states must strategically participate in global digital discourse to maintain their relevance (Azeez, 2023). With the democratization of information via the internet, non-state actors, including international organizations and individual citizens, now have access to global audiences, creating a more competitive environment for states to navigate. In this context, digital diplomacy becomes not just a tool for engagement but a means for states to assert their position in the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

The shift from one-way web publishing to interactive, digital diplomacy enables more inclusive participation in global negotiations, allowing smaller states, in particular, to engage meaningfully in discussions on critical issues such as climate change, health, and economic development (Holmes, 2015; Azeez, 2023). This transformation underscores the adaptability and collaboration required in modern diplomacy, as states increasingly rely on digital tools to inform decision-making, report on international events, and manage bilateral relations more effectively. The digital era marks a profound shift in diplomatic practice, reducing barriers to entry and enhancing the capacity of states to engage in a more inclusive, real-time global diplomatic process.

2.6. Digital Diplomacy in Africa: Trends and Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically accelerated the shift of diplomatic activities to the online space, as travel restrictions and social distancing measures made traditional face-to-face meetings increasingly unfeasible. Digital platforms quickly became essential venues for conferences, diplomatic meetings, and the communication of foreign policy objectives. This transition, while disruptive, also highlighted the need for more adaptable and efficient diplomatic practices. However, in the African context, the adoption of digital diplomacy remains in its nascent stages, with its implementation still hindered by several challenges. Wekesa et al. (2021) identify two key barriers to the effective use of digital diplomacy in Africa: first, the concept remains relatively new to the continent, and second, the use of ICTs in foreign policy is often driven by convenience rather than a well-thought-out, strategic approach. Consequently, in many cases, Africa's digital diplomatic actions are not even formally recognized as part of a broader digital diplomacy framework.

Furthermore, the lack of formal academic programs and research on digital diplomacy within African universities exacerbates this challenge. Wekesa et al. (2021) argue that this knowledge gap leaves African diplomats without sufficient expertise in digital diplomacy and without formal training on how to leverage digital tools in the context of foreign policy. The absence of an African-centred theory of digital diplomacy has resulted in a situation where key digital diplomacy issues are not thoroughly examined

or discussed. This gap in research and training undermines the capacity of African states to fully integrate digital diplomacy into their foreign policy strategies.

As African countries continue to pursue their international objectives in the digital age, the lack of a cohesive digital diplomacy strategy may become a significant barrier to their global engagement. Adesina (2022) suggests that in order to advance their foreign policy goals, African nations must harness the full potential of digital diplomacy, complementing traditional diplomatic efforts to expand their global influence and effectively engage with international audiences. However, to achieve these goals, it is essential to address the current research deficit and develop more structured approaches to digital diplomacy within the African context.

The ongoing pandemic and the evolving global diplomatic landscape also raise important questions about the role of diplomacy and its adaptation in the digital era. As Hocking et al. (2012) note, while some may have questioned the relevance of traditional diplomatic practices in an increasingly interconnected world, the pandemic has underscored the continued importance of diplomacy in addressing new global challenges. For Africa, this presents both an opportunity and a challenge—an opportunity to modernize its diplomatic tools and practices, but also a challenge to ensure that digital diplomacy evolves alongside its broader foreign policy goals and priorities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.7. Introduction

Digital diplomacy, a byproduct of globalisation and modern public diplomacy, has emerged as a significant development within the study of diplomacy. Advances in ICT have fundamentally transformed both the presentation and execution of traditional diplomacy (Rashica 2018: 78). The use of ICT and its various components has not only underscored the growing importance of digital diplomacy but also provided a foundation for strengthening diplomatic relations in the international arena. Consequently, digital diplomacy has become an increasingly indispensable tool for leveraging and advancing soft power.

Gallarotti (2010a, 2010b) observes that while soft power has historically been a key source of national influence, changes within the international system have highlighted its growing utility in contemporary diplomacy. This mini dissertation examines digital diplomacy through the lens of soft power. The following section will begin by conceptualising soft power and emphasising its significance. It will then explore how soft power functions within the context of diplomacy and its intersection with digital diplomacy.

2.8. Conceptualising Soft Power Theory

Changhe (2013: 544) notes that in contemporary diplomacy and international relations, soft power has become the most widely accepted concept among policymakers and scholars. The term "soft power" was coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye (1990), who defined it as the ability to influence global politics through persuasion, attraction, and the appeal of a nation's ideas, values, and beliefs. The key distinction between hard and soft power lies in their nature: hard power is coercive, targeted, physical, and immediate, while soft power is long-term, persuasive, indiscriminate, and more effective through co-optation (Hill 2016: 143). Changhe

(2013: 554) argues that a state's soft power is enhanced when its policies are perceived as legitimate within the international arena.

While most scholars align with Nye's conceptualisation, alternative interpretations of soft power have emerged over time. Nygard and Gates (2013) suggest that soft power is employed to achieve four primary goals: anti-racism, integration, reconciliation, and the creation of a platform for dialogue and trust. Similarly, Grix and Brannagan (2016: 260) argue that trade, branding, tourism, culture, and diplomacy all contribute to the "soft power package." Nonetheless, Nye (2013: 6) maintains that a state's soft power is rooted in three core resources: its culture (the aspects that others find attractive), its political values (which are consistently portrayed both domestically and internationally), and its foreign policy (which must be seen as legitimate and morally authoritative within the global context). The essence of soft power lies in the ability to transform these resources into attractive behaviours that persuade others to achieve positive outcomes. Nye (2013: 6) emphasises that the target's perspective is crucial in soft power dynamics, highlighting that both the agents and the targets are equally important. It is important to recognize that persuasion and attraction are social constructs shaped by perceptions.

Nye (1990: 165) argues that political leaders and philosophers have long understood the power of attractive ideas and the capacity to set political agendas that shape discourse and influence the opinions of others in the international arena. The ability to affect others on the global stage is tied to intangible power resources, such as ideology, culture, and institutions. Nye (1990: 166) further contends that when a state can legitimise its perceived power within the international system, it is less likely to face resistance from other actors. He posits that soft power is as important as hard power, since states that can establish international norms aligned with their own values do not need to resort to force. Which means that states can avoid the expensive use of force or hard power if they can fund institutions that persuade other governments to restrict or channel their activities in ways that suit the power projecting state.

2.9. The Importance of Soft Power

Over the years, soft power has become an increasingly important tool for states within the international arena as states strategically employ it to advance their interests. Three key arguments highlight the growing significance of soft power.

Firstly, Changhe (2013) argues that the proliferation of nuclear weapons has played a crucial role in deterring war among states. The widespread proliferation of nuclear weapons has created a shared understanding that political objectives are not solely achieved through the use—or threat—of military force (Hill 2016: 145). While this does not suggest that military power is irrelevant in international relations, it does indicate that military conquest and occupation are far more challenging. Instead, Changhe (2013: 547) asserts that states increasingly prefer the use of soft power, as economic and cultural influence are often more effective and sustainable means of achieving political goals.

Secondly, Changhe (2013) contends that the rise of advanced education has created favourable conditions for the utilisation of soft power. As information becomes more accessible in an increasingly globalised world, people are more inclined to make judgments based on rational knowledge (Changhe 2013: 548). This does not mean that all judgments are correct, but it highlights a shift towards greater democratisation and political engagement. As political systems become more open and democratic, domestic audiences gain the power to shape political realities through their voting choices. Consequently, soft power, rather than hard power, becomes more appealing as advanced education and public knowledge foster greater political agency.

Finally, Changhe (2013) emphasises the growing importance of information and knowledge, particularly in the digital age. The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented flow of information, which profoundly influences public opinion and political decisions. While physical coercion may be excluded, the spread of public information is virtually impossible to contain (Changhe, 2013). Nye (2006) similarly argues that in the age of globalisation, a state's ability to organise and communicate information effectively is central to accumulating and wielding soft power.

2.10. Soft Power and Diplomacy

Soft power remains a crucial element of foreign policy and can be leveraged at various levels of diplomacy. While states can achieve foreign policy goals through coercive means, such methods are generally discouraged and are constrained by both domestic politics and international norms (Hurd 1993; Changhe 2013; Spies 2013). As a result, states are increasingly inclined to utilise soft power to achieve their diplomatic objectives.

Changhe (2013) argues that the strategic use of soft power can enhance a state's influence in international relations and diplomacy. This influence manifests in two keyways: First, a country's diplomatic efforts should focus on cultivating strategic relationships. Smith and Fallon (2022) contend that a state's success in great power politics largely depends on its ability to form strong alliances, particularly when it comes to shaping or reforming the international order. In this context, soft power becomes an essential tool for navigating the global arena.

Second, a state's financial capabilities are also considered a form of soft power, particularly in the realm of economic diplomacy. While coercive economic sanctions are a commonly employed method to influence a state's behaviour, critics argue that such measures are not always effective (Changhe 2013: 554). Official development aid, which has been supported by the global community since the post-World War II era, represents another avenue for economic diplomacy.

Changhe (2013) further asserts that the most effective application of soft power, consistent with its cultural definition, is through public diplomacy. Initially, public diplomacy involved the exchange of messages between leaders, often kept confidential. However, over time, states recognized the value of directly communicating with the public of other states to influence their perceptions and policies (Nye 2013: 8). This direct form of communication is what we now refer to as public diplomacy. Nye (2008: 95) conceptualises public diplomacy as a tool used by governments to mobilise resources and engage foreign publics. By promoting a country's values, culture, and policies through media, exchanges, and other means, public diplomacy seeks to attract attention and foster positive perceptions.

The diffusion of power from states has added complexity to the practice of public diplomacy. No longer limited to state-to-state communication, public diplomacy now operates through a network of actors, including governments, publics, societies, and NGOs (Nye 2013: 5). However, it is important to note that public diplomacy, which aims to "broadcast" a nation's culture, values, and policies, can only generate soft power if its content resonates with and appeals to foreign audiences. If the message or the medium is unappealing, it risks failing to achieve the intended diplomatic outcomes.

2.11. Soft Power and Digital Diplomacy

Gosling (2021: 9) argues that current debates on public diplomacy and soft power often overlook the critical role digital diplomacy plays in fostering trust within the international arena. Rather than being viewed as a replacement for traditional diplomacy, digital diplomacy should be seen as a complement to conventional diplomatic methods. Sotiriu (2015: 35) notes that while digital diplomacy is interpreted in various ways, resulting in a lack of consensus regarding its definition and framework, it remains an essential and evolving tool for diplomacy in the 21st century. One notable feature of digital diplomacy is its ability to enable states to engage meaningfully with non-state actors in new and innovative ways.

Rawnsley (2024) extends this argument by emphasising that digital media and platforms have accelerated the exchange of information, communication, and interactions between institutions and individuals, regardless of wealth, power, or geographical location. Political competition, he argues, has shifted from a struggle for military or economic power to a battle for attention and narrative control, as more states, organisations, and non-state actors gain a voice and influence in the digital space. This shift has disrupted traditional notions of political power, leading to the de- and re-territorialization of the digital sphere. Transnational civil society organisations are now mobilised and dispersed in response to emerging issues, competing with states for influence and allegiance in a less hierarchical and more fluid power structure.

Diplomacy has always had to evolve in response to changing circumstances, and the digital era is no exception. As the digital landscape continues to connect the

international system, states find themselves in a unique position to engage broader audiences at a lower cost (Gosling 2021: 11). Through digital diplomacy, states can promote their political agendas in non-traditional ways, enhancing public diplomacy and, in turn, strengthening their soft power. It is now incumbent upon states to seize this opportunity and effectively harness the potential of digital diplomacy.

It should be noted that soft power and digital diplomacy complement one another by combining a nation's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion with the vast reach and immediacy of digital platforms. As such, soft power can be amplified through digital tools like social media and official websites, allowing states to engage directly with foreign audiences in real-time. Digital diplomacy provides the means for a nation to communicate its soft power more effectively, enabling it to shape public perceptions, foster international relationships, and advocate for its values on the global stage. In this way, digital diplomacy acts as a conduit through which soft power is exercised, making it easier for states to project their influence, build alliances, and address foreign policy challenges in a rapidly interconnected world.

2.12. Conclusion

The theory of soft power serves as the theoretical framework for this mini dissertation. As a critical component of foreign policy, soft power can be deployed at various levels of diplomacy. Its strategic use allows states to enhance their influence within the international arena. The advent of digital diplomacy has not only transformed the landscape of traditional diplomacy but has also underscored the growing significance of soft power. As states increasingly direct their attention and resources toward global audiences, digital diplomacy enables them to achieve their political objectives more cost-effectively. Through the use of digital diplomacy, states can now further their political goals in unconventional ways that can ultimately advance public diplomacy, aid and increase their soft power projection.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a contextual overview of South Africa's digital diplomacy, structured into two distinct sections. The first section examines the state of digital diplomacy in South Africa prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, focusing on key policies, strategies, and actions implemented by the South African government to leverage digital diplomacy. The second section shifts to the post-COVID-19 period, analysing the policies, strategies, and actions undertaken by the government in response to the pandemic and exploring how digital diplomacy has been employed in this context. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of South Africa's use of digital diplomacy as a tool for enhancing its soft power.

3.2. South Africa's Foreign Policy: Historic Analysis

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa's foreign policy has undergone significant evolution, reflecting the country's transition from isolation to active participation in the global community. Under Nelson Mandela's leadership, South Africa adopted a foreign policy rooted in the principles of Ubuntu, human rights, multilateralism, and reconciliation. Mandela's diplomatic efforts aimed to secure South Africa's place within the international order, emphasizing peace, equality, and solidarity with nations that shared similar struggles for freedom and democracy. A central tenet of post-apartheid foreign policy was South Africa's commitment to South-South cooperation, which sought to strengthen ties with other developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. At the same time, the country advocated for the reform of international institutions to better reflect the new global realities of a post-Cold War world.

In the early 2000s, under President Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's foreign policy grew more assertive, particularly regarding African unity and continental development. Mbeki championed initiatives like the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the AU, aiming to reshape Africa's image on the global stage and promote African-led solutions to Africa's challenges. South Africa positioned itself as a leader in peacekeeping and conflict resolution across the continent, leveraging its own history of overcoming apartheid to support peacebuilding efforts in countries such as Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Côte d'Ivoire. South Africa's foreign policy during this period also reflected a strong commitment to multilateralism, seen in its active participation in the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the G20.

A significant shift in South Africa's foreign policy occurred with the increasing recognition of the importance of economic diplomacy and the need for deeper engagement with the Global North, alongside strengthening South-South ties. This shift was clearly articulated in the White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy (2011), which highlighted the need to balance national priorities with global responsibilities. Economic diplomacy became a central focus of the country's foreign policy, prioritizing the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI), expanding trade, and securing international partnerships to support South Africa's development goals. The document also acknowledged the rapid pace of technological change and the growing role of digital tools, laying the groundwork for South Africa's eventual embrace of digital diplomacy as a key strategy to enhance its global presence.

However, it was during the COVID-19 pandemic that South Africa's foreign policy underwent a profound transformation, emphasizing the necessity of digital diplomacy in a globalized, interconnected world. The pandemic highlighted the need for effective global communication, collaboration, and leadership, leading South Africa to accelerate its use of digital platforms for international engagement. During its Chairmanship of the African Union in 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa utilized virtual platforms to coordinate a unified African response to the pandemic, mobilizing resources and advocating for debt relief for African nations. This period marked the formalization of digital diplomacy within South Africa's foreign policy framework, as the

country embraced technology not only as a tool for crisis management but also as a means to strengthen its soft power, amplify its voice on global issues, and maintain its leadership in African affairs during a time of unprecedented global challenges.

3.3. Key policies and Strategies that were released before COVID-19

As previously mentioned, this section will explore the state of digital diplomacy in South Africa prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will focus on key policies, strategies, and actions undertaken by the government, including the White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy (2011), the National Development Plan 2030 (2012), Ubuntu Radio (2013), and the National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper (2016).

3.3.1. White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy (2011)

The White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy, officially published in 2011, outlines the key principles and strategic priorities guiding the country's international relations. It emphasises South Africa's commitment to multilateralism, human rights, and democratic values, while also reflecting a desire to balance its global influence with domestic priorities (Kotze 2012: 16). The document highlights South Africa's dedication to multilateral engagement, advocating for active participation in key international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the AU to address global challenges. Economic diplomacy is identified as a central focus, with the goal of strengthening economic ties, attracting foreign direct investment, and enhancing trade relations.

Additionally, the White Paper underscores South Africa's role in promoting peace and security, particularly on the African continent, through conflict resolution and peacekeeping efforts. The country is also a strong proponent of South-South cooperation, fostering relationships with other developing countries based on mutual development and knowledge exchange. In conclusion, the document seeks to balance South Africa's national interests with its broader commitments to international norms and values, positioning the country as a proactive and responsible global actor.

While the document does not explicitly address digital diplomacy, it acknowledges the rapid pace of technological change, noting the creation of various social media platforms that have significantly impacted the international arena and the functioning of societies (South Africa 2011: 15). This recognition of technological advances, coupled with a broader push for modernization and effective communication, implies an implicit understanding of the need for new tools and approaches to support diplomatic efforts in the evolving international landscape.

3.3.2. The National Development Plan 2030 (2012)

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, officially published in 2012, serves as a comprehensive blueprint to guide South Africa towards a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous future by addressing its socio-economic challenges (South Africa 2012: 61). Its primary objectives focus on reducing poverty and inequality through economic growth and job creation, improving access to quality education and healthcare, and investing in infrastructure development across the country. The NDP aims to enhance the quality of life for all South Africans by fostering economic diversification, expanding access to essential services, and promoting sustainable development.

The NDP also outlines several strategies to strengthen government and institutional frameworks, ensuring effective and accountable public sector performance. This includes promoting better policy coordination and integrating technology and innovation into development strategies. The plan aims to build a resilient and competitive economy that will contribute to long-term national stability and growth.

Although the NDP does not explicitly address digital diplomacy, it does emphasise aspects that indirectly support the use of digital tools and technologies to enhance South Africa's global presence and diplomatic efforts. The document highlights the importance of leveraging technology for economic development, which aligns with the broader goal of using digital tools for international engagement and competitiveness (South Africa 2021: 33). Additionally, the NDP underscores the need to improve digital infrastructure, particularly through expanding broadband and connectivity, which

supports the broader goal of modernising infrastructure to foster economic growth and integration.

3.3.3. The Ubuntu Radio (2013)

Ubuntu Radio is a digital platform launched by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) in 2013, designed to facilitate the exchange of views and opinions among key stakeholders involved in South Africa's foreign policy (South Africa, 2014). These stakeholders include academic institutions, the media, the diplomatic corps, civil society, government agencies, and other influential figures in international relations. The platform aims to enhance the country's global communication and diplomatic outreach, playing a crucial role in South Africa's digital diplomacy efforts by broadcasting the nation's perspectives, policies, and cultural narratives to an international audience.

Through Ubuntu Radio, South Africa promotes its rich cultural heritage and achievements, thereby fostering a positive global image. The platform also serves as a key tool for disseminating South Africa's foreign policy positions and diplomatic initiatives globally, which helps shape international perceptions and provides a clearer understanding of the country's role on the global stage.

The interactive nature of Ubuntu Radio allows South Africa to engage with its listeners, gather feedback, and adjust its diplomatic strategies accordingly. The station also serves as an essential tool for managing international communication, offering timely updates during major events or crises. The establishment of Ubuntu Radio marked a significant step in the formalisation and institutionalisation of digital diplomacy within South Africa's foreign policy framework (Turianskyi & Wekesa 2021: 5).

3.3.4. The National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper (2016)

The National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper was officially published in 2016, outlining South Africa's strategic vision for integrating ICT into the nation's development framework. The policy aims to achieve universal access and inclusion by improving infrastructure and expanding connectivity, particularly in underserved and marginalized communities (South Africa 2016: 2). A key focus of the policy is the rollout of broadband infrastructure, which is intended to ensure the availability of high-speed internet across the country. Additionally, the

policy emphasizes the importance of innovation and research in driving both technological advancements and economic progress.

The policy also seeks to establish a supportive regulatory environment that encourages competition, protects consumers, and ensures fair and equal access to ICT services (South Africa 2016: 30). It advocates for the development of critical digital skills to empower individuals and businesses to fully participate in the digital economy. Moreover, the policy encourages the use of digital technologies to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of government services. Overall, it stresses the need for coordinated efforts among government departments, public-private partnerships, and other stakeholders to effectively implement its objectives and foster a vibrant digital economy.

By improving digital infrastructure and connectivity, the policy strengthens South Africa's diplomatic capabilities, facilitating more effective communication and collaboration in the international arena. Through its promotion of ICT innovation and economic growth, the policy enhances South Africa's global competitiveness and presence. It also supports economic diplomacy by providing better digital tools and platforms, streamlining e-government services, and enabling more active participation in international forums and discussions. In this way, the policy provides a foundation for leveraging digital advancements to enhance South Africa's international engagement and influence.

In conclusion, it may be argued that prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, South Africa had begun making efforts to integrate digital diplomacy into its foreign policy framework, but it did not have fully developed and cohesive digital diplomacy policies in place. The country had undertaken several initiatives and laid the groundwork for digital diplomacy through key policies and strategies, such as the White Paper on South Africa's Foreign Policy (2011), which emphasised the need for modernization in communication and engagement. However, digital diplomacy was not explicitly formalised or given a central focus in these early documents.

South Africa's efforts to embrace digital diplomacy were seen in the development of initiatives like Ubuntu Radio (2013) and the National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper

(2016), which focused on expanding ICT infrastructure and improving access to digital tools, particularly in marginalized communities. These initiatives demonstrated the recognition of the potential for digital platforms to enhance South Africa's international engagement. While digital diplomacy was not yet a central pillar of foreign policy, these early efforts laid the foundation for a broader, more structured approach that would be accelerated in the wake of the pandemic. Thus, while South Africa did not have fully formed digital diplomacy policies prior to COVID-19, it made important strides towards incorporating digital tools into its diplomatic practice.

3.4. Key policies and strategies that were released after Covid-19

This section will examine the state of digital diplomacy in South Africa following the COVID-19 pandemic. It will focus on key policies, strategies, and actions undertaken by the government, including the ICT and Digital Economy Masterplan for South Africa (2020), South Africa's Chairmanship of the African Union (2020), and the Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in the Global Environment (2022).

3.4.1. ICT and Digital Economy Masterplan for South Africa (2020)

The ICT and Digital Economy Masterplan for South Africa is a strategic framework designed to guide the country's development within the ICT sector and the broader digital economy (Genesis Analytics, 2020). The drafting of the Masterplan occurred during a period of significant transformation in South Africa, as digital technologies gained momentum while the world adapted to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the 1980s, digital technologies have rapidly evolved, reshaping how people conduct their everyday lives. As South Africa grappled with the effects of the pandemic, the country shifted its focus toward digital solutions to navigate its new reality.

The Masterplan outlines several key areas, which can be categorised into two broad themes: building and leveraging digital infrastructure and innovation, and creating a supportive environment for skills development, inclusivity, and effective governance.

Infrastructure and Innovation

The Masterplan emphasises the importance of digital transformation, which is essential for integrating digital technologies across various sectors. This transformation is intrinsically linked to economic growth and innovation. The plan also stresses the need for infrastructure development, particularly the expansion and enhancement of digital infrastructure, including broadband and next-generation technologies. Furthermore, the Masterplan envisions creating innovative ecosystems that support research, development, and digital entrepreneurship, fostering a dynamic environment for digital growth.

Skills, Inclusivity, and Governance

The Masterplan highlights the need for skills development to enhance digital competencies through education and training. South Africa ought to update its regulations to support the digital economy, ensuring robust data protection and cybersecurity measures. To promote inclusivity, the plan stresses the importance of providing broad access to digital services, particularly for marginalised communities. Public-private partnerships are also emphasised as a means to achieve South Africa's digital economic goals, both domestically and internationally.

Since the publication of the ICT and Digital Economy Masterplan, the South African government has undertaken various actions and participated in key events that align with the plan's objectives. This section will briefly analyse South Africa's participation in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and its efforts to advance regional digital integration on the African continent.

South Africa's Global Engagement and Regional Digital Initiatives

To strengthen international partnerships, South Africa has actively engaged with several international organisations and digital economy forums. One example of this is the country's involvement in the ITU. In 2023, South Africa was elected to serve as the Chairperson of the Council Working Group on the World Summit on the Information Society and Sustainable Development Goals (CWG-WSIS&SDG), underscoring its commitment to global discussions on digital policy, cybersecurity, and technological innovation (South Africa, 2023).

In addition to its participation in global forums, South Africa has made significant efforts to advance regional digital integration initiatives aimed at improving digital connectivity across the African continent. Notably, South Africa played a leading role in the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) submarine cable project, which was launched in 2021. The ACE cable is the world's first international submarine cable to pass through 19 countries and connect over 450 million people across the continent (Bizcommunity, 2021). This initiative aims to enhance broadband infrastructure, reduce the digital divide, and foster regional cooperation on digital issues.

3.4.2 South Africa's Chairmanship of the African Union (2020)

In 2020, during President Cyril Ramaphosa's chairmanship of the AU, South Africa strategically employed digital diplomacy to advance both regional cooperation and its national foreign policy priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the African continent, became the focal point of Ramaphosa's leadership. To tackle the crisis, he established several committees and appointed special envoys tasked with addressing the health and economic repercussions of the pandemic (Louw-Vaudran, 2020). Recognizing the need for swift and coordinated action, Ramaphosa harnessed digital platforms to facilitate virtual meetings, ensuring that heads of state could collaborate, exchange information, and align strategies despite travel restrictions. These online interactions not only kept the AU functioning during a time of physical isolation but also reinforced South Africa's role as a regional leader in managing the crisis.

Ramaphosa's digital diplomacy played a central role in mobilizing resources and building a collective African response to the pandemic. Through virtual meetings, he was able to galvanize support for African unity and solidarity, stressing the importance of a coordinated approach to tackling the crisis. Digital tools allowed him to engage African leaders directly and efficiently, providing a platform for real-time updates and joint decision-making. By championing the AU's role as a key coordinating body, Ramaphosa helped ensure that Africa's voice was heard in global discussions about the pandemic, especially in forums where critical decisions about health and economic recovery were being made.

In addition to addressing immediate health concerns, President Ramaphosa also used digital platforms to advocate for debt relief and financial support for Africa's most vulnerable nations. A key aspect of this effort was the establishment of a solidarity fund, which sought to secure financial aid and resources from international partners. To further these goals, a team of special envoys—comprising prominent figures like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Trevor Manuel, Donald Kaberuka, and Tidjane Thiam—conducted virtual meetings with the G20, the European Union, and various global financial institutions. These online discussions facilitated the negotiation of debt relief packages and financial stimulus for African countries, underscoring how South Africa leveraged digital diplomacy to build international coalitions and secure vital resources for the continent (Devermont and Mukulu, 2020).

Ramaphosa's use of digital diplomacy also aligned with South Africa's broader foreign policy objectives, particularly its commitment to advancing the AU Agenda 2063—a blueprint for Africa's long-term development, economic integration, and political cohesion. Through virtual summits and conferences, South Africa not only responded to the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic but also reinforced its strategic role in promoting Africa's sustainable development. By pushing for debt relief, advocating for economic recovery, and emphasizing regional integration, South Africa positioned itself as a leading voice in African diplomacy. In doing so, the country advanced both its national interests and the collective aspirations of the continent, using digital tools as a bridge to enhance cooperation, foster global partnerships, and assert Africa's position in the international arena.

3.4.3. Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in the Global environment (2022)

Published in 2022, the "Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in the Global Environment" outlines the country's approach to enhancing its global standing and advancing its national interests. The key objectives reflect South Africa's strategic priorities and its evolving role in the international arena. These priorities include the promotion of Ubuntu Diplomacy, strengthening multilateralism, advancing economic diplomacy, fostering regional leadership and

integration, building strategic partnerships, addressing climate change and sustainable development, and promoting cultural diplomacy (South Africa, 2022). The document serves as a strategic guide for navigating the dynamic global environment, with an emphasis on trade and investment, as well as digital and technological advancements as critical drivers of growth.

While the framework does not explicitly mention digital diplomacy, it integrates it as a strategic tool to navigate the increasingly complex international landscape in a post-COVID-19 context. Digital diplomacy is highlighted as a means to achieve key foreign policy objectives, such as enhancing global engagement, improving digital infrastructure, promoting trade and innovation, and advancing public diplomacy and image-building.

The following section further elaborates on these foreign policy objectives, focusing specifically on the use of digital diplomacy as a strategic tool, and providing relevant examples.

Boosting Engagement and Influence

The framework underscores the importance of strategically using digital platforms to increase South Africa's diplomatic reach and influence. This involves actively engaging in social media, digital communication channels, and online forums. By utilizing these platforms, South Africa aims to extend its diplomatic presence and influence across the globe. Additionally, digital diplomacy is used to promote policy, supporting South Africa's objectives in areas such as economic development, regional integration, and global collaboration through effective information dissemination and international communication.

Enhancing Digital Infrastructure and Regional Connectivity

The framework emphasises the need to enhance digital infrastructure and regional connectivity. South Africa is involved in various initiatives aimed at improving digital connections across the African continent. These efforts include participating in regional collaborations and projects designed to expand broadband access and enhance digital integration. Regarding data protection and cybersecurity, South Africa

uses digital diplomacy to advance efforts in strengthening cybersecurity protocols and ensuring resilient data security systems. The country collaborates with international partners to tackle global cyber threats and secure its digital infrastructure (South Africa 2021: 23).

Promoting Trade and Innovation

The framework highlights the importance of using digital diplomacy to promote trade and innovation. South Africa seeks to leverage digital diplomacy within the context of economic diplomacy to encourage digital investment and trade (South Africa 2022: 23). This includes promoting international trade agreements and forums, advocating for policies that encourage digital innovation, e-commerce, and the expansion of the digital economy. Through tech partnerships, South Africa engages in collaborations with other countries and international organisations to foster technological innovation and digital development.

Public Diplomacy and Image Building

Finally, the framework stresses the value of public diplomacy and image building. To maintain and enhance its international presence, South Africa must leverage digital resources to strengthen its public diplomacy efforts and cultivate a positive global image. This involves showcasing the country's achievements in digital technology, innovation, and cultural contributions on the international stage (South Africa 2022: 18).

In conclusion, after the outbreak of COVID-19, South Africa made significant efforts to formalise and strengthen its use of digital diplomacy, building on earlier initiatives but adapting to the rapidly changing global environment. While the country did not necessarily have fully developed, overarching digital diplomacy policies in place at the onset of the pandemic, it responded quickly by integrating digital tools and strategies into its foreign policy framework. The pandemic highlighted the importance of digital platforms for communication, international collaboration, and public diplomacy, leading South Africa to focus more on enhancing its digital presence.

Key steps in this direction included the ICT and Digital Economy Masterplan for South Africa (2020), which explicitly addressed the need to expand digital infrastructure and innovation, as well as fostering skills development and inclusivity. Additionally, South Africa's Chairmanship of the African Union (2020) saw the country utilise digital diplomacy to facilitate virtual meetings, coordinate responses to the pandemic, and promote African unity. Furthermore, the Framework Document on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in the Global Environment (2022) indicated a strategic focus on digital diplomacy as a tool for enhancing South Africa's global standing. Thus, while digital diplomacy policies were not fully realised before the pandemic, the outbreak of COVID-19 accelerated South Africa's efforts to formalise and implement digital strategies as part of its foreign policy.

3.5. An overview of South Africa's use of digital diplomacy as a means of increasing its soft power

South Africa's development of policies and strategies to advance its digital profile reflects a multifaceted approach to integrating technology and, by extension, digital diplomacy into its national and international agenda. The country has prioritised enhancing its digital infrastructure, with efforts aimed at expanding broadband access and improving connectivity. These initiatives ensure that both urban and rural areas benefit from reliable internet services. This infrastructure development is critical to South Africa's goal of entering the global digital market by creating an environment conducive to digital innovation, supporting tech startups, and encouraging international trade and investment in the digital sector.

In addition to improving domestic digital infrastructure, South Africa actively participates in international and regional digital policy-making, often taking on leadership roles. These efforts demonstrate the country's commitment to shaping global frameworks and advocating for fair digital practices. Through such leadership, South Africa leverages digital diplomacy to enhance its international profile, build relationships, and engage with global audiences via digital platforms.

By effectively using digital channels, South Africa is able to shape global perceptions and project a positive image. This strategic use of digital tools enables the country to

promote its values and priorities, while simultaneously fostering goodwill and strengthening its influence—without relying on coercion or economic incentives.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter shifts focus to South Africa's use of digital diplomacy before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, South Africa recognized the rapid pace of technological change, particularly the rise of social media networks, which had a significant impact on the international arena and the way societies operated (South Africa 2011: 15). While the country did not have a policy specifically addressing digital diplomacy, there was a clear push towards modernization and efficient communication. This was evident in initiatives such as Ubuntu Radio and key policies like the National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper, which marked the formalisation of digital diplomacy within South Africa's foreign policy framework (Turianskyi & Wekesa 2021: 5).

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, South Africa took a more proactive role in international and regional digital policy-making. The country participated in several major digital initiatives, such as the AEC submarine cable project and serving as the Chairperson of the Council Working Group on the World Summit on the Information Society and Sustainable Development Goals (CWG-WSIS&SDG). Furthermore, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, South Africa demonstrated a deliberate commitment to employing digital diplomacy as a tool to advance its foreign policy objectives on the global stage.

South Africa's leadership role as Chair of the AU during this critical period highlighted how the country effectively utilised digital diplomacy to address urgent challenges facing the continent. By leveraging digital platforms, South Africa was able to advocate for African interests, promote African unity, and enhance the continent's visibility and influence in global discussions.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

As mentioned in previous chapters, the purpose of this research study is to explain how the use of digital diplomacy can further South Africa's foreign policy objectives within the international system, to examine how South Africa utilises digital diplomacy to further its public diplomacy and to explain what opportunities and challenges digital diplomacy presents for South Africa's foreign policy. The research questions under consideration were as follows:

- Can South Africa's use of digital diplomacy further its foreign policy objectives within the international system?
- How does South Africa utilise digital diplomacy to further its public diplomacy?
- What opportunities and challenges do digital diplomacy present for South Africa's foreign policy?

To achieve the aim of this research study, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on research methodology and design. This section focuses on the participants interviewed and the data collection instruments. It also describes the procedures undertaken to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, and it outlines the steps involved in the research study. The second section presents the interview findings based on the participant's responses. The presentation of the interview findings is categorised under nine distinct themes.

4.2. Research Methodology and Design

This researcher conducted in-depth interviews to analyse how digital diplomacy may further South Africa's foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world. Boyce and Neale (2006: 3) conceptualise in-depth interviews as a qualitative research technique that entails conducting intensive individual interviews with a few participants, allowing them

to share their perspectives on a subject area. The use of in-depth interviews ensured that participants were able to delve deeper into South Africa's use of digital diplomacy before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the possible opportunities and challenges present, its impact on public diplomacy and how it could be used to influence the international system beyond the COVID-19 context.

4.2.1. Design of the Study

Creswell (2009) asserts that qualitative research design allows researchers to effectively analyse findings from a constructive perspective. In this study, the researcher applies a qualitative approach to explore how digital diplomacy can advance South Africa's foreign policy objectives within the international system, examine its role in enhancing South Africa's public diplomacy, and identify the opportunities and challenges digital diplomacy presents for the country's foreign policy. Data for the study was gathered through interviews.

Qualitative validity involves scrutinizing responses to ensure their accuracy by employing specific strategies (Creswell, 2009). To ensure the validity of the interview data, the researcher used triangulation, which involved utilizing multiple data sources and methods, as well as consulting with other researchers to cross-check responses and confirm the accuracy of the findings. Additionally, prior to the main study, the researcher piloted the interview questions with a panel of two academics who participants in the research were not. This pilot phase helped identify any ambiguities or potential issues in the interview questions.

4.2.2. Methodology

4.2.2.1 Instruments

This qualitative research study employed telephonic interviews to explore how digital diplomacy could advance South Africa's foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world. The validity of the findings was ensured through the triangulation of responses gathered from open-ended interview questions. In qualitative research, triangulation involves

using multiple data sources or methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 1996).

4.2.2.2 Participants

The participant selection for this study followed a purposeful sampling approach. According to Creswell (2009), purposeful sampling targets individuals who can provide the most relevant insights into the research questions and contribute to a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon. This study specifically targeted University of Pretoria academics and practitioners with more than five years of experience in diplomacy or foreign policy, particularly those familiar with digital diplomacy.

The research was conducted in South Africa, with participants selected from the University of Pretoria, academic institutions and government bodies involved in diplomacy and foreign policy. Out of ten eligible participants, seven were interviewed, yielding a 70% response rate. The study's inclusion criteria did not consider factors such as gender, race, socio-economic class, or geographical location. The participant pool included a diverse demographic, with two academics and five practitioners, all of whom had significant experience in foreign policy and diplomacy, including digital diplomacy.

4.2.2.3 Interviews

Participants were invited to participate in the study through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram. The invitation requested confirmation of their willingness to participate via phone or email. The researcher used a structured interview schedule (Appendix A) for the seven respondents who volunteered. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and consisted of ten questions.

To ensure clarity and validity, the researcher piloted the interview questions with two academics who were not involved in the study. Their feedback helped refine the questions for clarity and appropriateness, and also assisted in determining the optimal duration for the interviews, leading to adjustments in the interview schedule.

4.2.2.4 Procedure

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher developed and piloted a set of interview questions (Appendix A). Feedback from two non-participant academics helped identify ambiguities and refine the questions. The researcher then submitted an ethics application to the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee, which highlighted participant confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. To maintain privacy, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Once approval was granted, the researcher proceeded with the interviews.

Interviews were conducted via Google Meet at a time convenient for the participants. With their consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate data collection. Each interview took about 30 minutes. After data collection, the researcher analysed the responses, triangulated the data for recurring themes, and summarized the findings for Chapter Five.

4.2.2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data and address the research questions. Liamputtong (2009: 135) defines thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within a data set, with a focus on organizing and describing the data in detail. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006: 82) emphasize that thematic analysis involves recognizing patterns that emerge from the data, which then form the basis for analysis. The process entails thoroughly reading and interpreting each transcript to understand the meaning conveyed by the participants. Braun and Clarke (2006: 86) further describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying underlying patterns across data, contributing to the formation of themes that are relevant to the research.

4.3. Presentation of Interview Findings

The researcher conducted seven interviews that lasted 30 minutes to an hour, using a semi-structured schedule via digital platforms such as Google Meets and WhatsApp Video calls. The participants who consented to the interviews are individuals who have

worked or are currently working in the diplomatic and foreign policy space within the context of South Africa for five years or more. Therefore, it can be argued that purposive sampling provided reasonable grounds for answering the study's research questions.

To maintain anonymity, the researcher utilised pseudonyms. This technique was also employed to empower the participants and ensure that the reader's focus remained on the content, which meant that the researcher could maintain the integrity of the findings while allowing for a rich exploration of themes. As such, the pseudo-names used in this research study were Sarah, Alice, John, Noah, Peter, William and Maria. The research study did not reveal any personal information, including first or last names, to the ethical considerations' strict adherence to the confidentiality and anonymity norms.

The researcher employs a thematic analysis approach in which data from the interviews are analysed and interpreted to identify key themes, concepts, and ideas. This approach allowed the participants to share their ideas on how digital diplomacy could further South Africa's foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world. The participants were asked questions in which the researcher read through the responses repeatedly and identified recurring patterns in the data. As such, this method allowed the researcher to identify critical themes supporting quotes from the interviews.

4.3.1. Findings from the interviews conducted

The presentation of the findings from the seven participants are categorised under the following themes: South Africa's use of digital diplomacy, the impact of COVID-19, measures undertaken by South Africa to address the impact of COVID-19 on diplomatic relations, the need to preserve traditional diplomacy in an increasingly digitised diplomatic environment; opportunities in digital diplomacy; challenges in digital diplomacy; how South Africa can skilfully utilise digital diplomacy to further public diplomacy and How can South Africa use digital diplomacy to achieve its foreign policy goals while influencing the international system beyond COVID-19.

4.3.1.1. South Africa's Limited Use of Digital Diplomacy (Pre-COVID-19)

To contextualise the state of digital diplomacy and its use as a foreign policy instrument by South Africa, the researcher asked the participants to discuss the extent to which South Africa explored digital diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy before the outbreak of COVID-19. The findings highlight that South Africa's use of digital diplomacy remained limited before the outbreak of COVID-19. The participants responded that, on the rare occasion that South Africa used digital diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy, it was often conducted using digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter through official government accounts.

The use of digital platforms allowed South Africa to maintain a visible presence in the international diplomatic space, even if the extent of engagement was initially fragmented. As Peter noted:

“Before COVID-19, South Africa's use of digital diplomacy was limited to public diplomacy through websites and fragmented posts on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and other pages by missions and the Department of International Relations and Cooperation” (P6 20 September 2024).

However, Ubuntu Radio- launched in 2013- represents a more robust example of South Africa's soft power in digital diplomacy. The radio station not only provided information about South Africa's foreign policy but also helped project the country's cultural diplomacy and values on a global scale. Through platforms like Ubuntu Radio, South Africa could position itself as a leader in peace, reconciliation, and African solidarity, key elements of its foreign policy identity. This illustrated how digital diplomacy contributes to the enhancement of soft power through the dissemination of cultural and policy-based messages across borders. This is evident in William's argument by stating the following:

“To the extent that digital diplomacy can be construed as an intersection of information and communication technology with the functions of diplomacy, I would argue that South Africa, through DIRCO, has been using digital diplomacy for the last ten

years. This is so because digital diplomacy is often deemed virtual diplomacy, e-diplomacy, mobile diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, and networked diplomacy. Against this background, DIRCO launched Ubuntu Radio, a 24-hour online radio station, in 2013". (P7 22 September 2024).

Furthermore, William elaborated on how community-based radio could advance South Africa's foreign policy goals whilst attracting millions of viewers internationally. William said the following:

"Ubuntu Radio aims to advance South Africa's foreign policy goals. In 2014, Ubuntu Radio was unveiled on DSTV's audio bouquet and mobile application, as well as on the Ubuntu Radio Mxit Application. It is estimated that the dissemination of foreign policy news has reached over 10 million viewers on DSTV and 80 million Ubuntu Radio Mxit Application users. A survey assessing ministries of foreign affairs' digital diplomacy showed that South Africa garnered the pole position in Africa in digital diplomacy. The country was ranked 51st from 210 countries sampled in 2016/2017" (P7 22 September 2024).

Similar to William, Maria stated that the "the findings show that the use of digital diplomacy in South Africa remained limited to public diplomacy through websites and fragmented posts on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. The introduction of Ubuntu radio in 2013 further contributed to advancing the country's African foreign policy goals" (P 10 19 October 2024).

4.3.1.2. The Positive and Negative Impact of COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on South Africa's foreign policy and digital diplomacy has been polarizing, with participants expressing both positive and negative outlooks on how the pandemic reshaped diplomatic engagement. In this section, the role of soft power can be framed as an essential element in how South Africa navigated the challenges posed by the pandemic and, in some cases, capitalised on new opportunities for diplomatic influence.

Positive outlook

Several participants highlighted the positive impact of digital diplomacy on South Africa's foreign policy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant noted how South Africa used digital diplomacy to assert its position on international issues, such as the genocide case against Israel at the ICJ. The use of social media and digital platforms allowed South Africa to elevate its diplomatic efforts and gain visibility on critical global issues, thereby asserting its soft power in the international arena. As John stated:

"After COVID-19, South Africa's use of digital diplomacy has increased, evident in the country's case at the ICJ on the Israel and Gaza war" (P4 20 September 2024).

This can be further framed as an exercise in value-based diplomacy, where South Africa's emphasis on human rights and justice becomes central to its soft power strategy. Digital diplomacy allowed South Africa to communicate its values directly to the international community and further its standing in global governance.

Another participant highlighted how the pandemic eliminated the "middleman," making direct communication between South African diplomats and the public possible. This shift could be framed as an example of how digital diplomacy enhanced South Africa's public diplomacy, a key soft power tool, by giving ordinary citizens a voice and a stake in the country's international image and objectives. Alice's comment:

"The introduction of digital diplomacy as a tool of South Africa's foreign policy has eliminated the existence of a so-called 'middleman'," reflects the growing agency of South Africa's digital diplomacy and its capacity to shape global perceptions. (P14, 21 September 2024).

Negative outlook

On the negative side, participants discussed how COVID-19 had disrupted traditional diplomatic activities, including bilateral and multilateral engagements. This significantly slowed down the implementation of foreign policy objectives. Peter's

observation, “Covid-19 restricted diplomatic engagements and therefore impacted bilateral relations and multilateral relations, significantly slowing down the progress of South Africa’s implementation of its foreign policy objectives,” points to a key challenge in utilizing digital diplomacy for soft power. Traditional face-to-face diplomacy, which has long been a source of South Africa's influence in global politics, was disrupted, limiting the scope for relational and persuasive diplomacy.

However, the need for adaptation was also noted. South Africa had to pivot quickly to digital platforms to ensure its soft power influence was maintained. Noah’s comment on how “South Africa had to adjust as it shifted to a virtual format” is a clear example of how soft power dynamics were tested by the pandemic. The country's ability to adapt to the changing circumstances could, in fact, be viewed as a testament to South Africa’s diplomatic resilience and its soft power potential.

4.3.1.3. Measures undertaken by South Africa to Address the Impact of COVID-19 on Diplomatic Relations

To understand how South Africa was able to advance its foreign policy agenda amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were asked to elaborate on the measures undertaken to address the impact of the pandemic on the country’s diplomatic relations and international interactions. Most participants highlighted a move towards digital platforms such as Microsoft, Webex, and Zoom, particularly in cases where the country had to engage its foreign counterparts.

Leveraging Digital Diplomacy for Soft Power

By quickly adopting digital tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Webex, South Africa ensured its diplomatic presence remained strong. This ability to maintain communications with foreign counterparts during the pandemic underscored South Africa’s adaptability and resilience, traits that enhanced its reputation and credibility on the global stage. South Africa could still project itself as an engaged diplomatic actor, ensuring its voice was heard in multilateral and bilateral settings, which remains a crucial aspect of soft power. Sarah highlighted how DIRCO managed the migration to virtual diplomacy:

“In South Africa, everyone had to be registered via the DIRCO to participate in the bilateral and multilateral meetings. South Africa had to leverage the use of technology (to undertake their duties)”. (P1, 18 September 2024).

This shift demonstrated South Africa’s strategic use of digital diplomacy to ensure diplomatic continuity. Through virtual meetings, South Africa could not only preserve its diplomatic ties but also maintain influence in global conversations—effectively using soft power to project stability in a period of global uncertainty.

Cost Efficiency and Soft Power

William’s observation on how digital diplomacy became a cost-saving measure can also be viewed through the lens of soft power. Cost-efficiency in diplomacy enables South Africa to direct resources towards other diplomatic priorities, such as public diplomacy initiatives. William pointed out:

“Digital diplomacy was optimally used as a cost-saving measure to advance the foreign diplomacy agenda. To this end, the five-year Public Diplomacy Communication Strategy entailed strengthening relations through intensive use of media briefings, Ubuntu Radio, Ubuntu Magazine, opinion pieces, etc.” (P7, 21 September 2024).

This cost-saving approach enabled South Africa to maintain its global engagement while promoting national values, using soft power to reinforce its diplomatic efforts. The shift to online platforms, therefore, aligned with South Africa’s broader public diplomacy strategy—projecting messages of peace, solidarity, and reconciliation—all key elements of South Africa’s soft power.

The Need to Preserve Traditional Diplomacy in an Increasingly Digitalised

This section explores the tension between maintaining traditional diplomacy and embracing the benefits of digital diplomacy. While digital diplomacy is crucial for

expanding South Africa's reach, soft power emphasizes the importance of balancing personal engagement and online presence.

Soft Power through Traditional Diplomacy

While many participants agreed that digital diplomacy offered significant advantages, some emphasized the value of in-person interactions, especially in the context of relationship-building—a central element of soft power. Sarah noted:

“...it is important to note that traditional diplomacy plays a major role in South Africa’s foreign policy” (P1, 18 September 2024).

South Africa’s long-standing diplomatic traditions—emphasizing personal connections and face-to-face dialogue—are vital for building the trust and alliances that underpin its soft power. In this sense, the physical presence of diplomats remains crucial for engaging in deep, trust-building relationships, where nuanced communication and body language can play a pivotal role in influencing foreign partners. However, South Africa can incorporate digital diplomacy in a way that complements traditional methods. As Peter noted:

“Using digital diplomacy in conjunction with traditional diplomacy would add excellent value in achieving South Africa’s foreign policy objectives” (P6, 20 September 2024). This combined approach allows South Africa to expand its influence while maintaining the core diplomatic practices that have made its foreign policy successful, particularly in the African context. The ability to adapt and use digital tools alongside face-to-face diplomacy enhances South Africa’s soft power, demonstrating both flexibility and strategic thought leadership in the digital age.

4.3.1.4. Opportunities in Digital Diplomacy

To understand how digital diplomacy would benefit South Africa’s foreign policy, the participants were asked to discuss the opportunities that digital diplomacy presents. The most prominent opportunity highlighted by the participants was how digital diplomacy allowed for real-time responses. The following subsections will elaborate further on the opportunities mentioned above.

Real-Time Responses as Soft Power

One of the key opportunities identified by the participants was the ability of South Africa to provide real-time responses to emerging international issues. Peter argued:

“It will also allow our foreign policy to be much more responsive, especially in an uncertain global environment” (P17, 20 September 2024).

This quick-response capability is essential for enhancing South Africa's credibility in the international arena—showing that it can react to global crises with efficiency and relevance. By engaging in real-time digital diplomacy, South Africa can maintain its influence in discussions of global importance, whether concerning human rights, peace, or international justice.

Digital Diplomacy for Global Representation

Noah highlighted how representation through digital diplomacy could mitigate the underrepresentation of developing countries in key international discussions:

“The opportunities that digital diplomacy presents for South Africa is representation...it is often difficult for developing countries to be represented in important conversations, so with the introduction of digital diplomacy, we can mitigate such issues” (P14, 21 September 2024).

This is an important element of soft power—ensuring that South Africa's voice is heard in global debates, even when geographical barriers or resource constraints would otherwise limit participation. The opportunity for greater representation via digital platforms allows South Africa to shape global conversations, advocating for its interests and values more effectively developing countries.

4.3.1.5. Challenges in Digital Diplomacy

To explore the potential challenges that digital diplomacy presented for South Africa's foreign policy, the participants were asked to discuss and, if possible, provide examples. The answers provided by the participants varied between the following themes: misinformation and disinformation, the lack of human skills, and the lack of critical infrastructure. The following sub-sections will elaborate on the challenges mentioned above.

Misinformation and Trust

One of the main challenges identified was misinformation and disinformation, which could undermine South Africa's diplomatic efforts and harm its soft power by eroding trust. As Alice observed:

“The challenges that digital diplomacy presents for South Africa's foreign policy are misinformation and disinformation”.
(P13, 21 September 2024).

South Africa's efforts to project truth and credibility through digital channels could be undermined by the rise of false information, especially in an environment where competing narratives can go viral quickly. Combating misinformation is crucial for protecting South Africa's soft power and ensuring that its diplomatic messages are seen as reliable and authentic.

Skills Gaps and Digital Competency

Peter also discussed the challenges related to human skill and coordination in the context of digital diplomacy, highlighting the importance of technical skills and interdepartmental coordination. The lack of these competencies could limit the effectiveness of South Africa's digital diplomacy strategy, which in turn might undermine its ability to project soft power globally. To overcome these challenges, South Africa could invest in training and build a more cohesive digital diplomacy framework, ensuring that it can use technology to its advantage while maintaining the human touch needed to build lasting diplomatic relationships.

Lack of Critical Infrastructure

Concerns about the need for more critical infrastructure in the country and DIRCO were identified as a possible challenge to integrating digital diplomacy in South Africa.

Alice noted the following:

“The challenge South Africa faces with the rise of digital diplomacy is the digital divide” (P13 21 September 2024).

Furthermore, two participants highlighted a lack of policy and strategy as a serious challenge. William responded:

“While there is an uptake of digital diplomacy in South Africa, what is still missing is a digital diplomacy policy and strategy. A digital diplomacy policy or strategy will develop norms and the legal framework for deploying technology while addressing cybersecurity threats” (P19 22 September 2024).

Peter commented:

“...digital diplomacy and the foundation thereof must be seen as of strategic importance and factored in when making a strategic decision. This will be difficult as ICT within the department responsible for foreign policy does not see ICT strategically. This is reflected in the current state of ICT in the department. If the foundation for digital diplomacy is not solid, it will not achieve its potential”. (P18 20 September 2024).

The Potential Erosion of Traditional Diplomacy

Lastly, Sarah highlighted the potential of digital diplomacy taking over traditional diplomacy as a serious challenge. Sarah stated, “the challenge that digital diplomacy presents for South Africa is that it takes away the essence of traditional diplomacy, which is based on the idea of engaging and cooperating with counterparts in person, which in most instances is not possible behind the screen” (P12 18 September 2024).

To further elaborate on this point, Sarah further stated:

“In 2020, for instance, things were difficult because it was much easier to keep hardlines online than in person, as we could not read the room to see people's body language. In person, one can communicate with counterparts or take them out for coffee, where you can deliberate on issues and perhaps change their stances on the issue. The biggest challenge of digital diplomacy to South Africa's foreign policy is that it may be used to erase traditional diplomacy” (P12 18 September 2024).

4.3.1.6. How South Africa can skilfully utilise digital diplomacy to further public diplomacy

To understand how digital diplomacy could be used to further public diplomacy, participants were asked to discuss how South Africa could skilfully use digital diplomacy and provide examples of how this could be achieved. The responses were categorised under the following six sub-themes: narrative building and shaping, engagement with foreign audiences, crisis communication, promotion of tourism, and utilisation of data analytics. These strategies reflect South Africa's ability to leverage digital tools not just for diplomacy but as part of a broader soft power strategy to enhance its global standing.

Narrative building and shaping

Half of the participants noted how digital diplomacy could be used to further public diplomacy through narrative building and shaping, emphasizing how digital platforms allow South Africa to shape its international image and influence global perceptions. This aligns with South Africa's soft power strategy, where control over narrative is central to projecting its values, influencing public opinion, and managing international relationships. Peter stressed:

“The digital world undeniably has a massive impact on shaping opinions and international relations” (P18, 20 September 2024).

In this context, narrative-building becomes a core aspect of South Africa's soft power; by actively engaging in the digital space, South Africa can counter negative narratives

or misconceptions that may arise, offering its perspective and reinforcing its values of peace, reconciliation, and multilateralism. Alice elaborated on this point:

“Using digital diplomacy to address issues or misconceptions circulating on any digital platform allows South Africa to control the conversation and shape its public image” (P14, 21 September 2024).

By positioning itself as a credible and responsible global actor, South Africa strengthens its moral authority, an essential pillar of soft power, especially when engaging with both domestic and international audiences.

Engagement with foreign audiences

Increasing engagement with both domestic and international audiences was noted as a major way to utilise digital diplomacy to enhance South Africa's public diplomacy. This not only serves to directly promote national interests but also to cultivate positive perceptions of South Africa on the world stage.

Alice highlighted the potential of direct digital engagement: “Digital diplomacy acts as a mechanism that we can use to speak directly to international audiences” (P14, 21 September 2024).

Engagement on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok provides an unprecedented opportunity for South Africa to directly communicate its values and policies, amplifying its public diplomacy efforts and reaching a wider audience than traditional diplomacy alone could achieve. By regularly engaging foreign audiences on global issues—such as peace, sustainable development, or human rights—South Africa enhances its global appeal and strengthens its soft power, especially in countries that value transparency, inclusivity, and democracy.

Crisis Communication

During crises, digital diplomacy serves as a critical tool for shaping the narrative and maintaining South Africa's global image. Crisis communication through digital

platforms allows South Africa to respond swiftly and effectively, ensuring that its values of humanitarianism and solidarity are prominently showcased. Alice explained:

“Digital diplomacy would allow countries to respond to global pandemics, natural disasters, or terrorist attacks by providing timely responses while engaging in global issues on information during crises such as health emergencies” (P14, 21 September 2024).

In times of global crisis, South Africa can use digital platforms not only to offer practical solutions or aid but also to align its actions with its broader values of multilateralism and global cooperation. By taking proactive measures and showcasing leadership, South Africa reinforces its soft power as a country committed to global well-being and shared solutions.

Promote Tourism and Trade

The opportunity to use digital diplomacy for promoting tourism and trade is another aspect of South Africa’s broader soft power strategy. Digital platforms can offer a more engaging and immersive experience, providing virtual tours and cultural showcases to attract tourists and foreign investors, which helps to position South Africa as an open, welcoming, and modern nation. Noah noted:

“Looking at global trends, we are seeing instances whereby a country may promote tourism through virtual experiences, which can allow prospective visitors to have an understanding or feel of the particular country they may potentially want to visit” (P13, 21 September 2024).

By strategically utilising digital diplomacy, South Africa can showcase its rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, and diverse opportunities for trade. The use of virtual tourism experiences offers a soft power opportunity to attract global interest, whether through tourism or business investments, fostering an image of South Africa as an attractive, accessible, and progressive destination.

Data Analytics

Finally, the use of data analytics was highlighted as an essential tool for improving the effectiveness of digital diplomacy. Through data, South Africa can better understand the preferences of its target audiences and refine its messaging to strengthen its public diplomacy efforts. Data-driven insights would allow for more tailored communications, enhancing engagement and influencing foreign perceptions more effectively. Peter argued:

“The most important aspect is the quality of the inputs. The better the quality of information used to analyse, the better the dissemination and analysis of the information will be” (P14, 20 September 2024).

By leveraging data analytics, South Africa can gain insights into how its diplomatic messages are being received and what resonates most with different audiences. This allows for strategic adjustments to its digital diplomacy campaigns, ensuring that it consistently projects the right image, influences global opinion, and strengthens its global presence.

4.3.1.7. How can South Africa use digital diplomacy to achieve its foreign policy goals while influencing the international system beyond COVID-19?

Lastly, the participants were asked how South Africa could use digital diplomacy to achieve its foreign policy goals and influence the international system beyond COVID-19. All participants agreed that this was achievable, provided certain strategic considerations were addressed. These considerations include improving South Africa’s digital presence, developing digital infrastructure, creating a digital diplomacy strategy, understanding associated risks, and applying a reflective approach to digital diplomacy.

Improved Digital Presence

Most participants stated that if South Africa were to achieve its foreign policy goals while influencing the international system beyond COVID-19 through digital diplomacy, it would need to improve its digital presence, which is essential for effective diplomacy. Sarah said:

"...this will only be possible if South Africa enhances its digital presence worldwide, requiring the country to improve its digital infrastructure" (P18 22 September 2024).

Participants believed an improved digital presence would enable global communication and foster relationships beyond traditional diplomatic channels. This correlates with Alice's earlier response: "digital diplomacy would permit real-time responses, assist in responding swiftly to global crises and addressing any pressing public issues (P14 21 September 2024). The sentiments shared by the participants were that an improved digital presence would also increase public engagement, whereby the government could directly engage with domestic and international audiences.

Improve Digital Infrastructure

The need to improve digital infrastructure was widely discussed. Improving infrastructure is not only about the technical aspects but also about enhancing the capacity to engage meaningfully with global audiences. An upgraded infrastructure would support better communication tools, real-time engagement, and data management to boost South Africa's soft power on the world stage.

Participants emphasized that digital diplomacy tools—such as social media engagement, video conferencing, and content management systems—are essential for strengthening South Africa's diplomatic efforts, both at home and abroad. By improving these tools, South Africa would increase its ability to communicate effectively, influence international narratives, and project its global image.

Making the most of existing infrastructure

Despite the calls to improve South Africa's digital infrastructure, William noted that the need to improve South Africa's digital infrastructure (or lack thereof) should not overlook the existing digital infrastructure contributing to digital diplomacy, such as community-based Ubuntu Radio. William said the following:

"The country must build on the foundation laid in 2013 when Ubuntu Radio was launched. At any rate, the government's precarious financial position makes it imperative that the country do more with fewer resources, as Deputy Minister Candith Mashego-Dlamini intimated in May 2022 (P23 22 September 2024).

Developing a Digital Diplomacy Strategy

Participants also highlighted the importance of a digital diplomacy strategy. Peter emphasized:

"A clear strategy will assist in clearly defining South Africa's vision, goals, and objectives, supported by the resources and skills to realise the true potential of digital diplomacy" (P14, 20 September 2024).

A coherent strategy would help streamline South Africa's foreign policy goals in the digital space, creating a unified narrative that aligns with its soft power agenda. This strategy would also allow South Africa to engage in effective crisis communication, promote its values consistently, and adapt to the changing dynamics of global diplomacy.

Understanding the Risks Associated with Digital Diplomacy

Finally, understanding the risks associated with digital diplomacy is crucial for ensuring that South Africa can mitigate potential threats such as cybersecurity issues, misinformation, or privacy concerns. Sarah pointed out:

"We still need to understand Artificial Intelligence (AI) better...we need to consider both the positive and negative aspects of digital

diplomacy before we can fully take it forward in a post-COVID-19 world” (P12, 18 September 2024).

Addressing these risks would ensure that South Africa’s digital diplomacy initiatives remain effective and credible, reinforcing its soft power by upholding values of trust, transparency, and accountability in the digital sphere.

4.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter began by outlining the research design and methodology, focusing on the participants who were selected for their extensive experience in the diplomatic and foreign policy sectors, with each having over five years of expertise. The chapter also described how interviews were conducted with these participants, and how their responses were used to triangulate and analyse the data gathered to address the research questions.

The second section presented the findings from the interviews, which were grouped into key themes, including South Africa’s capacity to use digital diplomacy to advance its foreign policy goals, its role in public diplomacy, and the opportunities and challenges digital diplomacy poses within the broader context of South Africa’s foreign relations. These findings were drawn from six participants who met the inclusion criteria and were actively engaged in the study.

Participants generally agreed that South Africa’s use of digital diplomacy before the COVID-19 pandemic required significant improvement. However, the pandemic marked a turning point, with the government leveraging platforms like Microsoft, Webex, and Zoom for diplomatic communication, and using social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok to enhance its digital diplomacy efforts. While some participants were strong advocates for the potential of digital diplomacy, others emphasized the continued importance of traditional, face-to-face diplomacy, especially for maintaining personal relationships with international counterparts.

Despite these differing views, there was consensus among the participants that South Africa has the potential to use digital diplomacy effectively to advance its foreign policy

objectives. To fully realize this potential, however, the country must address several key areas: improving its digital presence and infrastructure, building on existing platforms like Ubuntu Radio, developing a comprehensive digital diplomacy strategy, and understanding the risks associated with digital diplomacy, such as cybersecurity concerns and misinformation.

A thematic analysis approach was employed to interpret and identify recurring themes, concepts, and ideas in the interview data. This methodology allowed for a nuanced understanding of how digital diplomacy can shape South Africa's foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world. The findings, presented thematically with direct quotes from participants, underscore the importance of strategic digital engagement as a critical tool for South Africa in its diplomatic and foreign policy efforts moving forward.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Introduction

The landscape of foreign policy has evolved significantly over the years, driven by rapid societal transformations in an increasingly digitized and interconnected world. This shift has prompted a rethinking of the nature of diplomacy, especially in the context of globalization and the speed of communication. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these transformations, challenging the traditional practices of diplomacy and raising questions about its purpose, scope, and participants. With the pandemic forcing the transfer of diplomatic engagements to online platforms, these tools have become essential venues for conferences, diplomatic meetings, and foreign policy communications on the global stage.

However, the transition to digital diplomacy in Africa presents unique challenges. These include the relatively recent adoption of digital tools for foreign policy purposes and a lack of scholarship specifically focused on digital diplomacy within the African context. This chapter seeks to explore these issues by answering the main research questions and discussing the findings in relation to the theoretical framework of soft power.

5.2. Interpretative Analysis of the Research Questions using Soft Power as the theoretical framework

Can South Africa's use of digital diplomacy further its foreign policy objectives within the international system?

South Africa's use of digital diplomacy has the potential to significantly advance its foreign policy objectives within the international system. This was confirmed by a majority of participants in the research interviews, who noted that digital diplomacy can play a pivotal role in enhancing South Africa's global influence. This view is

grounded in two primary factors: the increasing interconnectedness of the world due to globalization and the crucial role digital diplomacy played during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Adesina (2023) argues, African countries, including South Africa, can benefit from digital diplomacy as a complementary tool to traditional diplomatic methods, enhancing their visibility and influence on the global stage.

The interviewees identified several key opportunities for South Africa through digital diplomacy. These included strengthening diplomatic relations, amplifying South Africa's voice in international debates, and engaging with global audiences in more direct and meaningful ways. These points align with insights from Deos (2015) and the Lowy Interpreter (2015), who highlight digital diplomacy's capacity to bolster a nation's legitimacy, sustain diplomatic ties, and project its foreign policy priorities more effectively. Furthermore, the rise of social media and digital communication tools offers South Africa a unique chance to expand its soft power, as noted by Riordan (2016), allowing the country to reach audiences more quickly and with greater impact.

However, the research also uncovered several challenges in fully harnessing the potential of digital diplomacy. Many participants emphasized that South Africa must strengthen its digital infrastructure and adopt a more strategic, deliberate approach to integrating digital diplomacy into its foreign policy efforts. As one participant noted, "This will only be possible if South Africa enhances its digital presence and takes a more intentional approach to digitalisation within the diplomatic sector" (P13, 18 September 2024). Another participant underscored the importance of having a clear strategic vision, supported by the necessary resources and skills to effectively deploy digital diplomacy: "It will require a clear vision, supported by resources and skills, to realize the true potential of what digital diplomacy can offer" (P16, 20 September 2024).

Alongside these opportunities, the research also highlighted significant concerns about the risks associated with digital diplomacy. Issues such as cybersecurity threats and the control of digital platforms were raised as potential challenges. These concerns suggest that, while digital diplomacy can be a powerful tool, South Africa must carefully weigh its risks and consider the ethical dimensions of digital engagement to ensure it is used responsibly and effectively.

How can South Africa utilise digital diplomacy to further its public diplomacy?

The second research question explored how South Africa could employ digital diplomacy to enhance its public diplomacy efforts. The findings highlighted several strategies, particularly the use of storytelling, online engagement, and cultural diplomacy as key avenues for advancing public diplomacy. According to the participants, public diplomacy is seen as a tool for engaging both domestic and international audiences and supporting broader statecraft. One participant expressed that “...public diplomacy and all its events serve to support statecraft at its core” (P14, 22 September 2024), echoing Nye’s (2004) view that public diplomacy is a key element of soft power.

A central theme that emerged from the interviews was the power of storytelling in digital diplomacy. Participants emphasized that storytelling, shared through digital platforms, can humanize a country, foster empathy, and transcend cultural differences. This aligns with Bamazai’s (2023) assertion that storytelling not only raises awareness but also encourages dialogue and strengthens international partnerships. Nye (2004) further supports this view, arguing that storytelling is an essential form of soft power that enables states to shape perceptions and influence behaviour without resorting to coercion.

Moreover, the findings underscored the role of social media as an effective tool for engaging global audiences in real time. By offering a direct line of communication with both international and domestic publics, social media platforms enhance transparency, accountability, and the ability to address misconceptions. Participants noted that digital diplomacy enables South Africa to engage in more immediate and transparent dialogues with foreign audiences, as one participant stated: “...digital diplomacy gives us the chance to engage directly with international audiences to address any issues or misconceptions that may exist” (P14, 21 September 2024). This highlights how digital diplomacy can foster trust, shape perceptions, and build public support for foreign policy objectives, reinforcing South Africa’s soft power on the global stage.

The opportunities that digital diplomacy presents for South Africa’s foreign policy

From the interviews, it became clear that digital diplomacy has enabled the South African government to engage more effectively with both domestic and international audiences on foreign policy issues. One participant highlighted how digital tools could make South Africa's foreign policy more agile: "it will also allow our foreign policy to be much more responsive, especially in an uncertain global environment" (P17, 20 September 2024). Another participant emphasised the importance of digital diplomacy in improving interdepartmental coordination and decision-making: "better interdepartmental collaboration and a better-coordinated foreign policy can be achieved through digital diplomacy. Additionally, it will enable more real-time foreign policy. For instance, South African ambassadors can connect with the Head Office in real time at the UN, reducing the time needed to make decisions" (P14, 20 September 2024).

These responses are consistent with Fisher's (2013) assertion that social media enables states to communicate with citizens of other countries in near real-time, facilitating interaction and engagement that can further diplomatically goals. Saaid (2023: 3121) also argues that the rise of ICT and social media has amplified the visibility and impact of soft power in international relations. Through these digital platforms, states can project their values and ideas globally, shaping discourse on critical issues. This supports Hunter's (2009) view that soft power has become an essential tool for states to influence public opinion and build lasting relationships in the international system.

Another key opportunity identified by the participants was digital diplomacy's role in improving representation for South Africa on the global stage. One participant explained, "the opportunities that digital diplomacy presents for South Africa is representation... it is often difficult for developing countries to be represented in important conversations, so with the introduction of digital diplomacy, we can mitigate such issues" (P14, 21 September 2024). This resonates with the long-standing challenge that African states face in being underrepresented in multilateral forums, despite their significant contributions to international relations. The rise of ICT and social media platforms offers underrepresented states a way to ensure their voices are heard. Participants noted that digital diplomacy could help address the inequalities

that were further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the disparities between developed and developing countries.

The challenges that digital diplomacy presents for South Africa's foreign policy

Despite the opportunities, several challenges to digital diplomacy were identified during the interviews. One of the most significant challenges was the risk of misinformation and disinformation, which can erode trust and distort public perception. The rise of artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven platforms exacerbates these risks, making it more difficult to control the narratives that shape global opinion. This concern aligns with Raishica (2018) and Kolodziej (2005), who point out that the digital age complicates international decision-making by amplifying voices from a wide range of actors, each with different interests.

Another challenge is the lack of technical capacity within South Africa's foreign policy apparatus. Several participants emphasized the need for specialized skills and resources to effectively implement digital diplomacy strategies. One participant noted that "one of the main challenges will be the necessary skills to drive such a strategy and the ability to enable diplomats to implement it" (P16, 20 September 2024). Similarly, infrastructure gaps and the digital divide were highlighted as significant obstacles that need to be addressed in order to fully integrate digital diplomacy into South Africa's foreign policy.

Additionally, some participants expressed concerns that digital diplomacy could undermine traditional diplomatic practices, particularly face-to-face engagements that are foundational to building trust and understanding between diplomats. This view contrasts with scholars such as Hocking & Melissen (2015) and Madu et al. (2017), who argue that digital diplomacy should complement, not replace, traditional diplomacy.

5.3. Conclusion

This chapter has presented a thematic analysis of the interview findings, which were interpreted through the lens of *soft power* to answer the main research questions. The

results suggest that while South Africa faces significant challenges in integrating digital diplomacy into its foreign policy—particularly due to gaps in infrastructure, technical skills, and digital strategy—the potential for digital diplomacy to advance the country’s foreign policy objectives is substantial.

The findings demonstrate that digital diplomacy offers unique opportunities for South Africa to project its soft power, enhance public diplomacy, and increase its international presence. However, to fully capitalize on these opportunities, South Africa must address several prerequisites, including improving its digital infrastructure, developing a clear strategy for digital diplomacy, and mitigating the risks associated with misinformation, cybersecurity, and the erosion of traditional diplomacy. By strategically harnessing digital diplomacy, South Africa can further its foreign policy goals, shape international perceptions, and engage with global audiences in more dynamic and impactful ways.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Summary

This research study aimed to examine how digital diplomacy could be employed to further South Africa's foreign policy in the post-COVID-19 era, highlighting both the opportunities it provides and the challenges it poses. The findings of the study align with the research objectives, which sought to:

- Understand how digital diplomacy can advance South Africa's foreign policy objectives within the international system
- Explore the use of digital diplomacy to enhance South Africa's public diplomacy.
- Identify the opportunities and challenges associated with digital diplomacy in the context of South Africa's foreign policy.

The research revealed that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa had acknowledged the potential of digital tools but lacked a coherent and deliberate digital diplomacy strategy. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 catalysed a shift in South Africa's diplomatic approach, compelling the country to adopt a more active role in regional and global digital policymaking. The study noted that initiatives such as South Africa's participation in the AEC submarine cable project and its leadership of the CWG-WSIS SDG chairmanship during the pandemic reflected a clear intent to leverage digital diplomacy to further its foreign policy goals. Furthermore, South Africa's chairmanship of the AU during the pandemic highlighted its commitment to utilizing digital diplomacy as a means of advancing African interests on the global stage.

The research also examined the role of digital diplomacy in advancing public diplomacy, where it identified significant opportunities for South Africa to engage with international and domestic audiences. The use of social media and digital platforms has allowed South Africa to shape global perceptions, foster diplomatic cooperation, and build international partnerships. Through increased digital engagement, South

Africa has been able to enhance its visibility and soft power, thus advancing its foreign policy goals in ways that were not possible with traditional diplomacy alone.

However, the study also identified several challenges associated with digital diplomacy. These include the risks posed by misinformation, disinformation, privacy issues, and the rapid evolution of AI. These challenges have significant implications for South Africa's ability to use digital tools effectively while safeguarding the integrity of its diplomatic efforts. The study emphasized the importance of addressing these challenges, particularly the need for South Africa to develop a robust digital diplomacy strategy that accounts for these risks while capitalizing on the benefits of digital engagement.

Through interviews with diplomats, academics, and practitioners in the field of foreign policy, the study also highlighted the importance of balancing digital and traditional forms of diplomacy. While the increased reliance on digital platforms during the pandemic demonstrated the potential of digital diplomacy, participants in the study acknowledged that face-to-face interactions and personal relationships remain essential to successful diplomatic engagement.

The thematic analysis of the interviews reinforced the need for South Africa to develop a more structured and intentional approach to digital diplomacy. While the country has made significant progress in its use of digital tools during the pandemic, there is still a need to enhance its digital presence, improve its infrastructure, and build a comprehensive digital diplomacy strategy. Addressing the associated risks—particularly the threat of misinformation, AI-driven challenges, and privacy concerns—will be crucial to ensuring the sustainability and success of South Africa's digital diplomacy in the future.

6.2. Conclusion

This research study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital diplomacy, particularly within the context of South Africa's foreign policy in the post-COVID-19 era. The study demonstrates that digital diplomacy offers a significant opportunity for South Africa to advance its foreign policy objectives, especially in light of the

disruptions caused by the pandemic and the accelerating global shift towards digital communication.

The findings of the study are consistent with previous scholarship on the subject, such as Wekesa et al. (2021), which suggests that digital diplomacy remains relatively underutilized in Africa. Despite the growing recognition of digital tools' potential in foreign policy, their use is often reactive rather than proactive. This research, therefore, highlights the need for South Africa—and more broadly, African states—to adopt a more deliberate and structured approach to digital diplomacy, particularly as it relates to the achievement of foreign policy objectives in the global arena.

One of the key insights from the study is that South Africa's use of digital diplomacy can enhance its global presence, public diplomacy, and soft power. By engaging more directly with global audiences through digital tools, South Africa can increase its diplomatic influence, promote its values, and advocate for African interests. However, the study also underscores the challenges that digital diplomacy poses, including the risks of misinformation, the rapid evolution of digital technologies, and privacy concerns, all of which require careful consideration in future strategic planning.

Ultimately, the research highlights the transformative role that digital diplomacy can play in modern foreign policy, particularly for countries like South Africa, which have traditionally relied on more conventional diplomatic practices. While digital diplomacy offers numerous opportunities, its successful implementation will depend on South Africa's ability to address the associated risks and develop a clear, comprehensive strategy for utilizing digital tools in pursuit of its foreign policy goals.

6.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the research makes several recommendations for South Africa to enhance its digital diplomacy efforts in the post-COVID-19 era:

1. **Develop a Comprehensive Digital Diplomacy Strategy:** South Africa should prioritize the development of a clear and deliberate digital diplomacy strategy that aligns with its foreign policy objectives. This strategy should leverage digital tools, including social media and digital platforms, to enhance global

engagement, promote national values, and advance diplomatic goals. The strategy should also focus on mitigating the risks associated with misinformation and privacy concerns.

2. **Enhance Digital Infrastructure and Capacity:** To ensure effective digital diplomacy, South Africa must invest in improving its digital infrastructure. This includes enhancing connectivity, ensuring reliable access to digital platforms, and safeguarding against cyber threats. Furthermore, capacity building for diplomats is essential. Diplomatic personnel should be trained in digital tools, data analytics, and social media management to ensure effective engagement in the digital realm.
3. **Address Emerging Risks:** South Africa should establish regulatory frameworks to address the risks of misinformation, disinformation, and privacy violations in digital diplomacy. Monitoring tools and strategies to manage AI-related challenges should also be developed to protect the integrity of diplomatic communications.
4. **Expand Research on Digital Diplomacy:** Further research is needed to explore the implications of digital diplomacy within the African context, where digital diplomacy is still emerging. South Africa should take the lead in fostering regional collaborations and contributing to the development of best practices for digital diplomacy tailored to the unique challenges of the African continent.
5. **Engage in Multilateral Collaboration:** South Africa should strengthen its engagement in regional and global digital diplomacy forums. By participating in multilateral initiatives, the country can enhance its diplomatic presence, influence international digital policymaking, and support the development of global norms and standards in digital diplomacy.

By addressing these recommendations, South Africa can position itself to maximize the potential of digital diplomacy in advancing its foreign policy goals and improving its global standing in the increasingly digital world of international relations.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions:

Overall Research Question: How can digital diplomacy further South Africa's foreign policy in a post-COVID-19 world?

Research Questions:

1. As an academic, practitioner or expert within the foreign policy space (or digital diplomacy space), what is your understanding of digital diplomacy?
2. From your experience within the field, to what extent has South Africa explored digital diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy before COVID-19? Please substantiate your answer.
3. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, how was South Africa affected from a diplomatic and foreign policy perspective?
4. What were the measures taken by South Africa to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on its diplomatic relations and interactions within the international arena?
5. Do you think digital diplomacy may be an option for South Africa in a post-COVID-19 world?
6. What opportunities do you think digital diplomacy presents for South Africa's foreign policy?
7. What challenges do you think digital diplomacy presents for South Africa's foreign policy?
8. How would you conceptualise public diplomacy?
9. How can South Africa skilfully utilise digital diplomacy to further its public diplomacy?
10. Do you think South Africa can achieve its foreign policy goals while influencing the international system beyond COVID-19 with the use of digital diplomacy?