Assessment of Digital Diplomacy Initiatives for Mitigating Insecurity and Promoting Peace in North East, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives in mitigating insecurity and promoting peace in North East Nigeria, a region plagued by the insurgencies of Boko Haram and ISWAP. Digital diplomacy, involving the strategic use of digital platforms to communicate and engage with affected communities, is explored as a tool to counter extremist narratives and foster local peacebuilding. Utilising a qualitative approach, this research analyses interviews with key stakeholders, highlighting the role of digital platforms in facilitating real-time communication, community engagement, and the dissemination of counter-narratives. The findings reveal that while digital diplomacy has improved communication and enhanced community involvement, its impact is limited by challenges such as infrastructure gaps, cybersecurity risks, and low digital literacy. Thus, the study emphasises the need for enhanced digital infrastructure, stronger cybersecurity measures, and capacity-building initiatives to fully leverage digital diplomacy's potential in promoting stability and peace in conflict-affected areas.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Peacebuilding, Insecurity, North East Nigeria, Conflict Resolution, Social Media Diplomacy

1. Introduction

Digital diplomacy involves leveraging digital technologies and social media by both state and non-state actors to engage with domestic and global audiences, aiming to advance policy objectives and foster public engagement [1], [2]. This strategy includes activities such as information sharing, local community engagement, and promoting counter-narratives to extremist ideologies [3], [4]. In regions like Northeast Nigeria, where Boko Haram has created considerable instability [5], digital diplomacy can play a crucial role in strengthening peacebuilding efforts and countering extremist narratives.

The importance of digital diplomacy in resolving conflicts is particularly clear in dealing with Boko Haram and ISWAP. These groups have used social media to disseminate extremist ideologies and attract followers, necessitating a strategic response from governments and civil society [6], [7]. Digital platforms enable stakeholders to spread messages that encourage peace, tolerance, and inclusion, which helps reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies [8]. Furthermore, digital diplomacy allows for real-time communication with conflict-affected communities, deepening the understanding of their needs and fostering trust between authorities and citizens [9].

Furthermore, the interactive nature of digital platforms also aids in mobilizing grassroots movements and including diverse participants in peacebuilding initiatives. This approach can improve the credibility of peace efforts, making them more likely to connect with local populations [10]. For instance, digital campaigns that emphasize the positive role of local communities in preserving peace can counter the negative narratives spread by extremist organizations [11]. Additionally, digital diplomacy can facilitate the coordination of humanitarian aid, ensuring that support reaches those in need even amid conflict [6].

Recent research emphasises the need to incorporate digital strategies into public diplomacy to enhance peace and security. Findings indicate that community-based peace education, particularly among youth, can be scaled effectively through digital platforms [12]. Traditional leaders, crucial in fostering harmony, can use digital channels to promote messages of peace [13], [14]. The influence of social media on shaping public discourse is also notable, as demonstrated by the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, which showed how digital platforms can engage citizens and influence policy [15], [16]

However, despite these promising developments, a notable gap remains in the understanding of how digital diplomacy can be systematically applied to address the unique challenges of insurgency in regions like North East Nigeria. While much

research has focused on the broader applications of digital diplomacy, there is limited evidence on its specific role in countering the narratives of violent extremist groups and in coordinating peacebuilding efforts within this context. This study seeks to fill this gap by assessing the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives in mitigating insecurity and fostering peace in North East Nigeria, providing valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges of leveraging digital tools in conflict resolution.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives in countering violent extremism and fostering peace in conflict-affected regions of North East Nigeria.

2. To assess the challenges posed by digital infrastructure gaps and cybersecurity threats in the implementation of digital diplomacy initiatives aimed at promoting peace and security in North East Nigeria.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Public Diplomacy

The concept of public diplomacy has evolved significantly, especially during the Cold War, where it served as a national security strategy to counter opposing narratives and promote cultural values [17], [18]. A key component of public diplomacy is cultural diplomacy, which acts as a link between nations by encouraging exchanges of ideas, traditions, and values. This dimension is essential because it allows countries to showcase their cultural heritage and societal norms, fostering greater understanding among international audiences [19]. For example, the United States has used cultural diplomacy through initiatives like the Fulbright Program to encourage educational exchanges and improve its global image [20]. Similarly, modern efforts such as Indonesia's culinary diplomacy demonstrate how nations can use cultural elements to strengthen diplomatic relationships and improve their international standing [21].

Furthermore, public diplomacy extends beyond merely sharing a nation's perspective; it requires engaging and listening to foreign audiences. This reciprocal communication is critical for establishing credibility and trust, which are fundamental to successful public diplomacy [22]. The importance of listening is highlighted by the need to align public diplomacy with policy goals, ensuring that the messages resonate with the values and expectations of the intended audience [23]. This approach focuses on the role of civil society and grassroots movements in shaping perceptions and fostering dialogue, thereby improving the effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts [18], particularly in places battling insecurity.

In the digital era, digital diplomacy has emerged, with social media and online platforms becoming central tools for engagement. In this wise, digital diplomacy enables nations to increasingly use these platforms to reach larger audiences and enable real-time interactions, thereby amplifying the impact of their diplomacy activities [24], [25], including the area of peace building. However, this transition also presents challenges, such as the rapid spread of misinformation and negative narratives, which require a strategic and adaptive response in public diplomacy.

In contemporary times, digital diplomacy has become a crucial tool for nations to project soft power, connect with international audiences, and promote cross-cultural dialogue. By incorporating cultural diplomacy, active listening, and modern communication methods, countries can better manage the complexities of local and global relations and bolster their influence on the world stage.

2.2 Insecurity Issues in North-East Nigeria

The insecurity in North-East Nigeria stems from a complex mix of armed conflict, humanitarian challenges, and socio-economic issues. The region has been greatly affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, resulting in extensive violence, displacement, and a severe humanitarian crisis. Since the conflict's intensification in 2009, it has caused around 350,000 deaths and displaced more than 2 million people, creating a need for humanitarian aid for over 7.7 million individuals [26], [27].

The ongoing violence has significantly interrupted educational access and social services, especially for women and youth. Many young people in North-East Nigeria have suffered intense violence, which has long-lasting psychological impacts, heightening their vulnerability to mental health issues, including suicidal tendencies [28], [29]. The interruption of educational services has also led to a sharp rise in child marriages, with young women in the region being more likely to marry before 18 than those in other areas of Nigeria [30].

Additionally, the insurgency has had a severe economic impact, causing substantial losses for both local and international investors. The region has seen an estimated $9 billion in lost investments due to the persistent violence and instability [31]. This economic decline has exacerbated poverty levels, perpetuating the cycle of insecurity as some individuals resort to illicit activities for survival [32]. While traditional approaches to mitigating the insecurities challenge appear to be insufficient, the adoption of more innovative approaches like digital diplomacy to counter extremism and promote peace is becoming more imperative.

2.3 Peacebuilding

A well-known framework for understanding peacebuilding consists of a three-pronged strategy: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding itself. Peacekeeping aims to halt violence, peacemaking focuses on negotiation and conflict resolution, while peacebuilding seeks to establish a culture of peace through social and economic development [33]. This holistic approach is crucial because it acknowledges that stopping violence alone is inadequate for long-term stability; it requires addressing the underlying socio-economic injustices that drive conflict [34]. For example, in Southeast Asia, ASEAN's community-building strategy highlights the linkages between peace, security, and development, promoting a transformative model that encourages inclusive communities and social justice [35].

Moreover, education is vital in peacebuilding, especially in influencing the attitudes and actions of future generations. Peace education programs have been shown to decrease aggression and instill a culture of peace among young people [36]. Initiatives that involve children and youth in participatory activities, such as theater-based interventions, not only build their sense of agency but also enable them to actively contribute to peacebuilding efforts [37]. This bottom-up approach aligns with the concept of "everyday peace," which values local agency and emphasizes the role of community-driven initiatives in fostering resilience and transforming conflicts [38].

Additionally, the use of arts in peacebuilding has emerged as a significant method for promoting healing and reconciliation. Arts-based peacebuilding projects create opportunities for individuals and communities to express their experiences, facilitate dialogue, and foster understanding [39]. Such approaches can be especially effective in situations where traditional dialogue methods have proven inadequate, as they provide avenues for creative expression and emotional healing [40].

The contribution of women to peacebuilding is also vital, as they often act as pivotal agents of change within their communities. Women's groups frequently bridge ethnic and geographic divides, forming networks that support sustainable peace [41]. Approaches like women-to-women diplomacy underscore the importance of gender-sensitive strategies in peacebuilding, enabling women to challenge narratives of conflict and encourage dialogue. This approach is crucial for developing inclusive peace processes that address the diverse needs and experiences of all community members.

2.4 Theoretical framework

The theory of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, is fundamental to understanding how influence can be achieved through attraction rather than coercion. It highlights the importance of culture, political values, and policies in shaping a nation's appeal and influence. As Nye explained in Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (2004), the cultural allure of a nation and the appeal of its political values and policies are integral to its soft power [18]. This concept is applicable to digital diplomacy initiatives in conflict zones like North-East Nigeria, where digital platforms are utilized to promote peaceful narratives and engage local communities. These efforts reflect the principles of soft power, aiming to shape attitudes and behaviors without the use of force [42].

The effectiveness of such soft power strategies largely depends on the willingness of target audiences to engage. In the context of North-East Nigeria, this willingness is influenced by local socio-political dynamics and cultural connections. This resembles past instances, such as Turkey's engagement with American cultural products during the Cold War, illustrating how cultural content can act as a medium for influence [43]. Similarly, the digital diplomacy initiatives examined here aim to use online platforms to counter extremist narratives and advocate for peace, relying on local communities' openness to these messages.

However, the application of soft power faces challenges, including conceptual ambiguity and difficulties in assessing its impact, especially in complex settings like North-East Nigeria. Scholars like Saaida [44] argue that relying exclusively on soft power may not be sufficient without the backing of hard power. In digital diplomacy, the relationship between soft power and economic resources is evident. Limited financial support and infrastructure in North-East Nigeria constrain the effectiveness and outreach of digital diplomacy efforts, supporting claims that economic resources are crucial for sustaining cultural and diplomatic activities [45].

The evolving dynamics of soft power are also apparent in the emergence of non-Western players like China, which uses its cultural and political narratives to expand global influence, as evidenced by the Belt and Road Initiative [46], [47]. This development underscores the flexibility of soft power, suggesting that even nations in conflict zones can leverage digital tools strategically to shape public perception and promote peace. Through the application of soft power principles, digital diplomacy in North-East Nigeria aims to achieve stability using non-coercive methods, aligning with the broader goals of this study.

3. Methodology
For this study, a qualitative research approach will be employed, utilising semi-structured interviews with key informants as the primary data collection method. This methodology is selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, experiences, and insights of those directly involved in or affected by digital diplomacy initiatives aimed at mitigating insecurity and promoting peace in North East Nigeria.

4. Findings
This section presents a thematic analysis of the study's two main objectives, based on insights from key informant interviews. The first objective evaluates the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives in countering violent extremism and promoting peace while the second objective assesses the challenges posed by infrastructure gaps and cybersecurity threats. The section also profiles the key informants.

4.1 Informant Profile
The four key informants for this study were selected from different relevant institutions and organisations (See Table 1). The first informant (Informant 1) is the Programme Manager, Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO). He is an expert in community support, reintegration of ex-combatants, and educational initiatives. Informant 2 is the Programmes Manager, Street Child of Nigeria, and an expert in humanitarian and development interventions. He engages in digital diplomacy through existing platforms such as the Reintegration Technical Working Group and Protection Sector. Informant 3 is an expert in humanitarian coordination and peace-building from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). He coordinates humanitarian responses across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, using digital tools to enhance communication between local communities, security agencies, and humanitarian actors. Lastly, the fourth informant (Informant 4) is a Senior Special Assistant on Media to the Governor of Adamawa State, provides insights into the use of digital diplomacy for mitigating insecurity and fostering peace in North East Nigeria, particularly in Adamawa State.

Table 1: Informant Profile

Informant Name	Role/Organisation	Area of Expertise
Informant 1	Programme Manager, Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO)	Community Support, Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, Education
Informant 2	Programmes Manager, Street Child of Nigeria	Humanitarian and Development Interventions
Informant 3	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)	Humanitarian Coordination, Peace-building
Informant 4	Senior Special Assistant on New Media to Governor of Adamawa State	Media, Security Communication, Peace-building

4.2 Objective 1: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Digital Diplomacy Initiatives in Countering Violent Extremism and Fostering Peace in North East Nigeria

This section provides a thematic analysis of the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives in countering violent extremism and fostering peace in conflict-affected regions of North East Nigeria. Drawing insights from key informants, the analysis identifies key themes and sub-themes that demonstrate the ways in which digital diplomacy tools have been implemented, their impact, and the challenges faced.

Theme 1: Real-Time Communication and Crisis Management

Digital diplomacy initiatives have significantly enhanced real-time communication, allowing for swift responses to security threats. Platforms like WhatsApp enable immediate sharing of information, facilitating quicker interventions and coordination between community leaders and security agencies. In line with this, immediate response to security threats and coordination between local and international actors emerged as sub-themes.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Immediate Response to Security Threats

Digital diplomacy initiatives in North East Nigeria have significantly improved real-time communication, enabling faster and more coordinated responses to security threats. Informants consistently emphasised the role of WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms in relaying critical information during crises. For instance, Informant 4 highlighted the importance of real-time communication through WhatsApp, stating, "*We coordinated a rapid response using WhatsApp groups during a violent outbreak in Gombi. Community leaders shared information quickly, and security forces were able to intervene faster than with traditional methods.*" This shows that social media, particularly WhatsApp, allows for quick dissemination of information, facilitating timely interventions and potentially saving lives.

Similarly, Informant 1 elaborated on the use of WhatsApp for real-time coordination across communities and security agencies, noting, "*Whenever there is a communal clash or security threat, the WhatsApp group allows stakeholders, including security forces, to share information instantly and act before the situation escalates.*" This underscores how digital diplomacy has enabled proactive measures, improving the overall capacity to address security risks.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Coordination Between Local and International Actors

Another critical element of real-time communication is the improved coordination between local, national, and international peace-building actors. Informant 3 discussed how digital tools like Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp have created platforms for strategic collaboration among diverse stakeholders. He explained, "*Digital platforms are essential for bringing together local NGOs, international organizations, and UN agencies to coordinate responses, especially in conflict mediation and peace-building.*" This indicates that digital diplomacy not only facilitates communication at the local level but also strengthens ties between international and local actors, enhancing the overall peace-building framework.

Theme 2: Reduction of Misinformation and Extremist Propaganda

Moreover, digital platforms have been instrumental in reducing the spread of misinformation and extremist propaganda by providing timely and accurate information. However, the challenge of countering propaganda remains, as extremists also use these platforms to incite panic. The following sub-themes buttressed this theme: combating *misinformation* and *challenges with extremist propaganda*.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Combating Misinformation

One of the key successes of digital diplomacy has been its ability to reduce misinformation and extremist propaganda, which are frequently used by violent groups to incite panic and mistrust. Several informants noted the importance of providing accurate and timely information to counter these false narratives. In this wise, Informant 4 pointed out, "*During security incidents, we share real-time updates on social media to prevent the* spread *of panic. Our posts ensure that people receive accurate information rather than relying on rumors or extremist propaganda*." This highlights how digital diplomacy plays a critical role in maintaining public trust by delivering timely and factual updates.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Challenges with Extremist Propaganda

However, the challenge of misinformation persists, as extremist groups often use the same platforms to spread propaganda and false information. Informant 1 mentioned, "*We've seen instances where extremist groups send voice messages claiming that Boko Haram is about to attack a community, which causes panic. We have to act quickly to counter these messages with the truth*." This demonstrates the dual-edged nature of digital platforms, which can be exploited by both peace actors and extremist groups.

Generally, the efforts to debunk false narratives have proven effective to some extent, but the constant vigilance required to monitor and counter misinformation remains a significant challenge, particularly in regions where digital literacy is low and trust in digital information can be fragile.

Theme 3: Community Engagement and Mobilization

Digital diplomacy has also empowered communities by enabling them to engage directly in security measures and peace-building processes. Platforms such as WhatsApp and radio programs allow communities to provide feedback, report incidents, and participate in security discussions. This is expanded in these sub-themes: *empowering communities through digital platforms* and *educational and awareness campaigns.*

Sub-Theme 3.1: Empowering Communities Through Digital Platforms
Digital diplomacy initiatives have been instrumental in engaging local communities, giving them a voice in the security and peacebuilding process. Several informants noted that platforms like WhatsApp, radio programs, and podcasts have enabled communities to not only receive security updates but also provide feedback and participate in decision-making processes. Informant 4 noted, "*Through social media platforms, we've been able to engage local communities in discussions on security measures. Citizens can report incidents, offer feedback, and even suggest solutions during online town halls.*" This suggests that digital diplomacy has not only improved top-down communication but has also fostered bottom-up community involvement, ensuring that peace-building efforts are more inclusive.

Sub-Theme 3.2: Educational and Awareness Campaigns
Another dimension of community engagement is the use of digital literacy platforms and radio programs to educate conflict-affected populations. Informant 2 shared that digital platforms have been used to raise awareness about explosive ordinances and provide educational content to children displaced by conflict. He explained, "*We've been using radio programs and podcasts to teach children in affected communities, and we also provide explosive ordinance risk education through pre-recorded messages.*" This demonstrates how digital tools can be used to address educational and security challenges simultaneously, helping communities better navigate their environment and stay safe from potential threats.

Theme 4: Support for Reintegration and Peace-building

Digital diplomacy has played a critical role in promoting the reintegration of ex-combatants, using radio and social media to encourage surrenders and rehabilitation. It has also facilitated remote coordination of peace-building efforts, especially during periods where in-person meetings were not feasible. Under this theme, we have these sub-themes: *encouraging surrender* and *reintegration peace promotion through collaboration*.

Sub-Theme 4.1: Encouraging Surrender and Reintegration
One of the most notable impacts of digital diplomacy has been its role in encouraging the surrender and reintegration of ex-combatants. For instance, Informant 2 highlighted a significant success story in which digital messaging was used to reach non-state armed groups. He shared, "*Through radio programs and social media, we disseminated messages encouraging non-state armed groups to surrender. In 2021, over 60,000 members of armed groups surrendered after hearing these messages.*" This underscores the power of digital diplomacy in not only delivering security updates but also promoting conflict resolution and rehabilitation.

Sub-Theme 4.2: Peace Promotion Through Collaboration
Digital diplomacy has also supported peace promotion by facilitating collaboration among peace-building actors. Informant 3 noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical meetings were not possible, remote programming allowed peace-building activities to continue. He stated, "*Even when we couldn't meet in person, digital platforms enabled us to coordinate peace-building activities remotely, ensuring that efforts to resolve conflicts didn't halt.*" This indicates that digital tools have provided continuity in peace-building efforts, especially during challenging circumstances.

Theme 5: Strengthening Coordination among Stakeholders

Furthermore, digital platforms have improved coordination among various stakeholders, including local government officials, NGOs, and international actors, ensuring timely and collaborative responses to security threats. These tools have also

integrated international expertise into local peace-building initiatives. This theme is further explored through these sub-themes: *cross*-sector *coordination* and *integration with international peace-building efforts.*

Sub-Theme 5.1: Cross-Sector Coordination

Digital diplomacy has proven effective in enhancing coordination among various stakeholders, including local government officials, NGOs, and international organisations. For instance, Informant 1 discussed how WhatsApp groups have been established at the local government level to facilitate constant communication between civil society, security forces, and government agencies. He explained, "*We created WhatsApp groups with local government officials and security personnel so that when a security issue arises, we can respond immediately by coordinating through the group.*" This reflects the efficiency of digital platforms in fostering collaboration and ensuring that all actors are on the same page when addressing security threats.

Sub-Theme 5.2: Integration with International Peace-building Efforts

In addition, Informant 3 added that international organisations have also leveraged digital platforms to provide technical expertise and strategic guidance. He shared, "*We've used Teams and Zoom to coordinate with international bodies like the UN, ensuring that local peace-building efforts align with global best practices.*" This highlights the ability of digital diplomacy to bridge local and international peace efforts, ensuring that initiatives are informed by global standards.

Thus, the thematic analysis reveals that digital diplomacy initiatives in North-East Nigeria have made notable contributions to countering violent extremism and fostering peace. Through real-time communication, reducing misinformation, engaging communities, supporting reintegration, and enhancing coordination, these initiatives have demonstrated their effectiveness in mitigating insecurity. However, the constant challenges of combating misinformation, limited digital infrastructure, and varying levels of digital literacy indicate that there is room for improvement in fully realising the potential of digital diplomacy in the region.

4.3 Objective 2: Assessing the Challenges Posed by Digital Infrastructure Gaps and Cybersecurity Threats in the Implementation of Digital Diplomacy Initiatives Aimed at Promoting Peace and Security in North East Nigeria

This section focuses on analysing the challenges faced in implementing digital diplomacy initiatives due to infrastructure limitations and cybersecurity risks. The analysis reveals themes and sub-themes from the informants' insights, reflecting the barriers that hinder the effectiveness of digital tools in fostering peace and security in North East Nigeria.

Theme 1: Digital Infrastructure Gaps

A major challenge in implementing digital diplomacy is the *unreliable internet access* in rural areas, which severely limits the reach of these initiatives. This theme also includes the problem of *intermittent power supply*, which disrupts communication and weakens the effectiveness of digital tools. Additionally, *geographical and security* barriers prevent the installation of necessary infrastructure, further compounding these challenges. The lack of reliable infrastructure results in communities being digitally excluded from peacebuilding efforts.

Sub-theme 1.1: Unreliable Internet Access
One of the most significant challenges highlighted by all informants is the issue of unreliable internet access, particularly in rural and conflict-affected regions. This infrastructure gap severely limits the reach and effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives. For instance, Informant 2 stated: "*Limited internet access in rural areas drastically reduces the effectiveness of our digital diplomacy efforts. Many of the communities most affected by conflict have little to no internet connectivity.*" This demonstrates how digital exclusion in remote areas poses a barrier to peacebuilding efforts, as the communities most in need of support are often the hardest to reach through digital platforms.

Sub-theme 1.2: Intermittent Power Supply
In addition to internet access, the lack of a reliable power supply is another major challenge. Many regions experience frequent power outages, making it difficult to maintain continuous communication through digital platforms. For instance, Informant 3 discussed the impact of this issue: "*Power outages are a constant problem in rural areas, and without electricity, it's impossible to keep communication lines open, which weakens the effectiveness of our initiatives.*" This sub-theme

highlights how the lack of stable electricity further compounds the challenges of digital diplomacy, particularly in areas where other infrastructure is already weak.

Sub-theme 1.3: Geographical and Security Barriers

Informants also pointed out that geographical remoteness and security issues make it difficult to improve digital infrastructure in certain regions. Many areas are inaccessible due to ongoing conflict or challenging terrain, which prevents the installation of necessary infrastructure like cell towers or internet cables. As Informant 4 noted: "*Some areas are simply inaccessible due to the security situation or difficult terrain. Without access to these regions, it's almost impossible to improve internet and digital infrastructure*." This underscores how security and geographical challenges exacerbate the infrastructure gaps, limiting the ability of digital diplomacy to function effectively in certain regions.

Theme 2: Cybersecurity Threats

Digital diplomacy platforms are vulnerable to exploitation by extremist groups, who often use the same platforms to spread misinformation *and propaganda*. The *low level of cybersecurity awareness* among local communities and organisations exacerbates this problem, making them more susceptible to cyberattacks. Additionally, there are *insufficient cybersecurity measures* at the governmental and organisational levels, leaving peace-building operations exposed to various digital threats.

Sub-theme 2.1: Vulnerability to Extremist Exploitation

A recurring issue across the interviews is the vulnerability of digital platforms to exploitation by extremist groups. Several informants described how extremists use the same platforms intended for peace-building to spread misinformation, propaganda, or even coordinate attacks.

Informant 4 highlighted this challenge: "E*xtremist groups often exploit the same social media platforms we use for peacebuilding, spreading misinformation and creating panic within communities*." This assertion illustrates how cybersecurity threats are not only technical but also social, as extremist groups leverage digital tools to undermine peace efforts.

Sub-theme 2.2: Lack of Cybersecurity Awareness

Another challenge is the low level of cybersecurity awareness among local communities and stakeholders. Many individuals and organisations are unaware of the risks associated with using digital platforms, making them vulnerable to cyberattacks and data breaches. For instance, Informant 3 pointed out: "*Many people in the communities are unaware of the cybersecurity risks they face when using digital tools, which makes them vulnerable to hacking, phishing, and other forms of cyberattacks.*" This sub-theme highlights the need for greater awareness and training on cybersecurity to protect both peace-building actors and local communities from digital threats.

Sub-theme 2.3: Governmental and Organisational Gaps in Cybersecurity Measures

In addition to a lack of awareness at the community level, several informants discussed the insufficient cybersecurity measures in place at the governmental and organisational levels. Many organisations lack the resources or expertise to implement comprehensive cybersecurity protocols, leaving their operations vulnerable to attacks. As Informant 2 described: "*At the organisational level, there's still a lack of comprehensive cybersecurity measures in place. Without proper investment in cybersecurity, we're leaving ourselves exposed to serious risks*." This underscores the urgent need for stronger cybersecurity policies and resources to protect digital diplomacy initiatives from external threats.

Theme 3: Limitations in Funding and Resource Allocation

The lack of adequate funding for *infrastructure development* is a significant barrier to improving digital access in conflict-affected areas. Without sufficient resources, efforts to expand internet access or ensure consistent power supply are hindered. Moreover, there is a *lack of investment in cybersecurity*, with many organisations unable to allocate the necessary funds to protect their digital platforms from attacks.

Sub-theme 3.1: Inadequate Funding for Infrastructure Development

A major challenge in addressing digital infrastructure gaps is the lack of adequate funding to improve internet access, power supply, and other critical infrastructure in rural areas. Several informants discussed how resource constraints limit the ability of both governmental and non-governmental organisations to make necessary improvements. For instance, Informant 2

explained: "*The funding simply isn't there to build the kind of infrastructure we need in remote areas. Without more resources, it's difficult to expand internet access or ensure consistent power supply.*" This highlights the financial constraints that prevent the expansion of digital diplomacy to the regions where it is most needed.

Sub-theme 3.2: Lack of Investment in Cybersecurity

In addition to infrastructure, there is a significant lack of investment in cybersecurity, both in terms of personnel and technology. Several informants mentioned that budget limitations make it difficult to hire cybersecurity experts or purchase the tools needed to protect digital platforms. Accordingly, Informant 3 noted: "*Cybersecurity is often seen as an afterthought in our budgeting process, and we simply don't have the resources to invest in the kind of protections we need.*" This sub-theme emphasises the resource gaps that leave organisations vulnerable to cyber threats and limit the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives.

Theme 4: Alternative Strategies to Overcome Infrastructure and Cybersecurity Challenges

To address these infrastructure and cybersecurity challenges, *low-tech solutions* such as radio broadcasts and SMS alerts have been adopted as alternatives to digital platforms. Stronger *collaborations with international organisations* have also been key in providing technical expertise and resources. Furthermore, *capacity-building programs* focused on cybersecurity are necessary to equip local communities and organisations with the knowledge and skills to defend against cyber threats.

Sub-theme 4.1: Use of Low-Tech Solutions

To overcome infrastructure limitations, some informants discussed the use of low-tech solutions like radio broadcasts, SMS alerts, and pre-recorded messages. These alternatives help maintain communication with communities even when digital tools are not viable due to poor internet access or power outages. Informant 3 explained: "*In areas where internet access is limited, we rely on radio and SMS to keep communities informed. It's not ideal, but it's effective in reaching* people *who wouldn't otherwise be connected.*" This sub-theme highlights the importance of adapting to local realities by using alternative communication methods that can bypass digital infrastructure challenges.

Sub-theme 4.2: Collaborations with International Organisations

Several informants mentioned the need for stronger collaborations with international organisations to address both infrastructure and cybersecurity challenges. International organisations can provide technical expertise, funding, and resources that are lacking at the local level. Informant 4 stated: "*Collaborating with international organisations like UNICEF and the UN has been crucial in overcoming some of the infrastructure and security challenges we face.*" This illustrates the importance of international partnerships in ensuring that digital diplomacy initiatives are adequately funded and protected against cyber threats.

Sub-theme 4.3: Capacity Building for Cybersecurity

In response to cybersecurity threats, several informants stressed the need for capacity-building programs that teach local communities, NGOs, and government agencies how to protect themselves against cyberattacks. These programs would focus on improving awareness, as well as developing the technical skills needed to secure digital platforms. Informant 3 highlighted: "*We need to train both our teams and the communities on basic cybersecurity measures. Many of the cyberattacks we've experienced could have been prevented with proper awareness and training.*" This emphasises the need for ongoing education and capacity building to ensure that all stakeholders can engage with digital diplomacy safely and securely.

By and large, the analysis of the second objective reveals that infrastructure gaps and cybersecurity threats present significant challenges to the successful implementation of digital diplomacy initiatives in North East Nigeria. Key issues include unreliable internet access, frequent power outages, and a lack of cybersecurity awareness and resources. However, alternative strategies such as low-tech communication solutions, international collaborations, and capacity-building programs offer promising ways to mitigate these challenges.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that digital diplomacy initiatives significantly enhance real-time communication and crisis management in conflict zones like North-East Nigeria, aligning with the principles of soft power, which seek to influence behavior through attraction and engagement [18]. Real-time communication through platforms like WhatsApp has been crucial for rapid responses to security threats, allowing for immediate coordination between local leaders and security forces. This supports the idea that digital tools can foster community engagement and mobilization in peacebuilding processes [9,10]. Similar to

the case of Turkey's reception of American cultural products during the Cold War, where cultural content served as a medium for influence [43], digital diplomacy in North-East Nigeria relies on the readiness of local communities to engage with these platforms.

However, the dual nature of these platforms is evident, as they can also be exploited by extremist groups to spread misinformation and incite panic [42]. This underscores a challenge frequently highlighted in the literature, where the adaptability of digital diplomacy to both positive and negative uses complicates its application in conflict-prone regions [8,44]. The challenge of misinformation remains persistent, as indicated by the experiences of key informants, and aligns with existing research on the need for constant vigilance in digital communication spaces [7].

The findings highlight significant digital infrastructure gaps that hinder the reach of digital diplomacy efforts. Issues such as unreliable internet access and intermittent power supply limit the potential of digital diplomacy to fully engage communities in remote areas [26]. These challenges resonate with previous studies on the importance of economic resources and infrastructure in sustaining soft power and digital initiatives [45]. Informants emphasized that the lack of infrastructure results in digital exclusion, making it difficult for conflict-affected communities to access the peacebuilding support they need.

Cybersecurity threats also pose a substantial challenge, with extremist groups using digital platforms for their purposes, highlighting the dual-edged nature of these tools [6,42]. The findings suggest that inadequate investment in cybersecurity measures at both governmental and organizational levels leaves digital diplomacy efforts exposed to potential risks. This aligns with observations that without adequate support from hard power elements, such as security measures and economic investment, soft power strategies may struggle to achieve their intended outcomes [44].

Despite these challenges, digital diplomacy has enabled community involvement through initiatives like online town halls and radio programs, which empower local voices in security discussions [12,39]. This bottom-up approach is consistent with the concept of "everyday peace," emphasizing the importance of local agency in conflict resolution [37]. The adaptability of digital diplomacy is further demonstrated by the use of low-tech solutions, such as radio broadcasts and SMS alerts, which have been adopted to bridge the digital divide [31]. These methods provide a practical means of maintaining communication with remote communities, even when digital infrastructure is lacking.

Moreover, the collaboration with international organizations, as highlighted in the findings, provides essential support for overcoming infrastructure and security challenges [46]. This reflects the evolving nature of soft power in a globalized world, where partnerships and international cooperation play a crucial role in enhancing the impact of digital diplomacy initiatives [23,35]. Capacity-building programs focused on cybersecurity awareness also emerged as a critical need, suggesting that equipping local communities with the skills to protect themselves from digital threats is necessary for the sustainable success of digital diplomacy [45].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, digital diplomacy has shown promise in countering violent extremism and promoting peace in North East Nigeria by facilitating real-time communication, engaging communities, and combating misinformation. However, challenges such as infrastructure gaps, cybersecurity risks, and low digital literacy limit its full potential, particularly in rural areas. Addressing these barriers is crucial for long-term success. The findings imply that policymakers and peace-builders must prioritize investment in digital infrastructure, especially in underserved regions. Additionally, cybersecurity awareness and digital literacy need improvement to mitigate the risks of misinformation and cyberattacks. Integrating digital diplomacy with traditional peacebuilding efforts will create a more comprehensive approach to conflict resolution. Moving forward, it is recommended that governments and international partners focus on expanding digital infrastructure and strengthening cybersecurity measures. Capacity-building programs should enhance digital literacy and cybersecurity skills among local communities. Moreover, fostering international collaborations will provide the necessary support to ensure the success of digital diplomacy initiatives.

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