

The Role and Impact of Digital Diplomacy Practices in Promoting International Trade in Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the role and impact of digital diplomacy practices in promoting Kenya's international trade between 2013 and 2022. Although digital diplomacy has become a defining feature of contemporary international relations, existing research has focused mainly on advanced democracies and major powers, leaving limited empirical understanding of how developing states, and Kenya in particular, use digital platforms to advance concrete trade outcomes such as export promotion, market access, and investment attraction. This study addressed that gap by examining how Kenya's Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs and related trade institutions deployed digital diplomacy tools in support of the country's trade agenda. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted, drawing on key informant interviews with 30 purposively and snowball-sampled officials from the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, the Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry, and affiliated trade agencies. Data were analysed thematically using NVivo 12. Findings show that digital diplomacy strengthened Kenya's strategic communication, market access, export promotion, policy governance, and stakeholder engagement, with participants describing virtual trade missions, social media engagement, and online consultations as having expanded visibility and facilitated dialogue with investors and trading partners, although formal digital diplomacy policy remained underdeveloped before 2014. The study concludes that digital diplomacy has become an important, though still institutionally uneven, instrument for advancing Kenya's international trade objectives, underscoring the significance of formalising digital diplomacy governance to sustain these gains. It recommends that the Kenyan government institutionalise digital diplomacy policy and invest in the capacity of trade and diplomatic personnel.

Key terms: Digital diplomacy, economic diplomacy, foreign direct investment (FDI), international trade, strategic communication.

INTRODUCTION

Despite Kenya's active use of digital tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and video conferencing to advance its international trade agenda through the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, it remains unclear precisely how these digital diplomacy practices translate into measurable trade outcomes, and what specific gaps in Kenya's approach limit their effectiveness. Existing accounts of Kenya's digital diplomacy tend to describe the platforms used and the general benefits and challenges associated with digital engagement, such as reduced costs, expanded visibility, digital inequality, and cybersecurity risk, without clearly identifying the underlying research problem: the absence of empirical evidence on the specific mechanisms through which digital diplomacy practices shape Kenya's trade performance, and the institutional and policy gaps that constrain their impact.

Most scholarship on digital diplomacy has similarly concentrated on advanced democracies and major powers, leaving the experience of developing countries, including Kenya, comparatively under-examined (Adesina, 2017). It therefore remains inadequately understood how Kenya's digital diplomacy practices, namely strategic communication, virtual trade engagement, and stakeholder outreach, specifically contribute to market access, export promotion, and investment attraction, and what institutional weaknesses limit their sustained effectiveness. This study addressed that gap by examining the role and impact of digital diplomacy practices in promoting Kenya's international trade between 2013 and 2022.

Digital diplomacy refers to the use of internet-based platforms and digital communication tools, including social media, government websites, and virtual negotiation platforms, by state actors to conduct diplomatic engagement, shape international perceptions, and pursue foreign policy objectives (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). It is distinct from, though related to, several neighbouring concepts. Public diplomacy refers more broadly to a state's engagement with foreign publics through any medium, digital or otherwise, to build understanding and influence (Melissen, 2005); digital diplomacy is the subset of that practice conducted specifically through

digital tools. Economic diplomacy denotes the use of diplomatic channels, digital or traditional, to advance a state's commercial and investment interests; digital diplomacy contributes to economic diplomacy when digital platforms are the medium through which such interests are pursued. Tech diplomacy, a more recent and narrower development, refers to state engagement in the governance of technology standards, digital regulation, and cybersecurity (Bjola, 2024), and is therefore a specialised strand of digital diplomacy rather than a synonym for it. Nation branding refers to the deliberate management of a country's international image and reputation; digital diplomacy operationalises nation branding when it is used to project a state's economic credibility to investors and trading partners. The operational dimensions of digital diplomacy examined in this study were strategic communication and outreach, virtual trade engagement (missions, exhibitions, and negotiations), digital stakeholder engagement, and digital diplomacy governance.

Scholarship converges on several thematic mechanisms linking these practices to trade promotion. First, strategic communication through social media and government platforms is argued to reduce information asymmetries between states and foreign investors, building the trust and credibility that underpin trade partnerships (Bjola, 2015; Pamment, 2013, 2016). Second, digital diplomacy introduces a participatory, interactive model of engagement, rather than one-way messaging, that allows states to respond to market shifts, negotiate in real time, and co-construct economic narratives with foreign publics and investors (Manor, 2019). Third, digital diplomacy is argued to function as a structural equaliser for developing and peripheral states, enabling them to bypass structural disadvantages in traditional diplomacy and engage international markets, investors, and diaspora communities directly (Deciancio, 2023). Fourth, at the continental level, regional bodies such as the African Union have used digital tools to coordinate trade-related communication among member states and support frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area, AfCFTA (Manuwa, 2023). These four mechanisms, trust-building communication, interactive engagement, structural equalisation, and regional coordination, provided the conceptual basis for

examining how Kenya's digital diplomacy practices have shaped its international trade promotion between 2013 and 2022.

In Kenya, digital diplomacy has been adopted as part of wider economic policy reform aimed at boosting international trade. Through the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, Kenya has used platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and video conferencing tools to negotiate trade deals, communicate policy priorities, and promote investment opportunities abroad, while enabling Kenyan diplomats to participate in global engagements virtually and at lower operational cost. This study builds on that context to examine, through the accounts of officials directly involved in these practices, how digital diplomacy has shaped Kenya's trade promotion agenda between 2013 and 2022.

The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature and the theoretical framework underpinning the study, describes the methodology employed, presents and discusses the findings, and concludes with recommendations for strengthening Kenya's digital diplomacy practice. The study aimed to analyse digital diplomacy and its role in promoting Kenya's international trade between 2013 and 2022. Specifically, it examined the role of digital diplomacy practices in strategic communication, market access, and export promotion for international trade during the period. It also assessed the impact of digital diplomacy governance and stakeholder engagement on the promotion of Kenya's international trade between 2013 and 2022.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Diplomacy and International Trade: Global Perspectives

Scholarly work on digital diplomacy converges around a small number of theoretical contributions, discussed here thematically. Foundational accounts (Bjola, 2015; Bjola & Holmes, 2015) frame digital platforms as strategic communication ecosystems that reduce information asymmetries and allow states to craft narratives about trade opportunities, investment climates, and national branding, positioning digital diplomacy as a tool that can structure transnational economic interactions rather than merely broadcast information. Building on this, Manor (2019) characterises digital diplomacy as participatory rather

than unilateral: platforms enable governments to highlight export products, announce reforms, and respond to market developments in real time, which is significant for economic diplomacy because trade cooperation depends on responsiveness and mutual trust. Pamment (2013, 2016) links this interactivity to nation branding, arguing that digitally projected perceptions of a state's stability, competence, and openness shape investor confidence and, in turn, trade outcomes. Deciancio (2023) extends this to peripheral and developing states, arguing that digital diplomacy functions as a structural equaliser, allowing states with limited traditional influence to bypass hierarchies and communicate directly with investors and international markets, an insight of particular relevance to Kenya's position in the global economy. At the continental level, Manuwa (2023) shows that the African Union has used digital tools to coordinate trade-related communication among member states and to support the African Continental Free Trade Area, while Bjola (2024) identifies an emerging strand of tech diplomacy concerned specifically with digital trade regulation, standards, and cybersecurity negotiation.

Empirically, several developed and middle-power states illustrate how these mechanisms operate in practice, though this evidence should be read as illustrative rather than exhaustive. The United States' 21st Century Statecraft initiative and the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office digital diplomacy units have used social media platforms to facilitate trade missions and communicate investment opportunities directly to foreign publics (Cull, 2019; Department of State, 2007). India's Ministry of External Affairs has used its digital presence to manage diaspora engagement and promote trade and investment objectives (Agathangelos Stavropoulos, 2019), while South Korea has connected its embassies digitally with export promotion agencies to facilitate real-time engagement with trade partners (Azad, 2023). Comparing these cases suggests convergence on the use of digital platforms for investor-facing communication and diaspora engagement, but also divergence in institutional maturity: the American and British cases reflect long-standing, staffed digital diplomacy units, whereas the Indian and South Korean cases reflect more targeted, sector-specific digital engagement.

This divergence suggests that the trade impact of digital diplomacy may depend as much on institutional capacity as on platform adoption itself, a factor the existing literature has rarely examined as a moderating influence.

Despite this body of work, most empirical and theoretical attention has concentrated on advanced democracies and major or middle powers. Comparatively little empirical research has directly examined how African states convert digital diplomatic engagement into measurable trade outcomes, and the available African-focused literature is more descriptive than comparative or critical, limiting understanding of which specific digital diplomacy practices are most consequential for trade promotion in resource-constrained settings such as Kenya's.

Digital Diplomacy in the African Context

Within Africa, the empirical record is more limited but growing. In Kenya, the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs used digital platforms between 2013 and 2022 to run virtual trade missions, online investment forums, and a diaspora web portal explicitly aimed at facilitating trade and investment engagement, aligned with the country's foreign policy objective of strengthening trade and investment ties (Onyango, 2022; Mwashighadi, 2023). Mwashighadi (2023) provides evidence that these digital channels were used specifically to correct misconceptions among investors and to position Kenya as a regional trade hub, linking the practice directly to trade bargaining outcomes. In South Africa, digital diplomatic engagement has been documented as a channel through which government agencies communicated with investors and trade partners as part of broader FDI-attraction efforts, though the evidence linking specific digital diplomatic messaging, as distinct from South Africa's wider digital economy investment, to trade outcomes remains limited (Mutisya et al., 2024). In Nigeria, digital diplomacy has been used to coordinate and communicate the country's alignment with regional trade frameworks, including harmonisation of digital regulation under the AfCFTA, which Kouty (2024) links to strengthened capacity for cross-border digital trade facilitation and investment attraction. In Rwanda, President Paul Kagame's prominent digital diplomatic presence has

been documented as a channel for initiating and publicising cross-border trade and technology-transfer initiatives, contributing to regional integration and digital trade inclusion (Cohen & McIntyre, 2021).

Comparing these four cases highlights both convergence and divergence relevant to this study. All four illustrate digital diplomacy being used to communicate trade-related messaging directly to investors, diaspora communities, and regional partners, supporting the theoretical claim that digital diplomacy functions as a structural equaliser for developing states (Deciancio, 2023). However, the depth of evidence varies: the Kenyan and Rwandan cases offer clearer documentation of the link between specific digital diplomatic practices and trade outcomes, whereas the Nigerian and South African cases are documented mainly at the level of policy alignment rather than demonstrated trade impact. This divergence is itself a gap in the literature: existing African-focused studies have more often described the presence of digital diplomacy activity than critically evaluated its contribution to trade outcomes relative to other factors, such as trade infrastructure or macroeconomic conditions.

Research Gap

Taken together, the literature reviewed above demonstrates three specific gaps that this study addressed. First, while the theoretical literature (Bjola, 2015; Manor, 2019; Pamment, 2013, 2016; Deciancio, 2023) has articulated plausible mechanisms linking digital diplomacy to trade outcomes, namely trust-building, responsiveness, and structural equalisation, these mechanisms have rarely been empirically examined against the lived accounts of the officials who implement digital diplomacy in a developing-country context. Second, the African-focused empirical literature (Onyango, 2022; Mwashighadi, 2023; Kouty, 2024; Cohen & McIntyre, 2021) has documented the existence of digital diplomatic activity in Kenya and comparable states but has not systematically examined the institutional and governance conditions, such as the presence or absence of a formal digital diplomacy policy, that shape whether such activity translates into trade outcomes. Third, no identified study has examined Kenya's digital diplomacy practice specifically through the perspective and lived experience of the officials

responsible for its implementation across the full 2013 to 2022 period, during which Kenya's approach shifted from ad hoc, individually led engagement toward more institutionalised governance. This study addressed these gaps by examining, through key informant accounts, the role and impact of digital diplomacy practices in promoting Kenya's international trade between 2013 and 2022.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Social Responsibility Theory (SRT) as its guiding theoretical framework. SRT originated in media and press studies, first articulated by the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947), which argued that communicative freedom must be accompanied by a duty to serve the public good, provide balanced information, and give voice to diverse perspectives (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). The theory has since been extended beyond the press to communication studies more broadly, where it is used to examine the ethical obligations of communicators, including states, toward the publics they engage (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019).

The choice of SRT over liberal international relations theory, which more conventionally underpins studies of economic cooperation and interdependence, was deliberate. Liberal theory explains why states cooperate and pursue mutually beneficial economic exchange but is less well equipped to explain how the manner in which a state communicates digitally, its transparency, inclusivity, and accountability toward foreign publics, investors, and diasporas, itself shapes trade outcomes. Lee and Ayhan (2015) similarly observe that the liberal tradition tends to overlook the role that non-state actors, including digital publics, play in shaping diplomatic and economic discourse. SRT was therefore judged more appropriate to this study's specific focus on how the character of Kenya's digital communication practices, rather than the general fact of cooperation, has affected trade promotion.

Applied to this study, SRT links to international trade outcomes through three specific pathways. First, SRT holds that responsible communication reduces misinformation and manages asymmetries of power between communicators and audiences; applied to

digital diplomacy, this suggests that transparent, accurate digital messaging by Kenyan diplomatic missions reduces information asymmetries for foreign investors, thereby lowering the perceived risk of engaging with Kenya as a trade partner. Second, SRT's emphasis on inclusivity and voice for diverse perspectives implies that digital diplomacy, which engages a broad range of stakeholders- government, private sector, civil society, and international partners- builds the mutual trust that underpins sustained trade negotiation rather than one-off transactions. Third, SRT's emphasis on accountability implies that the institutionalisation of digital diplomacy governance, as opposed to ad hoc, individually driven practice, signals a state's reliability as a trade partner over time. These three pathways- transparency and reduced information asymmetry, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and institutional accountability- provided the analytical lens through which this study interpreted the relationship between Kenya's digital diplomacy practices and its international trade promotion outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodological approach adopted for the study, structured to ensure coherence between the study's objectives, the analysis of digital diplomacy and its role in promoting Kenya's international trade, and the research design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and analytical approach described below. Each methodological component was selected specifically to enable the researcher to access the lived experience and institutional accounts of officials directly engaged in Kenya's digital diplomacy practice.

This study employed a phenomenological research design, a qualitative inquiry approach suited to exploring the lived experiences and meanings that individuals attach to a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was considered appropriate, rather than an exploratory case study design, because the study's central interest was not primarily institutional (which would favour treating Kenya's digital diplomacy apparatus as a bounded organisational case), but rather the meaning that officials directly engaged in digital diplomacy attach to their own practice: how they understand, enact, and interpret the role of digital tools in advancing Kenya's trade

objectives. A case study design would have been well suited to examining Kenya's digital diplomacy as an institutional system bounded in time and place; phenomenology was instead selected to surface the interpretive, experiential dimension of digital diplomacy practice as recounted by the officials who carry it out, consistent with the study's objectives, which centre on the role of digital diplomacy as understood and enacted by its practitioners.

A qualitative approach more broadly was preferred because it enabled the researcher to capture behaviours, perceptions, and trends that cannot be adequately explained through purely quantitative measurement. Rather than focusing on numerical measurement, the approach sought to understand the why and how behind actions, policies, and strategies, which was considered appropriate for examining the complex interactions between diplomacy, technology, and trade.

The target population for this study consisted of key personnel directly involved in Kenya's digital diplomacy and international trade promotion ecosystem. This included officials from the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry (MITI), with particular emphasis on staff working within the diplomacy, trade, and investment departments. Representatives from agencies mandated to facilitate trade and investment, including the Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KNCCI), KenTrade, and KenInvest, were also part of the study population. The target was officers occupying strategic, managerial, and technical roles whose responsibilities intersect with digital diplomacy, including communication officers, IT specialists, principal information officers, directors, consuls general, and directors of international trade, foreign investment promotion, and ICT.

This study employed key informant interviews (KIIs) with a purposive sample of 30 participants. The sample size followed qualitative research standards, which emphasise reaching data saturation rather than adhering to fixed numerical thresholds. Guest et al. (2006) demonstrate that saturation often occurs within the first 12 interviews, with basic themes consistently emerging thereafter. Similarly, Hennink et

al. (2017) distinguish between code saturation and meaning saturation, showing that deeper insights typically require 20 to 30 interviews. Vasileiou et al. (2018) further argue that the sufficiency of qualitative samples should be justified based on the study's purpose, heterogeneity, and depth of analysis rather than statistical representativeness.

Given the specialised nature of the study, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that participants represented the main empirical sites most relevant to Kenya's practice of digital diplomacy in trade promotion. A purposive approach enables the selection of information-rich cases, providing in-depth insight into the phenomenon of harnessing digital diplomacy for international trade promotion (Englander, 2010).

To complement this purposive approach, the study employed a snowball sampling technique. Initial participants, holding senior roles such as communication officers, directors, consuls, and trade representatives, were asked to recommend colleagues within their institutions and networks who possessed relevant experience in digital diplomacy or trade promotion.

The primary data collection used a semi-structured key informant interview guide designed to facilitate in-depth KIIs with selected participants. The semi-structured format was chosen because it provided a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe emerging insights. The guide consisted of open-ended questions clustered around key thematic areas.

This approach enabled participants to narrate their experiences, highlight institutional practices, and reflect critically on digital diplomacy, while allowing the researcher to follow up on issues relevant to each respondent's role. The tool was pre-tested with a small group of professionals from MITI to refine its clarity, flow, and relevance before full deployment.

Data collection was conducted exclusively through KIIs with purposively and snowball-sampled participants drawn from the main empirical sites: MFA, MITI, KNCCI, KenTrade, and KenInvest. Interviews were scheduled in advance with participants, taking

into account their availability and work commitments. Each key informant interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, conducted either face-to-face at institutional offices in Nairobi or via secure online platforms, depending on the participant's preference and logistical considerations. Before the interviews, participants received an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study and their rights, and the researcher obtained their informed consent.

All interview transcripts were stored as Word documents in a password-protected folder accessible only to the researcher. The researcher anonymised each transcript by assigning unique codes to participants (e.g., KII01, KII02) to protect identities. Data analysis followed a thematic approach supported by NVivo 12 software.

In qualitative research, validity and reliability were addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To ensure rigour, several strategies were employed.

Credibility was enhanced through triangulation between data sources, including KIIs and secondary analysis of ministries' digital platforms, allowing cross-validation of findings so that themes reflected multiple perspectives rather than a single account. Prolonged engagement with the interview data through iterative reading, coding, and re-coding further strengthened the accuracy of interpretation. Member checking was also conducted, whereby preliminary findings were shared with selected key informants to verify that interpretations aligned with their perspectives.

Dependability was established by maintaining a transparent and systematic research process. An audit trail documented sampling decisions, interview guides, transcription processes, coding frameworks, and the development of themes, enabling others to trace the analytic process.

Ethical integrity was central to this study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Kenyatta University approved the study, and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) granted a research permit. Before data collection, participants received detailed information

sheets outlining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. We obtained written informed consent before each interview.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Role of Digital Diplomacy in Promoting Kenya's International Trade

This section presents findings on the role of digital diplomacy in promoting Kenya's international trade, organised around the study's two specific objectives. Findings addressing the first specific objective, which examined strategic communication, market access, and export promotion, are presented first, followed by findings addressing the second specific objective, which assessed digital diplomacy governance and stakeholder engagement. The thematic analysis identified five key themes: strategic communication and outreach, market access, export promotion, digital diplomacy policy and governance, and stakeholder engagement and inclusivity.

Strategic Communication Role and Function of Digital Outreach

Strategic communication emerged as a cornerstone of participants' accounts of Kenya's digital diplomacy. Participants described leveraging social media platforms, official websites, newsletters, and digital campaigns to create structured channels for disseminating information on trade policies, investment opportunities, and Kenya's broader economic strengths. Participant KII15 described this as a deliberate, hands-on process:

I had laid the groundwork; I used to write the releases, I had a lot of input into the messaging and crafting to make sure proper messaging and information were broadcast, and there was no misinformation. I was across the strategic messaging and communication of the State House Twitter diplomacy (KII15, 15th June 2024).

Participant KII23 similarly referenced the Kenya–United States trade negotiations as an example where

digital diplomacy provided a channel for information sharing:

Digital diplomacy allowed Kenya and the United States to disseminate information, provide updates on negotiation progress, and solicit feedback from stakeholders. Virtual town hall meetings, webinars, and online consultations facilitated direct engagement, ensuring transparency and inclusivity (KII23, 17th June 2024).

Several participants noted that outcomes were uneven: some observed that declining FDI over the review period suggested that virtual trade missions, exhibitions, and webinars had not yet translated consistently into direct engagement with foreign governments, investors, and business leaders in every market.

These findings suggest that intentional, planned messaging supported trust and credibility in Kenya's trade communication, consistent with scholarship arguing that crafting compelling narratives aligned with audience expectations is important for shaping trade-related perceptions (Zeng, 2023). Interpreted through Social Responsibility Theory, participants' emphasis on accuracy and avoiding misinformation reflects the theory's expectation that communicators serve the public good through transparent, purposeful messaging (Bates, 2018), which participants associated with building investor confidence. However, because participants' observation of a link between declining FDI and uneven engagement rests on their own perception rather than independently collected trade or investment data, it should be read as participants' perceived association rather than demonstrated causal impact.

Market Access

Market access refers to Kenyan businesses' ability to enter and operate in foreign markets. Participants reported that digital diplomacy expanded this access by leveraging virtual platforms to showcase products and services, connect exporters with international buyers, and highlight investment opportunities. Participant KII12 explained:

Through online platforms and virtual exhibitions, Kenyan businesses can connect with potential partners and investors without the need for physical presence, overcoming traditional trade barriers (KII12, 23rd October 2024).

Participants described virtual trade forums between Kenya and China in 2020 as having facilitated export opportunities in agriculture, technology, and manufacturing. Most participants identified three benefits in particular: increased frequency and scope of trade interactions; greater transparency and efficiency in trade engagements; and expanded participation of SMEs and women-led enterprises, illustrated below:

Digital diplomacy has opened doors for Kenyan exporters who would otherwise never afford to travel abroad for trade fairs. Now, even small firms can showcase their products to global buyers in real time (KII07, 19th April 2024).

By leveraging virtual platforms, we can market Kenya's opportunities directly to investors and cut down on costs and bureaucracy associated with physical trade missions (KII15, 15th June 2024).

These accounts are consistent with literature suggesting that digital diplomacy reshapes market access by reducing asymmetries between large corporations and smaller businesses (Mendoza-Moheno, 2021) and by facilitating exporters' integration into global value chains (Kouty, 2024). Read through Social Responsibility Theory, participants' descriptions of digital platforms lowering entry costs for SMEs align with the theory's emphasis on equitable access and accountability to citizens and businesses, rather than solely representing state interests.

As with the preceding theme, these are participants' own assessments of market-access benefits; the study did not independently verify export volumes or transaction data linked to specific virtual trade forums, and this should be borne in mind when interpreting

the reported association between digital diplomacy and market-access outcomes.

Export Promotion

Export promotion emerged as a central function in participants' accounts of Kenya's digital diplomacy. Participants described government-led digital platforms, online trade platforms, virtual exhibitions, market intelligence services, and knowledge-sharing webinars as creating opportunities for exporters to engage buyers and investors across borders. Participant KII25 referenced the Kenya–US trade negotiations:

Virtual platforms facilitated direct engagement with stakeholders, provided information updates, and allowed real-time feedback to shape trade outcomes. Messaging focused on market access, job creation, and economic growth from improved trade relations (KII25, 16th May 2024).

Participants noted that virtual trade missions had, in their view, expanded the reach of SMEs by reducing the costs associated with physical participation in international trade fairs.

These accounts resonate with scholarship suggesting that digital platforms can enhance the visibility, credibility, and competitiveness of African exporters in global value chains (Adesina, 2024), and that digital knowledge-sharing forums can build the export readiness of SMEs (Soriano & Valdés, 2021). Through the lens of Social Responsibility Theory, participants framed government-facilitated digital export promotion as a form of institutional accountability, supporting equitable market opportunities for SMEs alongside larger exporters. As with the previous two themes, these findings reflect participants' own interpretation of export-promotion outcomes rather than independently verified export performance data.

Digital Diplomacy Policy and Governance

Governance emerged as a critical theme shaping how digital platforms were used for trade promotion. Participants described standardised digital diplomacy strategy as largely absent before 2014, with

engagement instead driven by individual initiative. Participant KII11 explained:

There was no digital strategy... everything depends on individual initiative. The Ministry provides guidelines on agenda and priorities and assists in messaging creation (KII11, 25th May 2024).

Participant KII07 similarly described early efforts as relying on improvised structures:

To ensure the message was clear and strategically crafted, the pioneer team assigned individuals to disseminate information via the State House Twitter account. There was no formal policy framework except the one created after 2013 (KII07, 19th April 2024).

Participants noted that a subsequent digital department within the Ministry had since provided more structured oversight of messaging (KII24, 17th March 2024).

Participants' accounts are consistent with literature emphasising that effective governance structures underpin the credibility, coherence, and sustainability of digital diplomacy (Cull, 2013), and that ministries without formalised strategy risk fragmented messaging (Rhodes, 1996). Interpreted through Social Responsibility Theory, the shift participants described, from ad hoc, individually driven engagement toward institutionalised oversight, reflects the theory's expectation that states exercise communicative power in an accountable and transparent manner. Participants themselves linked this institutionalisation to improved message consistency, though the study's design does not allow the extent of any resulting improvement in trade outcomes to be quantified.

Stakeholder Engagement and Inclusivity

Participants described digital diplomacy as enabling the involvement of a wide range of actors, government agencies, private sector representatives, civil society organisations, and international partners, in shaping trade initiatives. Participant KII25 stated:

Virtual town hall meetings, webinars, and online consultations facilitated direct engagement between negotiators and the public, ensuring transparency and inclusivity in decision-making (KII25, 16th May 2024).

Participants reported that digital tools created avenues for previously excluded voices to participate in shaping trade policy and negotiations, supporting knowledge sharing and cross-sector trust.

These accounts align with the principles of Social Responsibility Theory, which emphasises institutional accountability to the public and the value of transparent, inclusive communication in governance. Participants associated this inclusive digital engagement with strengthened bilateral and multilateral trade relationships; however, consistent with the qualification noted throughout this section, this reflects participants' own assessment of the relationship between inclusive digital engagement and trade outcomes rather than an independently measured effect.

Summary of Findings

Across all five themes, participants described digital diplomacy as having contributed meaningfully to Kenya's international trade promotion between 2013 and 2022 by strengthening strategic communication, expanding market access, supporting export promotion, and enabling more accountable governance and stakeholder engagement. Consistent with the discussion above, these accounts should be understood as participants' own perceptions of digital diplomacy's contribution to trade outcomes, interpreted through the pathways set out in Social

Responsibility Theory, rather than as independently verified measures of trade performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Digital platforms were described by participants as playing an important role in amplifying Kenya's trade messaging and engaging global audiences. Initiatives such as virtual trade missions, webinars, online exhibitions, and e-newsletters allowed Kenyan diplomats to communicate trade policies, investment opportunities, and economic strengths directly to foreign counterparts, investors, and the diaspora. Participant narratives highlighted how these platforms overcame geographical barriers, enabled real-time stakeholder engagement, and fostered inclusivity. For example, virtual forums with the United States were described as having facilitated direct consultations on bilateral trade priorities, the collection of feedback, and the transparent dissemination of policy updates. In essence, participants associated digital diplomacy with enhanced global visibility, credibility, and capacity to showcase trade potential, supporting Kenya's international trade promotion agenda while adhering to the ethical and participatory principles emphasised in Social Responsibility Theory.

Recommendations: The Kenyan government should institutionalise and enhance strategic communication frameworks and governance structures to ensure sustained, coherent, and accountable digital diplomacy efforts. This entails formalising comprehensive digital diplomacy policies that guide messaging, outreach, and engagement across all trade-related platforms, while investing in capacity building for diplomats and trade officials on emerging digital tools and cybersecurity.

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