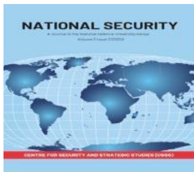

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The Strategy–Practice Gap in African Digital Diplomacy: Rwanda's Model and its Lessons for Africa

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Abstract

Digital diplomacy has become an increasingly vital aspect of African statecraft, yet research often attributes it more to visible platforms than to the institutional conditions that enhance their effectiveness. This article introduces the concept of the strategy–practice gap to explain why ambitious digital diplomacy strategies do not always lead to equally effective diplomatic outcomes. The gap is defined as the disconnect between high-level digital diplomatic goals and the organizational capacity needed to implement them routinely. The argument is that this gap is primarily a matter of institutional mediation rather than just technological access. To support this, the study combines public diplomacy theory, which examines strategic communication and national image, with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which analyses organizational adoption, skills, and enabling conditions at the micro level. Empirically, the article presents a mixed-methods case study of Rwanda, including survey data from 186 respondents across three institutional levels—Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters (n = 16), diplomatic missions abroad (n = 30), and diaspora members (n = 140)—along with policy documents and international datasets. Results indicate Rwanda's relative success stems from presidential strategic coherence, data-driven governance, active cyber diplomacy, service-focused digital state capacity, and multilateral norm promotion. However, the study also highlights a persistent strategy–practice gap: although 93.88% of headquarters respondents report strong strategic alignment, the same percentage cite staff expertise shortages as the main implementation barrier, with digital skills falling behind infrastructure development. This research contributes to the underexplored link between digital diplomacy and African international relations, demonstrating that the longevity of digital diplomacy depends more on institutional capacity to translate strategy into practice than simply the existence of digital platforms.

Keywords: *mental health, national security, digital diplomacy, institutional capacity, strategy–practice gap*

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Introduction

Digital diplomacy has moved from the margins of foreign policy to the centre of contemporary statecraft. Ministries of foreign affairs now use digital platforms not only to communicate policy positions, but also to engage diasporas, manage crises, project national image, circulate development narratives, and participate in emerging governance debates in areas such as cybersecurity and data governance (Manor, 2019). Yet the spread of digital tools has not produced equal diplomatic capacity across states. In Africa, digital diplomacy is expanding within a landscape marked by rapid technological change, uneven connectivity, affordability constraints, and major variation in bureaucratic capability (African Union, 2020; Adesina, 2022). This unevenness raises a central analytical question: why do states that articulate ambitious digital visions often struggle to translate those visions into sustained diplomatic practice?

This article answers that question by advancing the concept of the strategy–practice gap. The concept refers to the distance between the strategic ambition embedded in official digital diplomacy agendas and the institutional, organisational, and human capacities required to enact those agendas in routine diplomatic work. Existing scholarship has generated valuable insights into digital platforms, public diplomacy, online engagement, and cyber governance, but much of it still examines visible digital activity without sufficiently theorising the institutional conditions that make such activity durable, credible, and effective (Adesina, 2017; Endong, 2020; Hedling & Bremberg, 2021). Put differently, the literature has paid more attention to the presence of digital diplomacy than to the organisational conditions that determine whether it works.

Rwanda offers an especially useful case for examining this problem. As a small, post-conflict, landlocked state, Rwanda has built an unusually centralised and intentional model of digital transformation that extends across governance, service delivery, cybersecurity, and foreign affairs (Oakes, 2015; Oakes, 2025). The country has positioned itself as a visible actor in continental digital governance through initiatives such as the Smart Africa Alliance, while also investing in cyber resilience, platform-based public service delivery, and national branding. At the same time, Rwanda's experience reveals a more complex reality than celebratory accounts of digital success suggest. Strong strategic vision coexists with skill shortages, operational fragility, and incomplete movement from one-way communication to dialogic digital engagement. The article therefore, treats Rwanda not as a model to be copied mechanically, but as a critical case through which to conceptualise the institutional conditions under which digital diplomacy can succeed in Africa. It asks five interrelated questions: What elements of Rwanda's governance architecture support digital diplomacy? How does data-driven governance shape diplomatic credibility? What role do multilateral partnerships play in building digital reach and resilience? How do digital public services generate diplomatic value, especially in diaspora engagement? And what limits the transferability of Rwanda's experience to other African settings?

The core claim is that digital diplomacy's success in Africa relies less on technology availability than on the capacity of institutions to mediate its use. This means that state agencies need to align strategy, coordination, skills, infrastructure, security, and responsiveness to turn digital goals into ongoing diplomatic activities. To support this view, the article merges public diplomacy theory with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Public diplomacy theory explains how countries aim for visibility, credibility, and influence globally (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2020), whereas UTAUT clarifies the

organizational and individual factors influencing effective use of digital systems (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Combining these theories helps explain both the aims of digital diplomacy and why its implementation often encounters difficulties.

The article proceeds in seven sections. The next section develops the concept of the strategy–practice gap and presents the integrated analytical framework. It is followed by a discussion of methodology, a brief account of the broader African digital diplomacy context, an analysis of Rwanda's case, a discussion of the article's theoretical and policy implications for Africa, and a concluding section that sets out a comparative research agenda.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The article's key idea is to view digital diplomacy not just as a collection of tools but as an institutional process. This shift is significant because digital diplomacy often gets reduced to visible markers like official websites, social media activity, or platform presence. While these indicators matter, they don't necessarily reveal if digital diplomacy is strategically coherent, organizationally integrated, or capable of creating lasting diplomatic value. For example, a ministry might be highly active online yet still lack responsiveness, interdepartmental coordination, or the ability to defend itself in contested information environments. To address this, the article introduces the concept of the strategy–practice gap, which describes the disconnect between strategic intentions—such as digital transformation agendas, foreign policy documents, branding projects, or cyber strategies—and the actual capacity of diplomatic institutions to implement those intentions daily. This gap appears when a country has a digital narrative, leadership backing, or policy goals but lacks the necessary human resources, routines, cross-unit coordination, and adaptive capacity to execute those goals effectively. Hence, the strategy–practice gap signifies a failure in institutional translation, not just a failure of ambition.

Conceptualising the issue in these terms makes three contributions. First, it shifts explanation away from technological determinism. Digital diplomacy does not succeed because platforms exist; it succeeds when institutions know how to govern, staff, secure, and integrate those platforms into diplomatic practice. Second, it helps explain why outwardly successful digital states may still face significant internal fragilities. Third, it provides a basis for comparison across African states by identifying a common analytical problem—how strategy is mediated into practice under conditions of uneven capacity, connectivity, and bureaucratic development. The concept is especially useful in Africa, where digital diplomacy is unfolding in contexts marked by major infrastructural and regulatory variation. The continent has witnessed rapid expansion of mobile connectivity, broader uptake of digital governance agendas, and growing engagement with cyber policy and digital public diplomacy (African Union, 2020; Adesina, 2024; Turianskyi & Wekesa, 2021). Yet these advances coexist with persistent digital divides, uneven ICT regulatory maturity, affordability barriers, and differences in bureaucratic capability (GSMA, 2024; GSMA, 2025; ITU, 2025). The implication is that digital diplomacy cannot be understood through technological access alone; it must be studied as a problem of institutional design and capacity.

Public Diplomacy, UTAUT, and Institutional Mediation

To explain the strategy–practice gap, the article combines public diplomacy theory with UTAUT. Public diplomacy theory offers the macro-level lens. It helps explain how states use

communication, branding, dialogue, and representation to shape perceptions among foreign publics and to generate attraction, credibility, and influence (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004; Pamment, 2020). Within this perspective, digital diplomacy becomes an extension of public diplomacy into digitally mediated environments. It concerns narrative projection, image management, engagement with foreign audiences, and positioning within international debates on issues such as cyber governance. UTAUT provides the micro-level lens. Rather than asking what states want to communicate, it asks what conditions enable actors within organisations to adopt and use digital tools effectively. In UTAUT, adoption depends on factors such as performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). For diplomacy, these factors become analytically useful because they illuminate why the presence of digital platforms does not automatically lead to successful use. Staff may not have the requisite skills; leadership signals may be strong but training weak; infrastructure may be present while workflows remain underdeveloped.

The value of combining these frameworks lies in their complementarity. Public diplomacy explains the strategic logic of digital outreach, while UTAUT explains the organisational conditions under which such outreach can be enacted. The intersection between the two is institutional mediation capacity. This is the article's key analytical bridge: states pursue digital diplomacy for public diplomacy reasons, but whether they can sustain it depends on UTAUT-type organisational conditions. The strategy–practice gap therefore opens precisely where macro-level strategic ambition is not matched by micro-level organisational capability.

From this synthesis, the article identifies five analytical dimensions that connect strategy to practice: strategic communication and narrative projection; institutional governance and policy coherence; digital infrastructure and connectivity; cybersecurity and information resilience; and multilateral and regional integration. These dimensions do not operate as isolated variables. Rather, they form an interdependent chain through which strategy is translated or fails to be translated into action. Strategic communication requires coordination; coordination depends on organisational clarity; digital engagement depends on infrastructure and skills; cyber credibility depends on both technical systems and governance; multilateral influence depends on domestic implementation that makes external claims believable.

From Strategy to Practice: The Conceptual Model

Table 1 maps these five dimensions onto the two theoretical lenses. Public diplomacy theory is strongest in explaining the outward-facing political purposes of digital diplomacy, especially in relation to branding, audience engagement, and multilateral positioning. UTAUT is strongest in explaining why these goals may or may not be realised organisationally. Institutional governance and policy coherence sit at the centre of the framework because they connect strategic vision to actual implementation. In other words, governance is the bridge through which the state's foreign policy ambition meets the internal conditions of adoption.

Figure 1 translates this framework into a simple conceptual model. It shows that digital diplomacy outcomes do not flow directly from digital strategy. Instead, strategic intent passes through an institutional mediation layer composed of governance coherence, staff capability, infrastructure, cybersecurity, and coordination mechanisms. Where this layer is strong, digital diplomacy is more likely to produce visibility, credibility, responsiveness, and diplomatic influence. Where it is weak, a strategy–practice gap emerges, producing symbolic digital presence without fully institutionalised capability.

Table 1

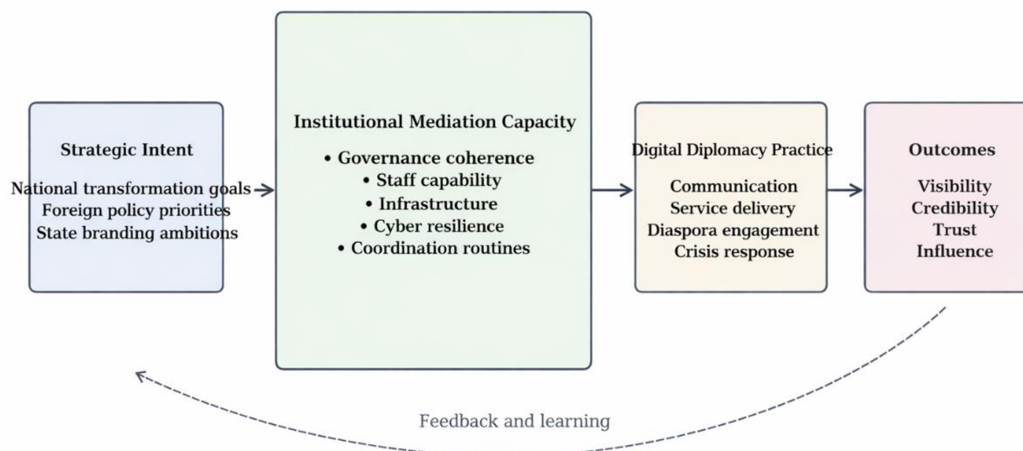
Mapping analytical dimensions onto the article's theoretical lenses

Analytical dimension	Public diplomacy (macro-level)	UTAUT (micro-level)
Strategic communication and narrative projection	National image-building, branding, messaging, and foreign-public engagement	Shapes performance expectations and social influence around adoption
Institutional governance and policy coherence	Strategic coordination across ministries and coherent diplomatic signalling	Leadership support, organisational routines, and facilitating conditions
Digital infrastructure and connectivity	Signals state commitment to digital modernisation and diplomatic reach	Material conditions for adoption
Cybersecurity and information resilience	Credibility in cyber governance and protection of national narrative space	Trust, usability, & risk conditions affecting digital adoption
Multilateral and regional integration	Participation in digital governance forums and norm entrepreneurship	Access to resources, knowledge, partnerships, and learning effects

Source: Author (2026)

The framework leads to the following expectation: Rwanda's digital diplomacy should appear strongest where strategic coherence is high and where institutional mediation capacity is sufficiently developed to sustain implementation. Conversely, the model predicts that weaknesses in staff skills, workflow redundancy, or dialogic engagement will persist even where overall strategic vision is strong. This expectation structures the empirical analysis that follows.

Figure 1.
Conceptual Model of the Strategy–Practice Gap in Digital Diplomacy



Source: Author (2026)

Methodology

This study uses a convergent mixed-methods design that combines quantitative survey evidence, qualitative insights, and documentary analysis to examine how Rwanda's digital diplomacy strategy is translated into practice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2014). A single-case instrumental design was selected because Rwanda is both analytically significant and substantively unusual: it is a small African state that has built a visible digital governance profile, linked digital transformation to state reconstruction, and positioned itself as a continental actor in digital policy debates (Oakes, 2015; Teleanu & Kurbalija, 2022). Primary data were drawn from 186 respondents across three institutional strata: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation headquarters (n = 16), Rwandan diplomatic missions abroad (n = 30), and members of the Rwandan diaspora (n = 140). This design makes it possible to compare strategic views from the centre, operational views from missions, and experiential assessments from citizens engaging the state from abroad.

Quantitative evidence came from structured questionnaires using Likert-scale and categorical items focused on digital tools, coordination, skills, service delivery, and perceived diplomatic outcomes. Qualitative material came from semi-structured interview responses and open-ended survey items with foreign policy officials, mission staff, and digital practitioners. These qualitative data were used to clarify how digital diplomacy is organised and where respondents perceive the main implementation bottlenecks. Missions were selected through maximum variation logic based on geographic spread, digital engagement intensity, and the technological environment of the host country (Patton, 2002). The documentary corpus included the Smart Rwanda Master Plan, the ICT Sector Strategic Plan 2024–2029, the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2024–2029, and publicly available reports from RURA, the ITU, GSMA, and related international organisations (Ministry of Youth and ICT, 2015; Ministry of ICT and Innovation, 2024; National Cyber Security Authority, 2024; RURA, 2024; ITU, 2024a; ITU, 2024b; ITU, 2025). These sources were used not as substitutes for primary evidence, but as contextual and triangulating material.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, quantitative responses were summarised descriptively in order to identify patterns across headquarters, missions, and diaspora

respondents. Second, qualitative materials were coded thematically using categories derived from the conceptual framework: strategic communication, governance, infrastructure, cybersecurity, multilateral engagement, and citizen responsiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, cross-stratum comparison was used to assess whether strategic narratives from headquarters were reflected in mission-level practice and in the experiences of diaspora users (Denzin, 1978). This triangulation is important because a core purpose of the article is to identify where official digital diplomacy narratives diverge from operational realities and user experiences.

Analysis of Findings

The study has three important strengths. It links institutional and citizen-facing perspectives in one design; it combines strategic, operational, and experiential evidence; and it enables conceptual refinement by identifying where the strategy–practice gap becomes visible empirically. At the same time, as a single-country case, its purpose is analytical depth rather than statistical generalisation. Rwanda is therefore used to clarify mechanisms and generate transferable propositions, not to claim uniformity across African states.

African Digital Diplomacy and the Problem of Uneven Capacity

Any assessment of Rwanda's digital diplomacy must be located within the broader African digital environment. Across the continent, digital diplomacy is expanding under structurally uneven conditions. ITU data indicate that in 2024 only 38 per cent of Africa's population was online, far below the global average, while mobile broadband coverage remains significantly more extensive than meaningful, affordable use (ITU, 2025). GSMA reports further show that affordability remains a major barrier and that rural populations continue to experience disproportionate exclusion from high-quality digital access (GSMA, 2024; GSMA, 2025). These conditions matter because they shape the actual reach of digital diplomacy: a digital campaign cannot engage audiences who remain offline, poorly connected, or priced out of data-intensive participation.

African digital diplomacy is therefore marked by a dual movement. On one side, states and regional organisations are increasingly investing in digital public diplomacy, cyber governance, and online service delivery. Countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and several North African states are often identified as leading or emerging actors in this field, while organisations such as COMESA and the African Union are gradually integrating digital tools into regional governance agendas (Adesina, 2024; Birhan et al., 2024; Siteki, 2025). On the other side, these advances remain constrained by uneven regulatory maturity, institutional weakness, and infrastructural dependence. By 2025, only a minority of African states had developed highly mature ICT regulatory environments, and cyber governance capacity remained unevenly distributed across the continent (ITU, 2025; Ifeanyi-Ajufo, 2023).

This context matters directly for the article's argument. The strategy–practice gap is not only an organisational problem inside individual ministries; it is also conditioned by wider national and continental digital inequalities. States that possess stronger infrastructure, more coherent digital governance, and more stable leadership commitment are better positioned to reduce the gap between digital aspiration and diplomatic execution. Rwanda's case is therefore instructive precisely because it appears to have narrowed that gap more effectively than many peers, while still leaving important weaknesses unresolved. Rwanda's relevance also lies in the fact that it

has used digital transformation not simply as a technical agenda but as a state-building, branding, and governance project. Narratives such as "Visit Rwanda" and Rwanda's broader reputation as a digitally ambitious state have given the country an outsized presence in digital governance discussions relative to its size (Manor, 2016; Oakes, 2025). Yet this visibility should not be confused with universal transferability. The very conditions that support Rwanda's relative success—centralised governance, sustained executive backing, and cumulative investment in infrastructure and cyber institutions—are not evenly available across African states. That makes Rwanda a revealing but bounded case.

Historical Foundations of Rwanda's Digital State Project

Rwanda's digital diplomacy cannot be separated from the broader historical project of post-genocide reconstruction and state re-legitimation. Since the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, successive governments have treated ICT as a strategic instrument of reconstruction, modernisation, and international re-engagement (Oakes, 2015; Oakes, 2025). This orientation became institutionalised through the National Information and Communication Infrastructure plans, the Smart Rwanda Master Plan, and the current ICT Sector Strategic Plan 2024–2029, all of which frame digital transformation as an integrated state priority rather than as a narrow sectoral issue (Ministry of Youth and ICT, 2015; Ministry of ICT and Innovation, 2024). What matters for digital diplomacy is that Rwanda's foreign-facing digital posture is anchored in this wider domestic project. The state's investment in connectivity, service delivery, innovation branding, and cyber governance gives diplomatic activity a stronger domestic base than is often available in comparable settings. Internet penetration remains incomplete and uneven, but the strategic thrust is unmistakable. Rwanda has invested heavily in tower coverage, public digital systems, and 5G rollout, while also seeking to align digital development with national transformation objectives (Ashiru, 2025; RURA, 2024). In conceptual terms, this historical layering matters because it means that digital diplomacy is not an isolated ministry initiative; it is an extension of a broader state-led digital modernisation project.

Governance Architecture: From Formal Policy to Agile Coordination

The data show that Rwanda's digital diplomacy is organised through a hybrid governance architecture that combines formal institutional design with agile informal coordination. At headquarters, 68.8 per cent of respondents reported the existence of formal digital diplomacy guidelines, while the mean rating for policy clarity was 3.31 on a five-point scale. This indicates that a policy framework exists, but that internal dissemination and interpretive consistency remain uneven. At mission level, by contrast, policy clarity was rated substantially higher, with a mean of 4.20, and 76.7 per cent of respondents agreed that they receive clear directives. This suggests that guidance becomes more intelligible once translated into operational mission-level routines.

The governance structure itself appears tripartite. Respondents identified three central nodes of responsibility: the IT and technology function, the ministerial or senior leadership team, and communications or public affairs. In practice, these units are linked through a Digital Diplomacy Task Force in which communications manages content, leadership provides strategic direction, and technical units handle infrastructure and cybersecurity. This arrangement is analytically important because it shows that Rwanda has not left digital diplomacy dispersed across uncoordinated units; it has created a governance mechanism through which strategy can be translated into operational tasks.

Informal coordination mechanisms deepen this capacity. Respondents repeatedly referred to WhatsApp groups and the secure QT Connect platform as the principal means of real-time communication. These tools allow headquarters and missions to coordinate more rapidly than traditional diplomatic cables would permit, especially during high-profile events or fast-moving information environments. Temporary inter-agency task forces are reportedly assembled during major events such as international summits, drawing in the Ministry of ICT, the Office of the President, and foreign affairs actors. The significance of this hybrid model is conceptual as much as empirical: it shows that the strategy–practice gap narrows when formal policy is matched by flexible coordination routines that permit fast implementation.

Leadership, Adoption, and Resistance to Change

Leadership support emerged as the strongest driver of digital adoption in the study. Among headquarters respondents, 87.5 per cent identified leadership backing as the principal enabler of digital diplomacy, far ahead of institutional culture or technological infrastructure. This finding strongly supports the article's integrated framework. From a public diplomacy perspective, leadership backing signals that digital diplomacy is not peripheral but strategic. From a UTAUT perspective, it corresponds to social influence and facilitating conditions, increasing the likelihood that staff treat digital work as legitimate and consequential (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Yet strong leadership does not eliminate organisational friction. A substantial majority of headquarters respondents also reported cultural and bureaucratic barriers to digital adoption. Qualitative responses suggest that resistance is less ideological than practical and generational.

The most frequently cited implementation problem was lack of staff expertise, identified by 93.8 per cent of respondents. Digital skills were rated significantly lower than infrastructure adequacy at both headquarters and mission level. This difference is crucial. It indicates that Rwanda's challenge is not the absence of digital tools, but the uneven depth of human capability required to use those tools strategically and consistently. This is one of the clearest places where the strategy–practice gap becomes visible. Strategic intent is strong, leadership endorsement is clear, and infrastructure is relatively adequate, yet everyday implementation remains constrained by skill deficits and uneven ease of use. In UTAUT terms, performance expectancy may be high—respondents broadly believe digital tools help foreign policy—but effort expectancy and facilitating conditions are less evenly distributed across personnel. Younger or more digitally fluent officials adapt more easily than older or less trained colleagues, producing an internal digital divide within the diplomatic bureaucracy itself.

Platform Ecosystem and Workflow Transformation

Rwanda's digital diplomacy is enacted through a multi-platform ecosystem rather than through a single channel. At headquarters, respondents reported near-universal use of the official website, QT Connect, WhatsApp or Telegram, Twitter/X, and LinkedIn. Missions showed a similar pattern, though with somewhat stronger emphasis on public-facing platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram, and embassy websites. This distribution reflects functional differentiation. Twitter/X is used primarily for formal public diplomacy and visibility in international conversations, while WhatsApp-type platforms are used for direct coordination and community engagement. The coexistence of these tools suggests that Rwanda's digital diplomacy has moved beyond symbolic platform presence toward a more differentiated communication ecology (Manor, 2019).

Respondents consistently associated digital integration with faster diplomatic workflows. Headquarters staff reported improvements in communication speed, public engagement, and international visibility, while qualitative responses noted that virtual briefings now replace slower forms of formal correspondence in many situations (Nsengimana, 2026). This matters conceptually because workflow transformation is one of the mechanisms through which strategy becomes practice. A digital diplomacy strategy becomes operational only when it reorganises how officials actually communicate, coordinate, and respond. At the same time, faster communication creates new tensions. One respondent observed that social media pressures diplomats to react immediately, even when diplomacy traditionally values caution, calibration, and ambiguity. This tension is significant. It reminds us that digital diplomacy does not simply accelerate traditional diplomacy; it also changes its temporal logic. The problem, therefore, is not whether digital speed is beneficial in itself, but whether institutions can govern the trade-off between responsiveness and diplomatic prudence (Hedling & Bremberg, 2021; Pamment, 2020). Rwanda appears to have made significant progress in managing this shift, but the data suggest that the organisational demands of doing so remain substantial.

Digital Service Delivery and Diaspora Engagement

One of the most distinctive findings of the study is that digital service delivery functions as a form of diplomatic capital. The IREMBO e-governance platform illustrates how domestic digital state capacity can spill over into foreign-facing trust and legitimacy. Among diaspora respondents, awareness of the platform was almost universal, and three-quarters reported having used it while abroad. The most used services included e-passport applications, document legalisation, certificates, and police clearance. User evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, with large majorities citing speed and ease of navigation as key strengths. The diplomatic significance of this pattern is substantial. Digital diplomacy is often discussed in terms of messaging and branding, but Rwanda's case shows that service delivery can itself become a diplomatic resource. When citizens abroad experience efficient, user-centred, and accessible digital services, they are more likely to trust the state and to carry that trust into broader perceptions of national competence. In the data, 85.7 per cent of diaspora users reported that IREMBO improved their trust in Rwandan public institutions, while mission staff overwhelmingly viewed the platform as complementary to consular operations. In theoretical terms, this aligns with work that treats attraction and legitimacy as forms of soft power generated not only by rhetoric but also by institutional performance (Nye, 2004; Adesina, 2020).

The Rwanda Community Abroad portal points in the same direction, though more unevenly. Registration and e-consular card uptake show progress toward digitally structured diaspora relations, but the lower registration figures also indicate that digital service ecosystems do not automatically produce universal inclusion. This finding is important for the article's broader argument. It suggests that the strategy–practice gap can narrow where digital services are clearly useful and directly experienced, but that service-centred success does not necessarily eliminate wider participation or access constraints.

Outputs, Outcomes, and the Supply–Demand Gap in Engagement

The data show strong growth in Rwanda's digital diplomacy outputs. Official accounts registered substantial increases in followers across major platforms, including noticeable

surges during high-profile events. These patterns indicate growing visibility and a widening digital audience for Rwanda's external messaging. Headquarters staff unanimously reported improved international visibility, and mission staff and diaspora respondents broadly confirmed this perception. Diaspora connectedness also emerged as one of the strongest positive indicators in the study. However, the findings also reveal a clear supply–demand gap in engagement. While mission staff tended to rate diaspora outreach highly, diaspora respondents were less positive, especially with respect to responsiveness and two-way interaction. Many reported that they mainly engaged by liking or sharing content rather than by participating in meaningful exchange, and a substantial minority said they rarely or never received responses from officials. This indicates that Rwanda's digital diplomacy has become effective at broadcasting information and maintaining visibility, but is still less effective at institutionalising dialogic engagement.

This distinction is theoretically important. Public diplomacy scholarship has long argued that effective public diplomacy requires movement beyond one-way communication toward dialogue and reciprocal engagement (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005). Rwanda's data suggest that this transition remains incomplete. The country has built a capable digital outreach apparatus, but that apparatus still functions more comfortably as an instrument of projection than as a sustained architecture of listening and response. The strategy–practice gap therefore appears not only in skills and staffing, but also in the incomplete shift from broadcast communication to interactive diplomacy.

Cybersecurity, Crisis Response, and Information Resilience

Rwanda's cyber profile is one of the strongest pillars of its digital diplomacy model. The country's Tier 1 placement in the ITU Global Cybersecurity Index and the existence of a National Cybersecurity Strategy with clear pillars on resilience, industry development, and cooperation provide Rwanda with unusual credibility in digital governance discussions (ITU, 2024b; National Cyber Security Authority, 2024). This matters externally because cyber credibility has become part of diplomatic credibility. States that can demonstrate coherent cyber governance are better positioned to speak authoritatively in debates on digital norms, resilience, and information security. The primary data also indicate that digital tools significantly improved crisis response capacity. Respondents pointed to the use of digital coordination during Covid-19, the electoral cycle, and fast-moving narrative contests in multilateral settings. Such capacity shows how cyber resilience and communication systems intersect in diplomacy. Crisis management in the digital era requires not only secure systems but also the ability to coordinate quickly, communicate credibly, and protect narrative space under pressure.

At the same time, the data reveal an important vulnerability. Disinformation was identified as the most common cyber threat by a large majority of headquarters respondents, and qualitative responses suggest that the institutional posture remains more reactive than proactive. This is consequential because a reactive information posture can undermine the very visibility that digital diplomacy seeks to generate. In contested regional information environments, cyber capability is not only about technical defence; it is also about anticipatory narrative resilience. Rwanda has built a comparatively strong cyber base, but the evidence suggests that analytic capabilities for proactive monitoring and disinformation response still need strengthening.

Conclusion

Rwanda's experience offers broader lessons for the study of African digital diplomacy, but those lessons are most useful when framed conceptually rather than descriptively. The key lesson is not that Rwanda has more digital platforms than its peers. The more important lesson is that Rwanda has built a comparatively strong institutional mediation layer between strategic vision and diplomatic practice. That layer is composed of executive commitment, interdepartmental coordination, digital service capacity, cyber governance, and a political narrative that treats digital transformation as integral to statecraft rather than as an auxiliary technical project. This observation helps clarify the article's conceptual contribution. The strategy–practice gap is not simply a synonym for implementation failure. It is a more specific diagnosis of where digital diplomacy breaks down: at the point where, high-level strategic intention must be converted into routinised organisational capability. Rwanda narrows this gap more effectively than many African states because it has built institutions and workflows that give digital ambition operational expression. Yet the gap does not disappear. It remains visible in staff skill shortages, weak redundancy across missions, and the continued predominance of one-way communication over dialogue. This is precisely why Rwanda is analytically useful. It shows both how the gap can be narrowed and why it persists even under relatively favourable conditions.

The findings also allow the article to restate Rwanda's lessons as transferable propositions. First, executive commitment matters, but only when bureaucracy can absorb it. Leadership can signal priority and accelerate coordination, yet without training and organisational depth it produces symbolic commitment more than durable practice. Second, data-driven governance can strengthen diplomatic credibility, especially for small states, but only where domestic systems generate reliable evidence that can support external claims. Third, cyber diplomacy is most effective when security governance is proactive, not merely reactive. Fourth, digital public service delivery can generate diplomatic value by increasing trust among diasporas and foreign-facing users. Fifth, multilateral digital influence depends on credible domestic implementation: states are more persuasive as norm entrepreneurs when they can point to functioning internal systems.

For African states more broadly, the central implication is that digital diplomacy should be treated as an institutional reform agenda as much as a communication agenda. The widespread assumption that ministries need primarily to adopt platforms or expand social media presence is analytically insufficient. What matters equally, and often more, is whether ministries possess the organisational routines, staff capabilities, security architectures, and feedback mechanisms needed to make digital diplomacy effective over time. In this sense, digital diplomacy is a governance question before it is a branding question. Rwanda also illustrates an important caution. Its model is enabled by a specific political and institutional configuration: strong executive direction, a relatively centralised governance structure, cumulative investment in digital systems, and a national development narrative that gives digital transformation high legitimacy. These conditions cannot be presumed elsewhere. Transferability therefore depends on adaptation, not imitation. States operating in more fragmented bureaucratic settings, more resource-constrained environments, or more pluralistic political systems may need different organisational solutions to address the same strategy–practice problem.

The article's conclusions should be read alongside four scope conditions. First, Rwanda is a strategically important but unusual case. Its political centralisation, post-conflict reconstruction trajectory, and sustained executive backing make it valuable for theory development but also limit direct comparability with more pluralistic or institutionally fragmented settings. Second, as a single-country design, the article seeks analytical generalisation rather than universal

inference (Yin, 2014). The propositions generated here require testing in broader comparative work across African ministries of foreign affairs. Third, the study identifies persistent domestic and continental digital divides that constrain both practice and replicability. In Rwanda itself, internet access remains uneven and far from universal, especially across urban and rural populations (Ashiru, 2025). Across Africa, affordability barriers and uneven regulatory maturity continue to shape who can actually participate in digital public life (GSMA, 2024; ITU, 2025). These inequalities mean that even well-designed digital diplomacy strategies may rest on a narrower social base than official narratives suggest.

Fourth, the findings point to an operational fragility within mission-level practice. Several respondents suggested that digital diplomacy remains heavily dependent on small groups of specialists. When these staff are absent or overstretched, online engagement can stall. This person-dependence matters because it indicates that digital work is not yet fully mainstreamed across diplomatic roles. The challenge, therefore, is not only to add staff but to redesign professional expectations so that baseline digital competence becomes an ordinary requirement of diplomatic work rather than a technical specialism reserved for a limited cadre.

Recommendations

This article has argued that the major challenge in African digital diplomacy is not technological adoption in itself, but the institutional capacity required to turn digital strategy into sustained diplomatic practice. To capture this problem, it developed the concept of the strategy–practice gap and used Rwanda as a critical case through which to analyse it. The case shows that digital diplomacy becomes effective where leadership commitment, policy coherence, infrastructure, cyber governance, service delivery, and organisational coordination reinforce one another. It also shows that strong outward performance can coexist with internal fragilities, especially where human-capital development, workflow redundancy, and dialogic responsiveness lag behind strategic ambition.

The article's broader contribution is therefore conceptual as well as empirical. By bringing public diplomacy theory into conversation with UTAUT, it explains how macro-level ambitions of visibility, credibility, and influence depend on micro-level conditions of organisational adoption and institutional support. This integrated perspective helps move the study of African digital diplomacy beyond descriptive accounts of online activity toward a more rigorous analysis of how digital diplomacy is produced, constrained, and sustained. Rwanda should not be read as a universal template. It should be understood as a revealing case that clarifies the conditions under which digital diplomacy can work in a resource-constrained African setting. Its experience suggests that the future of digital diplomacy on the continent will depend less on whether states adopt digital platforms than on whether they build the institutional mediation capacity needed to make those platforms meaningful.

As the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy approaches its final phase, research and policy attention should increasingly focus on these institutional conditions. Comparative work that directly tests how executive commitment, bureaucratic capacity, digital regulation, and public responsiveness interact across cases would be especially valuable. Such a research agenda would make it possible to move from celebrating digital visibility to explaining digital diplomatic effectiveness.

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