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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN BANGLADESH'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

Abstract

The paper explores the role of social media in Bangladesh's public diplomacy by identifying limitations and potential solutions. Recently, public diplomacy has expanded beyond state-to-state interactions to include state-to-people engagement. This shift is evident across various countries, including Bangladesh. Based on qualitative research through expert interviews, the paper identifies that social media holds significant potential for fostering people-to-people connections, projecting a positive national image, and enhancing Bangladesh's regional and international engagement. Notwithstanding that, the study identifies persistent structural and operational challenges (e.g., digital divide, low levels of digital and media literacy, proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, etc.) that continue to hinder proper utilisation of social media in pursuing the country's public diplomacy. To address these impediments and maximise benefits, the paper recommends a multi-pronged approach that integrates innovative content, promotes digital and media literacy, cultivates strategic diplomatic competencies, and suggests reformations of other structural and institutional frameworks.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, Social Media, Facebook, Digital Connectivity, Misinformation, Disinformation

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, communication has become an indispensable part of public diplomacy, and social media is utilised extensively to shape and maintain a country's positive image in the international arena. It has been observed that, in this contemporary era, the age of digital technology is significantly influencing public diplomacy strategies. Most importantly, social media (e.g., Facebook), through its transformative power, has revolutionised public diplomacy by enabling direct communication, fostering interactive engagement, and enhancing the transparency of diplomatic efforts. The term "public diplomacy" commonly refers to a country's strategic efforts to influence the audiences of other countries while building positive relationships, upholding national interests, and shaping global perspectives.¹

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¹ Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009); Jan Melissen, ed., *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

A growing number of nations are incorporating social media into their public diplomacy initiatives as a way of adapting to the ever-changing digital landscape. This rapidly advancing digital environment assists in disseminating information about critical events and concerns (e.g., popular protests and conflicts). As a result, the dynamic digital context has not only widened the scope of a country's diplomatic communication but also redefined how it should project its soft power² to maintain fame on a global scale.

In this regard, Bangladesh, a country of South Asia with a rich cultural heritage is gaining prominence in both regional politics and international affairs by leveraging its social media platforms. Recently, social media has emerged as a critical component of the country's public diplomacy efforts to assert its national identity, strengthen cultural values, and shape its global image. Utilising this platform, various government agencies and cultural institutions alike disseminate information about numerous national events and traditional festivals (e.g., *Pohela Boishakh*) to enhance cultural visibility and foster international engagement.³

More precisely, social media has the strength to create "online political citizens", empower ordinary people and mobilise movements.⁴ This has been reflected through the July uprising 2024, which demonstrated the remarkable impact of social media in shaping Bangladesh's political landscape and receiving global attention. In response, the country's diplomatic missions and government communication channels have actively engaged with global audiences, diaspora groups, and international agencies to maintain the country's stability and manage its international image. These participatory networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, among others) have played a substantial role in mobilising public sentiment and extending outreach to global community.⁵ During this time, Bangladeshi diaspora has actively utilised social media tools to amplify the voices of the youth and other participants, regardless of age and gender.⁶

² Soft power refers to the ability of a country to influence others through culture, values, ideology and other attributes instead of payment or coercion.

³ "Government to promote Pohela Boishakh as major tourist attraction," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 14, 2025.

⁴ M. Bakardjieva, "Subactivism: Lifeworld and Politics in the Age of the Internet," *The Information Society* 25, no. 2 (2009): 91–104; Fatima Binte Zahid, *Influence of Social Media on the Political Behaviour in Bangladesh: Facilitating Political Engagement & Democracy* (Dhaka: BIPSS, 2023).

⁵ Md. Dilwar Hushen, "Harnessing Facebook by Gen Z to Mobilize Masses and Transform Student Protest into Revolution: A Study on Quota Reform Movement 2024 in Bangladesh," *Journal of Public Administration, Public Affairs, and Management* 22, no. 2 (2024): 45–67; Saume Saptaparna Nath and Ahnaf Ashiqur Rahman, "Social Media's Agenda-Setting Role in Bangladesh's July 2024 Student Movement," *Journal of Governance, Security & Development* 6, no. 1 (2025): 1–18

⁶ H. Rabiul Chowdhury, "Global Voices, Local Impact: How Bangladeshi Diaspora Catalysed Revolution Back Home," *The Wire*, August 19, 2024.

Utilising platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for diplomatic messaging has created new chances to facilitate discourse and engage international audiences, thereby advancing the overarching objective of public diplomacy. Although this alternative civic space has gained great momentum in Bangladesh, its potential, efficacy, and associated challenges while engaging foreign publics by the government have not yet been explored fully. To strengthen public diplomacy initiatives, a deeper understanding of current discourse and narratives around social media is required. Although ministries, embassies, diplomats, and government officials from various institutions are active on social media platforms to enhance the country's international image, there is a lack of clarity about the extent of social media usage, coupled with associated strategies. It is in this context that this paper aims to analyse the contemporary dynamics of social media in the country's public diplomacy efforts, with a focus on regional and international engagement.

The core questions explored in this paper are: How is the potential of social media perceived in the context of Bangladesh's public diplomacy efforts? What are the major barriers to the effective use of social media for public diplomacy? How can the strategic use of social media in public diplomacy be enhanced to strengthen Bangladesh's image on the global stage? The key objectives of the paper include:

1. To identify key areas in which Bangladesh can effectively leverage social media in its public diplomacy efforts;
2. To examine major challenges related to the use of social media for diplomatic engagement;
3. To offer recommendations for effective use of social media in advancing Bangladesh's public diplomacy and global outreach.

To carry out this study, a qualitative research approach is chosen to have a deeper look at the role of social media in Bangladesh's public diplomacy. According to the global digital report, worldwide, there are many dozens of social media platforms, and some countries have their own social media channels (e.g., China operates Weibo). To confine the scope of the research, the paper has focused solely on Facebook, given its largest user base in the country. Data analysis incorporates diverse content on Facebook, including messages, podcasts, movies, and photographs that pertain to national and strategic issues. Interviews with 15 experts⁷ are the primary

⁷ High official, Public Diplomacy Wing, MoFA; Former Secretary (East), MoFA and Rector, Foreign Service Academy; Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to the Swiss Confederation and Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office; Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to China; Professor, Department of Political Science, DU; Staff Reporter, Daily Observer; Senior Reporter, Diplomatic Correspondence, Desh TV Special Correspondent, ATN Bangla; Reporter, Shomoi TV; Graduate Student of International Relations and Public

source of data collection that provides a valuable insight into contemporary issues linked to the use of social media within the public diplomacy domain. In addition to primary data, secondary data has been used from a wide range of sources, including newspaper reports and academic publications.

The major limitations of the paper lie in its thinness of empirical depth and absence of quantitative metrics (e.g., longitudinal follower growth trajectories of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), embassy accounts, comparative benchmarking with regional peers, systematic content coding of Facebook posts from MoFA and key missions, and influencer network mapping) largely due to time and resource constraints. While the paper offers a normative discussion along with a conceptual foundation, it does not empirically measure digital reach, network dynamics, or cross-platform narrative flows. However, these dimensions will be intended for future research.

The paper is structured as follows: After an introduction in Section one, Section two presents an existing literature review on social media and public diplomacy. This section also draws on scholarly analyses to uncover how social media is integrated into public diplomacy strategies in other countries. Section three draws on a framework based on the concepts of Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser to understand digital public diplomacy in Bangladesh. Section four discusses the potential of social media in Bangladesh's public diplomacy. Sections five and six, respectively, address challenges and recommendations for effective use in this field. Finally, Section seven draws a conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Public Diplomacy and Social Media: Defining Key Terms*

Diplomacy, by and large, is a way of communication and negotiation among nations regardless of geopolitical influence. Traditionally, it is “concerned with the management of relations between states and other actors”.⁸ The word “public diplomacy,” distinct in meaning in the academic field, is used synonymously in terms of foreign policy and traditional diplomacy.⁹ The concept's definitional

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⁸ R. P. Barston, *Modern Diplomacy*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.

⁹ Hasan Saliu, “Public Diplomacy and Related Concepts from the Perspective of Lasswell's Communication

ambiguity has led to its emergence as an academic discourse, with researchers in the social sciences defining it as distinctively dependent on the modes and viewpoints of communicative actors. Hence, it is quite often used as a blend of soft power and digital diplomacy to analyse how a country is viewed from the outside world.

Earlier, in the 20th century, public diplomacy was largely considered as “a state-centric activity” or “one-way flow of information” in which key actors controlled the messages and acted on a limited scale.¹⁰ However, in the 21st century, it is viewed as a “two-way channel” through which actors interact more through dialogues and other forms of cooperation with foreign audiences. Its most influential and cited definitions are offered by notable scholars of International Relations (IR) and International Communication, namely Melissen, Gilboa, and Cull, who referred to the term as the diplomacy of the public by which governments and non-state actors engage with foreign publics to inform and influence international perceptions and policies. As articulated precisely by Melissen, “public diplomacy is both public and diplomatic in their use of media; and that through media they both aim at the art of influence on foreign opinions.”¹¹ Aside from states and diplomatic ministries, the term has been widely used by non-state agencies, such as civil society organisations, multinational corporations, and influential individuals who play a pivotal role in fostering mutual understanding of other countries’ cultures and behaviours. Consequently, public diplomacy is not only confined to state-to-state interactions but also promotes deeper intercultural connections and people-to-people engagement, which cannot be managed even by the state itself.

What is social media for public diplomacy? This question is relevant here since the practice of public diplomacy has undergone a significant transformation with the advent of digital technology, mostly with the rise of social media. Now, it has been a platform-based interaction in which digital tools shape or filter citizens’ narratives. In academic literature, one of the foundational definitions of social media was given by Kietzmann et al., who analyse this as a tool that “employs mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content.”¹² That is, social media has an unprecedented impact on public diplomacy, serving as a key facilitator of international communication. This conceptual foundation

Model,” *JAHHR – European Journal of Bioethics* 11, no. 2 (2020): 287–300.

¹⁰ Saliu, “Public Diplomacy”.

¹¹ Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*; Eytan Gilboa, “Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 55–77; Nicholas J. Cull, *The Decline and Fall of the United States Information Agency: American Public Diplomacy, 1989–2001* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹² Jan H. Kietzmann et al., “Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media,” *Business Horizons* 54, no. 3 (2011): 241–251.

draws on Marshall McLuhan, who coined the term “global village” to illustrate how technology reduces distances and connects people across the world.¹³ Likewise, Manuel Castells’s concept of “Global Civic Society” explains how communication technologies foster collective engagement.¹⁴

Since 2000, when blogs and other social networking platforms were used for further communication and information dissemination, social media has gained popularity as a people-to-people information-sharing method.¹⁵ It has also emerged as a valuable tool for states to engage with international stakeholders, advance national interests, and shape global narratives. Social media platforms (such as Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok) have become an essential mode of digital communication for projecting the country’s soft power sourced from culture, religion, values, ideology, etc. Most importantly, in absence of traditional diplomatic intermediaries, these tools have created a great opportunity for governments to communicate with foreign publics and disseminate critical aspects of culture.¹⁶ Such a form of digital tool has often been referred to as a crucial part of “digital diplomacy”, “virtual diplomacy”, “e-diplomacy”, “media diplomacy”, etc., which represents a greater shift towards a more inclusive engagement of public.

While connecting these two terms, scholars explain the relationship in different ways and raise theoretical debates in digital public communication. Academics like Manor and Segev¹⁷ contend that digital tools—a subset of public diplomacy, facilitate two-way communication between state actors and foreign audiences. In particular, Manor’s work¹⁸ on “selfie diplomacy” and the distinction between “monologic” (one-way) and “dialogic” (interactive) digital connection, as well as applications of network theory (e.g., how Twitter or Facebook network structures affect message diffusion), are useful analytical lenses for assessing the effectiveness of contemporary digital diplomatic purposes. Cull¹⁹ outlines five core functions of public diplomacy that social media effectively supports: listening, advocacy, cultural connectivity,

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963).

¹⁴ Manuel Castells, “The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 78–93.

¹⁵ Mahesh Senadeera, “The Use of Social Media in Diplomacy: An Exploration of Its Efficacy and Challenges,” last modified April 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369799621_The_Use_of_Social_Media_in_Diplomacy_An_Exploration_of_its_Efficacy_and_Challenges.

¹⁶ Ukam I. Ngwu, “Social Media and Cultural Diplomacy in Developing Nations,” *International Journal of Advanced Mass Communication and Journalism* 3, no. 2 (2022): 14–18.

¹⁷ Ilan Manor and Elad Segev, “Social Media and the Transformation of Public Diplomacy,” *Policy & Internet* 7, no. 3 (2015): 301–316.

¹⁸ Ilan Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁹ Cull, *Public Diplomacy*.

exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. Melissen,²⁰ Seib²¹, and Duncombe²² note that by reducing information gaps and building trust in diplomatic messaging, platforms like Twitter and Facebook are used to provide transparent accounts of international negotiations and crisis responses. Sevin and Ingenhoff,²³ and Manor²⁴ provide empirical evidence of how networks and content of social media improve international collaborations. Before turning to Bangladesh as a specific case, it is useful to contextualise how social media works under the broader sphere of public diplomacy in other countries.

2.2 *Public Diplomacy and Use of Social Media Across Countries*

The United States of America (USA) has been at the forefront of engaging and leveraging social media platforms in its diplomatic strategy. The US State Department predominantly uses X and Facebook to engage with global audiences, a strategy widely known as “X Diplomacy”. One prominent initiative by the government, like “AskState” exemplifies the interactive approach to digital communication, allowing direct engagement between officials and foreign citizens. Collin²⁵, in this aspect, discusses how former President Barack Obama’s administration strategically used X to foster diplomatic relations and counter anti-American sentiments overseas. Aside from English, they used multiple languages to have more inclusive communication. During the election period and after assuming office, President Donald Trump’s frequent use of X demonstrates how social media platforms have been crucial as a diplomatic tool, especially when clarifying the state’s position on national and internal issues, and this has also been reflected in the recent Iran-US conflict. Beyond messaging, the USA promotes public diplomacy through various soft power initiatives such as organising cultural events, EducationUSA Advising programmes, English language initiatives, and enhancing a robust engagement with international alumni networks.

Meanwhile, countries of the European Union (EU) have integrated social media as a part of “Strategic Digital Diplomacy”. The European External Action Service (EEAS) has effectively used social media platforms (mostly X and Facebook)

²⁰ Jan Melissen, *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²¹ Philip Seib, *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²² Constance Duncombe, “Twitter and Geopolitics: Diplomacy in the Digital Age,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2017): 589–610

²³ Efe Sevin and Diana Ingenhoff, “Public Diplomacy on Social Media: Analyzing Networks and Content,” *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018), 3663–3685.

²⁴ Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*.

²⁵ Stephen D. Collins, Jeff R. DeWitt, and Rebecca K. LeFebvre, “Hashtag Diplomacy: Twitter as a Tool for Engaging in Public Diplomacy and Promoting US Foreign Policy,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 15 (2019): 78–96.

to promote European values, engage global audiences, and respond to global crises. Related to this, Bjola and Jiang²⁶ analyse how the EU utilised X during the Ukraine crisis to counter Russian disinformation and provide transparency of diplomatic communications. The EU's "EUvsDisinfo" campaign stands as a notable example of social media being used to combat misinformation and bolster the EU's credibility in international discourse.²⁷

In South Korea, "K-Pop" is intertwined with the broader framework of public diplomacy. The country has successfully used social media to spread Korean popular music to enhance its national image and build cross-cultural connections. Jin and Yoon,²⁸ in this aspect, highlight how platforms like YouTube and X have helped K-pop groups (like BTS, BLACKPINK, and EXO) to create emotional and cultural bonds with international audiences. This phenomenon, often recognised as the "Korean Wave" (*Hallyu*), which is highly supported by the government to promote Korean culture, language, and tourism and position itself as a modern and globally connected nation.

Similarly, China incorporated social media platforms (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) into its public diplomacy framework in advancing soft power and digital connectivity. The country has strategically used these tools to conduct public diplomacy across different countries. As Wang²⁹ observes how Chinese diplomatic missions worldwide utilise these social media platforms to promote China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while countering Western narratives. The collaboration with digital influencers and targeted messaging has helped China to project a favourable international image and deepen its engagement with global audiences.

India, on the contrary, formalises digital public communication by promulgating digital public diplomacy initiatives via its Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). This ministry has embraced social media (especially X, Facebook, and YouTube) as a strategic communication tool and used the "India Connect" initiative to strengthen diplomatic ties and improve engagement with the Indian diaspora. Pant and Joshi³⁰ elaborately discuss this initiative and highlight how India uses this

²⁶ Corneliu Bjola and Lu Jiang, *Social Media and Public Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of US and EU Digital Engagement Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁷ João A. Leite et al., "EUvsDisinfo: A Dataset for Multilingual Detection of Pro-Kremlin Disinformation in News Articles" (Paper presented at the 33rd ACM International Conference on Information and Knowledge Management (CIKM '24), New York, Association for Computing Machinery, 2024), 5380–5384.

²⁸ Dal Yong Jin and Ki Yoon, "The Korean Wave and Soft Power Diplomacy," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2367–2385.

²⁹ Jian Wang, "Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 257–273.

³⁰ Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi, *India's Digital Diplomacy: The Role of Social Media in Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2019).

platform to communicate its foreign policy positions, offer consular assistance, and promote its global fame. The Indian Prime Minister's personal use of X has also been instrumental in shaping international perceptions and fostering bilateral relations.

2.3 *Social Media and Bangladesh's Public Diplomacy: Finding out Key Research Gaps*

Public diplomacy in Bangladesh, as outlined by MoFA, encompasses both internal and external communication functions. According to the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh, external public diplomacy means communication with foreign publics, to project a positive national image and enhance people-to-people connectivity and counter negative narratives.³¹ This approach aligns well with analytical frameworks of Nye's soft power theory (which focuses on culture, values, and foreign policy) and Habermas's concepts of public sphere and communicative action, which highlight communicative engagement with key stakeholders.³² Internal public diplomacy, on the contrary, involves informing domestic citizens about foreign policy actions and building national consensus through the media. Although MoFA has yet to have a formal definition of social media within the context of Bangladesh's diplomacy, it can be characterized as a state-driven, yet citizen-endorsed communication strategy designed to enhance the nation's exposure via digital platforms. Through coordinated efforts of the Public Diplomacy Wing and embassies and missions abroad, this strategy seeks to portray the country's development success, enhance cultural exchange, mobilise diasporas as informal ambassadors, and promote other soft power initiatives using digital tools.³³ Notable examples are "branding Bangladesh" campaign, "Bangladesh @50" global celebration, and leadership in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and climate diplomacy.³⁴

In this way, social media has been an indispensable component of Bangladesh's public diplomacy strategy in contemporary times. However, during the early 1990s, use of internet and social media was minimal in the country. The adoption of digital technologies, nevertheless, began mainly in the early 2000s.

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), *Public Diplomacy Wing* (Dhaka: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2021).

³² Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

³³ Md. Shafiqul Hassan, "Public Diplomacy and Bangladesh's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 66, no. 1 (2021): 95–118; Iftekhar A. Rahman, "Digital Diplomacy and Public Engagement: Bangladesh's Evolving Approach," *BIISS Journal* 42, no. 2 (2023): 85–103.

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), *Bangladesh @ 50: Showcasing Bangladesh's Progress and Global Partnerships* (Dhaka: MoFA Public Diplomacy Wing, 2021); Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), *Soft Power and Economic Diplomacy: The Case of Bangladesh, Policy Brief No. 130* (Dhaka: CPD, 2020).

In 2013, internet use was only 4.8 per cent, which increased to almost 38 per cent by 2022.³⁵ Currently, 63 per cent of government agencies use this platform to communicate with the public, which reflects a shift toward a more accessible governance system. Among all the tools of social media, Facebook remains the most widely used platform, followed by YouTube and X. Moreover, by utilising these platforms, the country is trying to enhance domestic communication, diaspora engagement, and global outreach for advancing its national interests. In addition to public sector organisations, think tanks, cultural academies, and private entities alike are more pronounced in terms of utilising social media to create a positive image abroad. It has already been realised that due to a large number of youth cohorts and rapid advancement of information and communication technology (ICT), social media platforms have brought remarkable impacts among general masses of Bangladesh.³⁶ Therefore, the government has introduced various measures to incorporate social media into the national decision-making process and improve the government's performance across all sectors.³⁷ Notwithstanding those initiatives, the contribution of social media in public diplomacy is very minimal.

Citing the example of MoFA, it can be argued that the ministry has been found to have limited engagement (only 330,000 followers) through social media platforms.³⁸ Moreover, it is hard to find comprehensive information on how many followers the Facebook page has for many missions. Several Bangladeshi missions including those in Manama (123,219 likes), Doha (76,043 likes), Paris (54,658 likes), and Washington maintain active Facebook pages to engage foreign public.³⁹ In 2021, the Ministry itself joined X, but till now, it has only 85,000 followers.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, its presence on YouTube is very minimal. Although the Ministry established a dedicated Public Diplomacy Wing in 2020, realising the importance, as of now, there is no specific public diplomacy framework or clear social media strategy. Parallel to this institutional gap, there is limited scholarly research on Bangladesh's public diplomacy through social media, and to some extent, it is still in a nascent and fragmented stage. Hence, as the growing importance of digital diplomacy, existing literature offers limited analysis of Bangladesh's use of social media platforms, particularly Facebook and X as instruments of public diplomacy.

³⁵ Md. Ashraful Islam and Md. Al-Fahad Bhuiyan, "Social Media Adoption in the Public Sector of Bangladesh: Progress and Efficiency," *Information Polity* 28, no. 3 (2023).

³⁶ Guohua Wang et al., "Bangladesh's Experience with Social Media Adoption in Public Organizations," *International Journal of E-Adoption* 14, no. 1 (2022): 1–19.

³⁷ A. K. Azad et al., *Use of Social Media in Government for Improving Service Delivery and Government-Citizen Interaction: The Case of Bangladesh* (Academic Press, 2016).

³⁸ Nilotpal Bhattacharjee, "Bangladesh's Digital Diplomacy Disconnect," USC Center on Public Diplomacy, last modified April 17, 2024, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/bangladeshs-digital-diplomacy-disconnect>.

³⁹ From official Facebook pages of the respective Bangladeshi missions, December 2025.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Bangladesh) (@BDMOFA), Twitter/X profile, accessed May 04, 2026, <https://www.twstalk.com/BDMOFA>.

In this regard, it is important to conduct research on these platforms to address the existing research gap.

3. Linking Social Media and Public Diplomacy: A Theoretical Insight

The rise and widespread adoption of social media platforms have changed the landscape of public diplomacy, which largely shapes public opinion of a country; hence, social media and public diplomacy have become interrelated notions. Both concepts have attracted scholarly attention across social science disciplines, including IR, political science, mass communication, and journalism. Scholars have identified several linkages between these two domains to better understand the evolving role of social media in public diplomacy practices. In the context of IR theories, the linkage between public diplomacy and social media is realised through the lens of soft power and constructivism. From a constructivist perspective, social media reshapes public diplomacy through cross-cultural communication, negotiation, and the creation of collective identities.⁴¹ Complementary to the constructivist approach within IR, one of the most pertinent and theoretically rich notions for understanding the interconnectedness of social media and public diplomacy is Jürgen Habermas's "Theory of Public Sphere" along with Nancy Fraser's critique of Habermas's "subaltern counterpublics".⁴²

Jürgen Habermas—a German philosopher, is known for his critical theory of how communication and public discourse shape power, societal structure, democratic participation, and the formation of public opinion.⁴³ In his theory of public sphere, he primarily shed light on how public opinion is shaped by rational critical debate. He imagined that earlier coffee houses and salons were appropriate spaces for debating about public affairs. Adding to this, Papacharissi and Castells emphasised digital era transformation and stated that in the contemporary digital era, online platforms (X, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) are significant avenues for public discussion and interactive discourse.⁴⁴ Their primary argument is that social media has been a new form of digital public sphere where government officials, diplomats, non-government organisation (NGO) workers, and other relevant officials can directly engage with global audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. However, Fraser argues that there is no single public sphere, but rather multiple public spheres

⁴¹ G. R. Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁴² Habermas, *Structural Transformation*; Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109–142.

⁴³ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*.

⁴⁴ Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

where subordinated groups create their own narratives and identities.⁴⁵ Highlighting the issue of structural inequality, she contends that digital access remains uneven as it excludes rural communities and disadvantaged groups from dominant public discourse; hence, she introduces the relative term of “subaltern counterpublics”.

While discussing “rational critical debate” as a core theoretical claim, Habermas further argues that public opinion is shaped through reasoned and critical discussion within the public sphere.⁴⁶ Habermas’s theory emphasises dialogic communication, which has later influenced the communication theories, specifically the “two-way communication model” in public diplomacy analysed by Grunig and Hunt. This model is pertinent since it allows people to share their ideas, values, and opinions on political matters with institutions and the state. In the domain of public diplomacy, Cull further argues that public diplomacy is not only confined to online diplomatic dialogues but also involves engaging with and making relationships with foreign audiences and embassies through live Q&A.⁴⁷ These two perspectives, nonetheless, show the growing importance of people’s participation in contemporary public diplomacy. On the contrary, Fraser counters that “counterpublic” exists in which marginalised communities create alternative communication spaces that may not intersect with official diplomatic platforms, thereby reducing inclusivity. The online discourse, as Fraser argues, often privileges only educated, urban, and elite groups, excluding marginal groups who face linguistic barriers and digital illiteracy.

Habermas further elaborates his ideas through the “Theory of Communicative Action”,⁴⁸ which holds crucial relevance to contemporary public diplomacy. Closely aligned with the principle of constructivist IR theory, this framework emphasises power of discourse and socially constructed nature of meaning in public interactions. For Habermas, communication does not solely mean exchanging information; it is rather a process to foster mutual understanding and reach consensus and agreements (e.g., collaborative global campaigns on climate change). According to him, power augments public diplomacy when it is coordinated and inclusive. This form of action, however, is needed to cultivate a healthy relationship in society; otherwise, coercive power will colonise communicative space. In this regard, Fraser points out structural inequality and criticises the narratives of the powerful that dominate the discourses (e.g., female is symbolically included but structurally excluded from the discussion). The distrust of dominant state narratives ultimately leads the marginal groups to develop independent communication networks.

⁴⁵ Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”.

⁴⁶ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*.

⁴⁷ Cull, *Public Diplomacy*; James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984).

⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

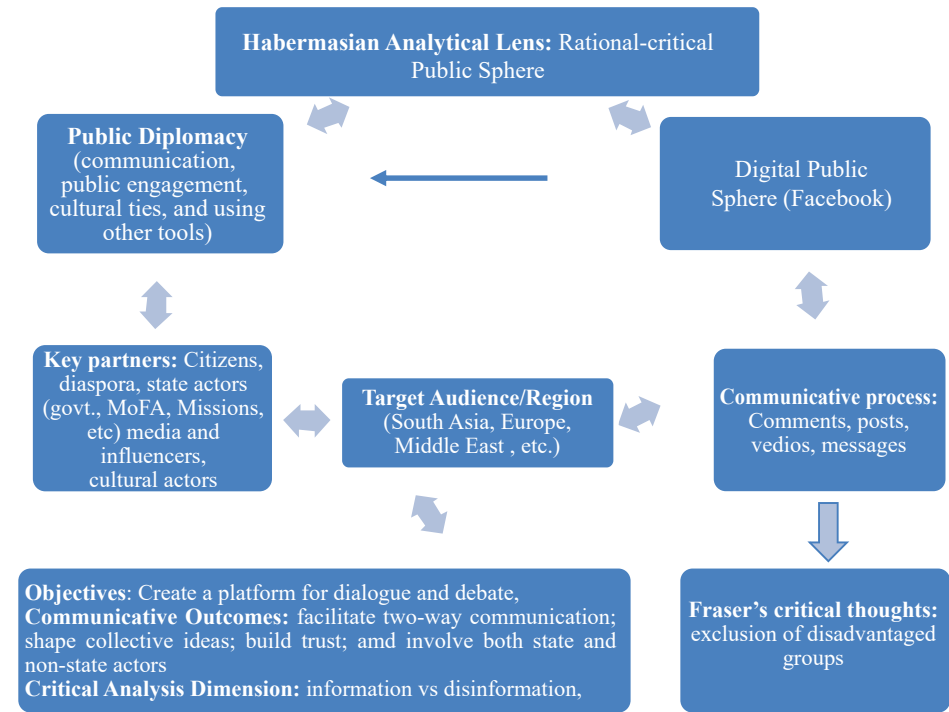
Overall, this debate prompts some pertinent questions: What is social media (particularly Facebook) meant for public diplomacy in Bangladesh? Which components, actors, and factors are linked with that process? Realising the relevance of Habermas' theories of public sphere and communicative action, and Fraser's subaltern counterpublics, the paper offers a framework (shown in Figure 1) for setting up the linkage between social media environment and public diplomacy for Bangladesh. First and foremost, Habermas's ideas remain foundational in offering a valuable insight into how public opinion and its common concerns are shaped in participatory platforms like social media, which he recognised as a new form of social space.⁴⁹ In particular, social media tools (e.g., Facebook) in Bangladesh are considered as a contemporary extension of digital public sphere, where broader engagement co-exists and shapes collective perspectives (from citizens, diaspora, and the government) on issues like foreign policy, elections, labour migration, etc. Second, in modern diplomatic practice, social media acts as a two-way communication channel that directly affects various government agencies (like MoFA, ICT ministry) while dealing with foreign relations (e.g., Bangladesh's relations with India). Third, public opinion serves as a legitimate force in diplomatic practice and, therefore, in the digital world, "credibility" and "authenticity" emerge as critical dimensions. Fourth, Fraser's crucial corrective of "*subaltern counterpublics*" applies to Bangladesh since public sphere is not equally accessible and marginalised and rural population often have limited access to participate in digital debates. Therefore, in Bangladesh's public diplomacy, digital platforms are intrinsically imbued with power, serving as both amplifiers and distorters. For instance, inside the Facebook-mediated public sphere, it enhances communication while simultaneously serving as a conduit for misinformation, narrative manipulation, and political control. Thus, in the evolving nature of diplomacy in the digital age, whether dialogic or propagandistic, participatory communication is crucial for shaping public diplomacy in Bangladesh.

Based on this elucidation, the following Figure (Figure 1) illustrates how Habermas's rational-critical public sphere theory helps explain Bangladesh's public diplomacy in the digital era, by highlighting how traditional or one-way state messaging is transforming into online spaces. Certain platforms, like Facebook, provide an interactive communication channel between the state, citizens, and other relevant actors. The figure further demonstrates that public diplomacy in Bangladesh quite often operates through a digital public sphere, which facilitates two-way engagement that allows the government to share information and engage in dialogue across various audiences and regions. However, due to the presence of inequalities in access and platform algorithms, the digital public sphere does not entirely fulfil Habermas's ideal condition. Therefore, tensions, like information vs.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension?" *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 411–426.

disinformation and inclusion vs exclusion in online space, have been the central features in Bangladesh’s online public diplomacy environment.

Figure 1. Bangladesh’s Public Diplomacy Framework Linking with Social Media (e.g., Facebook)



Source: Rendering from Habermas and Fraser by the Author, 2026.

4. Potential of Social Media in Bangladesh’s Public Diplomacy

Due to digital transformation, public diplomacy in Bangladesh has extended beyond closed-door negotiations conducted in different layers by various ministries, foreign missions, influencers, bloggers, and cultural actors to meet numerous objectives. Among all the social media platforms, Facebook represents an untapped yet potentially valuable contributor for Bangladesh. As of April 2025, it is the most widely used platform, with over 67 million people (37 per cent) using this platform, followed by YouTube (33 million), TikTok (37 million), and LinkedIn (8 million).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ “Digital 2025: Bangladesh,” DataReportal, last modified March 03, 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-bangladesh/>; “Social Media Use in Bangladesh Grows by 22.3% in 2024; Facebook Leads,” *Daily Star*, October 25, 2024.

Dhaka is the second-highest city worldwide in terms of Facebook usage.⁵¹ Therefore, to realise its key potential, this section also touches upon how power, discourse, and participation interact within the sphere of Facebook.

It is identified that the potential of social media in Bangladesh's public diplomacy varies across regions, as briefly outlined in Annex 1. It illustrates that the country could use digital engagement to promote public diplomacy, but right now its strategy and outreach are not very good. But the framework also shows that social media can play a big part in Bangladesh's public diplomacy in a number of areas, especially when it comes to improving communication and policy. First, social media, nowadays, plays a crucial role in shaping Bangladesh's "political ecosystem," in which general people can actively engage and add value to political discourse.⁵² It has provided the common populace with a distinct political platform to articulate their problems, frustrations, and critique governmental policies. Officials from multiple ministries, political leaders, diplomats, and overseas missionaries are progressively use Facebook to convey information, cultivate cultural connections, and interact with people, diaspora populations, and global audiences. It is even observed that decision makers often reconsider or modify their decisions when they are confronted with direct criticism from citizens, journalists, or diaspora members through digital platforms. This shift indicates that social media not only accelerates rapid information dissemination but also provides real-time public feedback, thereby influencing policy behaviour. However, a critical question yet remains: To what extent is this form of participation genuinely inclusive? Who has digital access and who gets to speak? However, one fact is clear—unlike traditional media, which is filtered through institutional gatekeepers, social media offers broader scopes for ordinary people to raise their voices and directly engage in public discourse. While explaining this advantage, a senior official from MoFA has remarked:

"Unlike traditional media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, television, film, etc.), the content of Facebook or Twitter can go viral. It can also create a positive image for the country and help to read the mindset of the people".⁵³

Second, as a valuable tool of political communication, Social media which is a useful tool contributes to a better understanding of the dynamic changes that are occurring in bilateral ties. A number of positive narratives about the country, such as its economic prosperity, cultural heritage, climate resilience, and various development achievements, can be promoted by the competent authorities through

⁵¹ Adnan Tahsin Alamder, "Impact of Social Media on Political Campaigns," *Press Xpress*, April 11, 2023.

⁵² Ratan Kumar Roy, "Digitalisation, Online Activism and Civic Politics in Contemporary Bangladesh," *Occasional Paper 2* (2023): 1–21. J. Clarke, "In Search of Ordinary People: The Problematic Politics of Popular Participation," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5, no. 3 (2012): 330–348..

⁵³ Public Diplomacy Wing, MoFA, interview taken on October 13, 2025.

the use of this tool, which can serve as an important instrument. As remarked by a faculty member from the Political Science Department, Dhaka University (DU):

“Now, traditional forms of direct diplomacy are not required. We are now gauging public perception (e.g., Indian or Pakistani) while sitting on our drawing table. Through social media, people’s likes and dislikes can be understood.”⁵⁴

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of public diplomacy by grassroots engagement is the reopening of the Argentine embassy in Dhaka after 45 years. This development is largely driven by the overwhelming support for Argentina by Bangladeshi football fans during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Mass posting of videos and messages on Facebook has not only enhanced a sense of emotional connection but also opened avenues for trade, cultural exchange, and sports cooperation.⁵⁵

Third, Bangladesh’s digital technology expansion has ensured civic engagement, especially among the youth demographics (most notably Generation Z). The shift has also encouraged women’s empowerment by getting involved in a technology-driven society. In future, social media can be a significant component in utilising the youth cohort and cultural diplomacy. Since more than 30 per cent of the country’s population is youth, engaging them with the world can help to secure an identity. They can help to promote people-to-people connectivity and attract international audiences by promoting Bangladeshi music, literature, film and a name of a few.

Moreover, social media helps to enhance soft power and the nation’s branding by building a positive national image. The growing digital participation of young bloggers, content creators, and entrepreneurs presents a unique chance to harness their impact. If they are utilized appropriately, they have the potential to function as ambassadors of soft power or powerful informal agents of public diplomacy. Their relatable narratives, ranging from travel, food, culture, fintech, EDTech, and e-commerce, reach global followers. This global linkage not only facilitates market expansion but also enhances international visibility even in absence of a formal diplomatic channel.

Fourth, Bangladeshi diaspora contributes meaningfully to this process. Through social media, they increasingly promote “Bangladesh” as a distinct country beyond the broader South Asian framework. For example, the rapidly gained popularity of Coke Studio Bangla through its digital release has created a new sense

⁵⁴ Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka (DU), interview taken on September 06, 2025.

⁵⁵ “Argentina reopens embassy after 45 years,” *The Daily Star*, February 28, 2023.

of cultural pride and visibility among Bangladeshis abroad and attracted millions of viewers. Traditional food like Hilsha and biriyani is also being recognised specifically as Bangladeshi, rather than generally South Asian. A Bangladeshi Diaspora living in the USA informed that,

*“Bangladeshi-owned stores and restaurants use Facebook and Instagram to highlight their heritage, while community hubs in areas like Queens, New York, use local pages and groups to organise events and bring people together.”*⁵⁶

These digital spaces, indeed, promote Bangladesh’s rich cultural heritage globally. Besides this, social media can enhance the political engagement of the diaspora community. This mobilisation was highly evident during the July uprising, in which the diaspora participated in national and transnational political discourse. Several foreign media outlets, including Reuters and Al Jazeera, reported on this event and spotlighted slogans of the movement (e.g., BangladeshRising and hashtags like #SupportBangladeshProtest), which contributed to prompting an international call for accountability.⁵⁷ During this political trajectory period, social media tools have been used as a catalyst for mobilisation, protest organisation, information dissemination, and national and international visibility. The influence of this movement was so pervasive that it transcended national borders, with the Bangladeshi diaspora actively engaged in amplifying its message worldwide.

The final prevailing point is that, for the country’s crisis management, social media can act as a direct channel for the government to clarify its position by engaging both national and international audiences. For instance, during the flood in Feni, social media was instrumental in sharing critical updates, raising awareness, and mobilising funds. This case also demonstrates the powerful effect of social media on community engagement and transnational solidarity in times of crisis. On a broader scale, during crisis management (e.g., Rohingya refugee crisis), the role of social media channels seemed to have proven valuable for diplomatic outreach and garnering support from international community.⁵⁸ By building strong narratives (e.g., speeches, media outreach, diplomatic messages) and increasing diplomatic efforts in multinational forums like the United Nations (UN), Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), or Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Bangladesh has more scope in gaining international support and converting this humanitarian burden into diplomatic

⁵⁶ Graduate Student of International Relations and Public Management of Technology, Syracuse University, New York, USA, and Washington, DC-based data and research professional, interview taken on October 11, 2025.

⁵⁷ Parama Sigurdson and Ravi Iyer, “A Double-Edged Sword: The Role of Social Media in the 2024 Political Uprising in Bangladesh,” *Tech Policy Press*, October 01, 2024, <https://www.techpolicy.press/a-double-edged-sword-the-role-of-social-media-in-the-2024-political-uprising-in-bangladesh>.

⁵⁸ M. Hussain and K. K. Tusi, “Role of Media in Representation of Forced Migrants: A Study on Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh,” *BISS Journal* 42, no. 1 (2021): 77–99.

leverage. This view is reinforced by Karim, who contends that Bangladesh should proactively cultivate soft power and deploy public diplomacy to generate international pressure on Myanmar and secure the rights of Rohingya refugees.⁵⁹

5. Key Challenges

As mentioned above, Bangladesh has experienced a rapid digital transformation in recent years. Despite this notable growth, the use of social media for systematic public diplomacy remains limited. Several predicaments persist, including:

5.1 *Misinformation and Disinformation*

Unregulated proliferation of misinformation and disinformation poses a crucial challenge while conducting effective public diplomacy in Bangladesh, especially in the age of social media. According to data from Rumour Scanner, misinformation has gone up 30 per cent in Bangladesh during the first half of 2025, with Facebook being identified as the principal source of misinformation and fake news.⁶⁰ Such misleading content, quite often, fuels social rifts, causes mental health issues, destabilises democratic path, complicates communication landscape, and tarnishes the country's image globally. Additionally, the rapid dissemination of false content on social media platforms undermines public trust and raises doubts about the credibility of the government in terms of its ability to meaningfully engage with audiences both within the country and internationally.

5.2 *Politicisation of Social Media*

The social media platforms have emerged as an indispensable component of the political economy on a global and regional scale. Since this platform tends to be more reactive rather than strategically planned, the negative content of ordinary citizens brings adverse repercussions and creates a trust deficit. For example, "narrative battles" on social media are witnessed in Bangladesh-India relations⁶¹, and it has been a site of intense nationalist exchanges through online commentary. The government has yet to harness social media effectively, and for this, the platform is predominantly used by the general public. To clarify the point, a Senior Reporter from Desh TV states:

⁵⁹ Md. Rezaul Karim, "Bangladesh's Diplomatic Maneuvering in the Rohingya Crisis: Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 3 (September 2020): 263–276.

⁶⁰ "Misinformation rises 30% in first half of 2025," *The Daily Star*, July 20, 2025.

⁶¹ "India-Bangladesh relations sour as tensions rise over attacks on Hindu minority," *The Guardian*, December 05, 2024.

“Over the past 17 years, Bangladesh-India relations were positive, while Bangladesh-Pakistan relations were largely stagnant. Negative propaganda has damaged bilateral relations between the former, and now social media acts as an icebreaker for the latter”.⁶²

Sometimes, this media platform serves the interests of particular groups and creates a polarised digital space, which poses a crucial threat to diplomatic engagement. It is detrimental to Bangladesh’s strategic culture which may weaken the credibility of state-led communication efforts and hinder the paths of constructive dialogues.

5.3 Lack of Institutional Gatekeeping

When it comes to public diplomacy that is driven by social media, Bangladesh is not very prudent. Lack of gatekeeping, in conjunction with content that has not been vetted, creates substantial institutional hurdles. This is in contrast to traditional media, which allows for the accuracy of information to be examined and double-checked. In an unregulated digital environment, this verification is difficult, hence political content circulates rapidly. Without trained professionals, it is hard to ensure public diplomacy efforts. This concern was echoed by a former Secretary of MoFA, who acknowledged:

“Perhaps we could have done much better if we had managed interministerial coordination and conducted regular briefings instead of weekly ones”.⁶³

Besides, a lack of centralised public diplomacy and social media strategy, in addition to fragmented coordination among key ministries (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and the Informatics and Communications Technology division), contributes to the country’s diminished credibility in international circles. Although MoFA has a dedicated Public Diplomacy wing, but the goal of engaging global publics still remains a challenging task as there is absence of a central public diplomacy unit with all concerned government bodies that is equipped with data analytics and content editors.

5.4 Less Investment in Public Diplomacy Efforts

Currently, MoFA and other related ministries are mostly event-driven rather than investing heavily in other soft power tools. Whereas government-supported

⁶² Senior Reporter, Diplomatic Correspondence, Desh TV, interview taken on October 12, 2025.

⁶³ Rector, Foreign Service Academy, interview taken on October 13, 2025.

institutions in other countries, such as the Confucius Institute in China and the British Council in the UK, play a vital role in disseminating information to support public diplomacy efforts. In 2024–25, the budget for public diplomacy and international outreach was US\$150–200 million, which was modest compared to many countries' fund allocation in this sector.⁶⁴ As analysed by a Professor from the Journalism Department, DU:

*“Bangladesh neither has a precise structure of public diplomacy nor sufficient investment in this sector, which limits the capacity to extend media influence beyond its borders. Compared to nations like the US, China, and India, which have their well-developed and independent public diplomacy frameworks, Bangladesh remains behind in this area”.*⁶⁵

It is also noticeable that with limited resources, Bangladesh's public diplomacy is confined to the West instead of Southeast Asia or East Asian culture. Due to a lack of infrastructure and resources, Bangladesh cannot fully harness social media and public diplomacy.

5.5 Issues of Cybersecurity and Data Privacy

Even after more than five decades of independence, Bangladesh still lacks a robust data management system, content ethics, and citizen privacy. This gap became evident when personal data of over 50 million people was leaked from a “gov.bd” domain in 2023.⁶⁶ As a result, ensuring cybersecurity and maintaining data privacy are pressing concerns for public diplomacy efforts. Weak infrastructure mechanisms and inadequate security measures can lead to hacking incidents, data breaches, and compromised official accounts. Unfortunately, Bangladesh lacks a comprehensive media policy and an independent regulatory authority. As noted by an Academic from DU,

*“Bangladesh does not have formal agreements with Google and Meta that regulate social media. Consequently, unlike India or larger nations, Bangladesh cannot exert pressure on these platforms.”*⁶⁷

Since Bangladesh heavily relies on these tech giants for global networks, it lacks the authority to impose restrictions on these services. Bangladesh introduced

⁶⁴ “Demands for Grants and Appropriations 2024–25: Grant No. 15,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, accessed May 04, 2026, https://mof.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mof.portal.gov.bd/budget_mof/435baee9_7cc7_4d33_8cde_2b39ad52637a/118ce_Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs.pdf.

⁶⁵ Interview taken on October 24, 2025.

⁶⁶ “Over 5 crore Bangladeshi citizens' personal data ‘exposed’ online,” *The Business Standard*, July 08, 2023.

⁶⁷ Professor, Mass Communication and Journalism Department, DU, interview taken on October 24, 2025.

the National ICT Policy (2009) but has faced criticisms for overlooking civic engagement strategies. Later, the Cyber Security Act (2023) was added, but due to its controlling approach to digital space, the Act has further intensified debate about balancing freedom of expression and effective digital regulation.

5.6 Digital Divide

As observed, Bangladesh lacks seamless network connectivity, with significant disparities in internet access between urban (71 per cent) and rural areas (37 per cent).⁶⁸ These disparities are further compounded by stark gender disparities. Data indicates that in rural areas, only 23 per cent of females have internet, compared to 66 per cent of males, whereas in urban areas, the figures improve remarkably to 62 per cent for females and 71 per cent for males. Such disparity limits them from reaching the public diplomacy effort when content is shared via social platforms such as Facebook. In particular, women with limited or no access are excluded from this dividend. As one former Ambassador said,

*“Social media is almost a cost-free tool to reach an international audience, but income disparity limits its access. People with a certain level of income can afford and access the internet, while many citizens living in rural and remote areas remain excluded.”*⁶⁹

Furthermore, inadequate digital infrastructure and less advanced technology use (e.g., reliance on 2G networks) restrict inclusive digital engagement in public diplomacy.

5.7 Poor Digital and Media Literacy

Significant challenges persist in Bangladesh since people lack adequate digital and media literacy. Researching 6,500 rural households in 2019–2020, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) revealed that digital literacy is extremely low (77 per cent) in rural areas, and many lack even basic computer operating skills, hindering access to public services.⁷⁰ This low level of literacy helps to spread propaganda, undermines national interests, and weakens overall diplomatic efforts. Often, government and other institutional actors struggle to achieve their goals effectively due to people’s limited ability to interpret messages accurately. Although

⁶⁸ Ariful Hasan Shuvo, “Zero Digital Divide Still a Far Cry for Bangladesh,” *The Business Standard*, February 04, 2025.

⁶⁹ Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to China, interview taken on August 31, 2025.

⁷⁰ “Digital Literacy and Access to Public Services,” BIGD, accessed May 04, 2026, <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/study/digital-literacy-and-access-to-public-services-in-bangladesh/>.

some organisations' initiatives such as 10-minute school and JAAGO Foundation's Digital School, young Bangla, Bangladesh Computer Council's Skills for Employment initiative are noteworthy, their reach remains limited, particularly in rural areas.

5.8 *Regulation of Diaspora Voices*

The influence of diaspora has been mixed with merits and drawbacks. Online activists living abroad spread rumours by posting messages and videos, and they are hard to mobilise in absence of proper institutional frameworks. It is also alleged that long-term educated expatriates are often detached from Bangladesh's current reality, and digitally unskilled migrant workers unintentionally bring country's bad reputation by posting controversial narratives abroad. This has also been reflected through the remarks of the Special Correspondent, ATN Bangla: "social media serves as a source of entertainment for the diaspora. But certain bloggers or influencers use this platform to spread politically charged information, which fuels unrest at home and erodes mainstream media credibility".⁷¹ This denotes that instead of mainstream news outlets (e.g., TV channels, newspapers, and radio), people rely more on social media, which weakens the public information system. In 2023, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) has finalised a draft on Bangladesh National Diaspora Policy known as a "whole-of-society" approach for ensuring engagement in policy debates in their host countries.⁷² However, these initiatives are yet to be fully implemented. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC)'s draft Telecommunication Ordinance (2025) and Cyber Security Act (2023) are important but have limitations in safeguarding privacy, ensuring due process, accountability, and preventing arbitrary enforcement.

6. *Way Forward*

Social media has the strength to disseminate information across borders and reach global audiences. While it is encouraging to see that information spreads so quickly, for Bangladesh, certain initiatives need to use this platform effectively. These include:

6.1 *Ministerial Coordination on Social Media Governance*

Social media should be filtered by the government to prevent the spread of misleading information. Strengthening fact-checking mechanisms is crucial for uncovering the truth. As expressed by an Academic from DU:

⁷¹ Interview taken on September 14, 2025.

⁷² "Unlocking the diaspora potential," *The Daily Star*, July 27, 2023.

“We have to be vigilant about what kind of information is being shared. Is it misinformation, disinformation, or real information?”⁷³

Constructive criticism is healthy, but subjective analyses on religious and political issues need to be avoided. Non-controversial issues should be brought up on social media platforms (e.g., climate change) for proper utilisation of this platform. This has also been supported by a former MoFA official.⁷⁴ Beyond the ICT Division and MoFA, other relevant ministries and institutions should appoint designated spokespersons to ensure the authenticity and reliability of information. In this aspect, the expansion of e-governance services and the development of public grievance portals are crucial means to increase transparency, accessibility, and efficiency in government services.

6.2 *Enhancing Regional Mechanism*

It is appropriate for having interdependency in connectivity; yet, it is essential for any nation to ensure that information flows correctly. As discussed before, citizens shape regional narratives and foreign policy through social media (e.g., India-Bangladesh relations). To stop misinformation and cyber insecurity and maintain bilateral ties and an overall clean image, government initiatives at the regional scale are pivotal. Regional platforms like South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) and Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) are currently playing a crucial role in the case of regional advocacy, but the institutions have been facing various difficulties due to heavy reliance on donors, fragmented regional connectivity, weak cybersecurity, and online engagement tools.⁷⁵ More research should be conducted on digital cyber frameworks and trust-building with neighbouring countries for lawful intersection. From its official page, the government should share accurate information and clarify its position. This will enhance the government’s credibility with both local and global audiences.

6.3 *Innovative Content*

Over the past decades, digital connectivity has rapidly transformed society. Therefore, creating innovative content for social media and public diplomacy is not optional; it is rather essential for Bangladesh. It can work as a powerful tool

⁷³ Professor, Department of Political Science, DU, interview taken on September 06, 2025.

⁷⁴ The former Ambassador to China in Bangladesh, interview taken on September 01, 2025.

⁷⁵ South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), *Annual Report 2022–23* (Lahore: SAFMA Secretariat, 2023); Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), *Annual Report 2023* (Quezon City: MFA Secretariat, 2024); World Bank, *Digital Development in South Asia: Opportunities and Challenges* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022).

for education, influence, and engagement both domestically and internationally. The government should therefore work on a well-supported digital environment to enhance its public diplomacy. As informed by a former Ambassador:

“It is undeniable that social media in public diplomacy is desirable, but it is not effectively used in our country. Bangladeshi missions abroad and even regions without a formal mission, innovative content can work well.”

Instead of stereotypical approaches, producing innovative or creative content like short videos, infographics, storytelling about economic progress, cultural richness, and climate resilience can be more effective to counter negative narratives in international media and attract global audiences.

6.4 *Promoting Inclusivity through Youth Engagement*

In the digital connectivity era, youth engagement and global visibility have been central to Bangladesh’s national progress and image-building. The youth aged 18-24 who are the change agents and the core of the country’s digital transformation constitute a crucial segment (33 million) of the total population. As a former Ambassador aptly noted:

“Today, youth are Bangladesh’s future public diplomats and policy advocates. Considering their mindset and approach, traditional diplomacy is no longer effective. Hence, public diplomacy must align with the aspirations of youth”.

It is also observed that digital participation is uneven, with 65 per cent of Facebook users being male, while female users are comparatively less (only 35 per cent), and digital divide in rural and urban areas limits equitable digital access. To realise potential of social media, inclusivity remains a cornerstone in national digital strategies and the country’s diverse social landscape. In this regard, youth increasingly can act as policy advocates, leveraging social media and digital networks to push for inclusive ICT policies and equitable infrastructure development.

6.5 *Digital Literacy*

Alongside nationwide basic literacy, digital literacy needs to be ensured as it enhances critical thinking, confirms online safety, increases capacity for positive engagement, teaches digital etiquette, and supports awareness of digital rights. It needs to be improved to stop manipulative narratives on social media that can create division in society. One recent example is Australia’s ban on the use of social media for those below 18 years, which could be a lesson learned for

Bangladesh.⁷⁶ Such measures could be taken by the government, alongside strict conditions of a minimal literacy level to guide responsible engagement on social media platforms. Similarly, digital illiteracy is atrociously prevalent among the country's migrant workers, for their awareness and capacity building. To address these limitations, an integrated digital literacy approach can be introduced in school and university curricula so that people can critically assess, create, and communicate information. To enhance such forms of technical and cognitive skills, the government can also facilitate peer learning, community Wi-Fi networks, conduct digital literacy training, and promote awareness of technology's potential, especially in underserved areas. The government's partnership with tech companies (e.g., Rumour Scanner Bangladesh) is useful in facilitating public awareness on digital rights and responsibilities.

6.6 *Skilful Diplomacy*

Social media plays a significant role in taking diplomatic relations forward. Prudent diplomacy can mitigate the challenges related to disinformation and political propaganda. By uncovering the truth, diplomats can work as mediators and create social harmony and enhance public trust in institutions. As explained by a former Ambassador:

"In public diplomacy, communication is central. Smart diplomacy promotes soft power tools (such as language and culture) to create positive experiences. Communication itself is an experience; therefore, a prudent diplomat can handle critical issues smartly".

One notable example is introducing Bangladeshi cuisine (e.g., Kachhi Birani) by Bangladeshi ambassador to India on social media to engage Indian audiences, counter misinformation, and strengthen bilateral trust.

6.7 *More Investment in Public Diplomacy Efforts*

Beyond Facebook, which is the largest market in Bangladesh, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram seem highly pronounced. These are acknowledged as a national image building mechanism in international arena.⁷⁷ These interactive platforms can generate high-volume digital conversations and shape global public

⁷⁶ Josh Taylor, "Millions of children and teens lose access to accounts as Australia's world-first social media ban begins," *The Guardian*, December 09, 2025.

⁷⁷ Claudia Auer, Alice Srugies, and Martin Löffelholz, "The Role of Social Media in Public Diplomacy: Potentials and Reality" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego, CA, April 1–4, 2012), <http://files.isanet.org/ConferenceArchive/d78e5a10950541378f0c2562745a8017.pdf>.

perceptions. For example, “#Bangladesh” has reached over 2.7 million users⁷⁸ who attract foreign audiences. These two platforms are also popular among government officials abroad for direct communication. Since the Public Diplomacy Wing at the MoFA is working with the government, it should actively leverage the channels for enhancing Track 1 and Track 2 diplomacy.

6.8 *Management of Diaspora Narratives*

As already discussed, the role of diaspora on social media is crucial to retaining a positive image of the country. Many members of diaspora are actively involved with political parties that have branches abroad, significantly impacting bilateral ties. Likewise, many diasporas living abroad, including YouTubers and bloggers, are now influencing public perceptions which may not always align with national interests. Regarding diaspora engagement, there remains urgent needs to take effective measures against those spreading anti-Bangladesh agenda and to educate those lacking basic literacy and proper knowledge to counter propaganda. To better understand the trends and behaviours of influencers, social media monitoring and metadata analysis are essential. A meaningful collaboration with MoFA and the host country’s embassy is required to ensure that all the activities of influencers comply with laws and regulations. Besides, the effective implementation of a broader legal and regulatory framework is crucial to ensure large-scale accountability and responsive digital engagement.

7. Conclusion

The role of social media in shaping public perspectives has both opportunities and challenges, often regarded metaphorically by scholars as a “double-edged sword”.⁷⁹ While the positive impact of social media on public diplomacy is evident and well-documented across multiple countries and diverse geopolitical contexts, its drawbacks cannot be overlooked. It is also seen that social media has transformed the practice of diplomacy in the 21st century by enabling real-time engagement, promoting transparency, and enhancing cultural exchanges. These transformative abilities, supported by Habermas’s theories of public sphere and communicative action, have made digital technologies a crucial tool for modern public diplomacy.

However, misuse of social media platforms has become a key concern in contemporary times. In Bangladesh, while the advantages of social media are

⁷⁸ DisplayPurposes, “Best #Bangladesh Hashtags,” accessed May 04, 2026, <https://displaypurposes.com/hashtags/hashtag/bangladesh>.

⁷⁹ Sigurdson and Iyer, “Double-Edged Sword”.

substantial, several barriers hinder its efficacy. These include a lack of digital literacy, insufficient cybersecurity, proliferation of hate speech, and so forth. Another particular pressing issue about the use of social media is the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and spreading fake information and misinformation (notably observed during and after the July Uprising with the neighbouring country, India). Sometimes, the media portrays Bangladesh's social challenges like poverty, corruption, and political instability in a way that adversely affects the country's image on the global stage. In the absence of proper regulatory mechanisms, it has been an arduous task for the government to find online falsehoods and mitigate the spread of digital untruth. Despite the growing importance of social media in the realm of public diplomacy, scholarly research on its impact, especially in Bangladesh's context, is very scant. Thus, working in this area is essential for optimising the full potential of social media in public diplomacy. Besides, the country must invest in combating fake information while simultaneously fostering creativity, innovation, and digital skills. Since Bangladesh continues to navigate the post-uprising era, future research should prioritise informed, data-driven, and context-specific approaches that will address the risks posed by digital tools, particularly social media.

ANNEX

Annex 1: Bangladesh's Potential of Social Media (e.g., Facebook) as a Tool of Public Diplomacy in Various Regions

Region and Target Audience	Strategic Channels via Facebook)	Prime Partners / Institutions	Objectives/ Probable Outcomes
South Asia (e.g., India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, etc.)	Official embassy pages, cultural event posts, student exchange updates, and Facebook Live for events	MoFA, embassies/high commissions, universities, cultural centres	Enhance regional ties, promote cultural heritage, and support Bangladesh's development success, encountering false narratives
Southeast & East Asia (e.g., Thailand, China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, etc.)	Facebook pages with multilingual content, videos on tourism, culture & Rohingya issues	MoFA, embassies, tourism boards, cultural institutions	Enhance Bangladesh's cultural visibility, attract tourists, and foster academic and business exchanges, solving Rohingya crisis
Europe (e.g., France, UK, Germany, etc.)	Facebook campaigns for diaspora events, cultural festivals, youth exchange programs, and virtual exhibitions	MoFA, embassies, Alliance Française / British Council, diaspora associations	Engage diaspora, improve national image, promote cultural diplomacy and educational cooperation
North America (USA, Canada)	Facebook pages targeting students and diaspora, promotion of Bangladeshi festivals, and partnerships with universities	MoFA, consulates, diaspora organizations, student associations	Strengthen diaspora ties, attract investments, highlight Bangladeshi culture and soft power initiatives
Middle East & Gulf (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, etc.)	Facebook groups for migrant workers, cultural awareness campaigns, and live updates from embassies	MoFA, embassies, migrant welfare organizations, cultural associations	Support diaspora, improve government-diaspora engagement, and maintain a positive image of Bangladesh abroad
Online Audience of Other Regions	Official online pages, viral content campaigns, live streaming of cultural events, and interactive posts	MoFA, embassies, international cultural organisations, media partners	Build global awareness of Bangladeshi culture, tourism promotion, and enhance soft power influence

Source: Compiled by the Author, 2026.