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# Social media and cultural diplomacy in developing nations

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### Abstract

Communication and culture are integral part of human existence, no society can thrive without them. The transfer of culture from one generation and nation to another are made possible through the instrumentality of Social media. The internet has made it possible for users to interact with people from other nations with relative ease. This paper critically analyses the use of social media to share cultures. Anchoring on the Diffusion of Innovation Theory this paper finds out that people while using the social media also share ideas, information, art and other critical aspects of culture among people of other nations to foster mutual understanding called cultural diplomacy. It is concluded social media is a modern vehicle driving speedy cultural diplomacy among developing nations, though not without its attendant challenges like increased cybercrimes, leakage of information, anonymity of most users, electricity and low digital media literacy level, among others. Several recommendations were made including the improvement in digital media literacy skills in order to effectively utilise it to propagate their cultures and equally adapt to new ones.

**Keywords:** Social media, culture, cultural diplomacy, development, developing nations

### Introduction

Communication and culture are critical and inseparable components of every society. One can only imagine what the situation can be without communication in the society. Hence, these two intertwine components must necessarily coexist for any meaningful interaction and development to take place in the society. As the culture of a given society evolves, so is their means of communication and interaction with one another.

The advent of digital era has brought about several innovations in the field of communication and cultural studies. Advancement in the area of digital technologies has made social interactions and inter-cultural communication a lot easier and simpler. The internet technology has made the vision of Marshal McLuhan in his concept of global 'village' possible.

As observed by Chen and Zhang (2010, p. 14), "the compression of time and space, due to the convergence of new media and globalization, has shrunk the world into a much smaller interactive field". Seyfi and Güven (2016) <sup>[16]</sup> added that different cultures and communication means have interlaced and started to increasingly affect each other, leading communication and culture to transform into two organic structures that feed each other. This means that the culture in which individuals socialise also to a large extent determines their ways of communication. With globalisation and developments in communication technologies, the world is fast turning into a small village where cultures and communication tools have begun intertwining and interacting by each passing day.

Advancement in communication technology has now expanded exponentially with billions of users all over the world. With the help of the internet people can now be involved simultaneously in many different relationships, all without face-to-face contact. Through high-tech communication, people can now have contact with others with different socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds with different life experiences too, hence increasing the frequency with which people encounter multilingual situations (Martin & Nakayama, 2005) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Notable among the internet enabled innovations that has great impact on modern societies is the social media; an internet enabled online communication mediums or platforms which allow people from different parts of the world to create and share content like ideas, opinion, happening around immediate environment and interact with one another or as a group. Social media is an ever-changing and ever-evolving web-based platform which originated as a way of interacting with friends and family, but today even businesses have taken advantage of the uniqueness and interactivity the medium offers as an indispensable tool which helps in

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providing fast and easier reach to customers in order to boost sales through advertising and promotion, gauge consumer trends and offering customer service or support (Dollarhide, 2019) <sup>[3]</sup>.

The power of social media is inherent in its ability to connect and share information with many people simultaneously. This may take the Social media may take the form of a variety of tech-enabled activities which include photo sharing, blogging, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, business networks, virtual worlds, reviews and much more. Even governments and politicians utilize social media to engage with constituents and voters (Dollarhide, 2019) <sup>[3]</sup>. Travellers use social media to learn about their host countries, establish and maintain relationships, and stay informed with events in their home countries (Sawyer & Chen, 2012) <sup>[12]</sup>.

According to Sawyer (2011) <sup>[13]</sup>, social media have become increasingly popular components of our everyday lives and have provided a context where people across the world can communicate, exchange messages, share knowledge, and interact with each other regardless of the distance that separates them. People tend to use new social media to become more integrated into the host culture during their adaptation and to maintain connections to their home countries.

Social media is a modernise agent of socialisation that has obviously created a social milieu for people to interact with their contemporaries all over the world. With the help of social media, people are now able to share their cultures with others around the globe. This unique aspect of the social media as observed by Georgetown University (2010), have made everyone a publisher and critic of social contents. This however makes possible the interaction of cultures between two or more nations called cultural diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy is simply the exchange of ideas, information, art and other critical aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding (Schneider, 2005) <sup>[14]</sup>. Despite the gains advanced technology and social media have brought to modern societies, it is however not without attendant challenges as observed by Prakapiene and Prakapas (2016) in the areas of efficient management of intercultural communication exchange of good practice and assessment of impact of communication on individuals of different nationalities. This paper tends to critically analyse the conscious and unconscious use of social media in achieving cultural diplomacy in Nigeria.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Diffusion of Innovation Theory**

Diffusion of Innovation theory as propounded by Everett Rogers in the 1962 is concern with how an innovation - new idea, culture, practice, or object which is obtainable in developed climes can be communicated through certain communication channels to achieve the desired change over time among members of a social system (Rogers, 2003).

Diffusion of Innovations seeks to explain how, why, and at what rate new ideas and technology spread through cultures of different nations. It outlines how new technological and other advancements spread throughout societies and cultures, from introduction to wider-adoption. The diffusion of innovations theory seeks to explain how and why new

ideas and practices are adopted, with timelines potentially spread out over long periods. The theory thus explains the way in which innovations are communicated to different parts of society and how quick spreading and adoption of the culture takes place as well as the subjective opinions associated it (Halton, 2019) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **The Concept of Social Media**

According to Dollarhide (2019) <sup>[3]</sup>, Social media is computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities. By design, social media is internet-based and gives users quick electronic communication of content. Content includes personal information, documents, videos, and photos. Users engage with social media via computer, tablet or smart-phone via web-based software or web application, often utilizing it for messaging.

Social Media refers to online communication channels wherein users create and share content, and interact with each other in many different ways. These social media channels provide easily accessible and easily usable platforms and enable the users to communicate with each other freely (Timespro, 2018) <sup>[18]</sup>.

### **The Concept of Culture**

The term 'Culture' can be traced to the Latin words 'cult or cultus' which means tilling, or cultivating or refining and worship. This means cultivating and refining a thing to such an extent that its end product evokes our admiration and respect. Culture is the sum total of way of life of a particular people –it includes the food, clothes, wears, language spoken, and religion of worship. Culture can also be seen as the embodiment of the way in which a particular people think, react and do things among them. It is also the things that we have inherited as members of society. All the achievements of human beings as members of social groups can be called culture. Art, music, literature, architecture, sculpture, philosophy, religion and science can be seen as aspects of culture. However, culture also includes the customs, traditions, festivals, ways of living and one's outlook on various issues of life (The National Institute of Open Schooling, 2012) <sup>[17]</sup>.

According to Gill (2013, p.11) <sup>[5]</sup>, "culture can be described as a system of knowledge, beliefs, procedures, attitudes, and artifacts that is shared within a group. That the cultures with which each of us connects exert a strong influence on our behaviors is beyond dispute". Culture is a learned, shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose meaning provide a set of orientations for members of society. It is a way of life, a complete design for living for a group of people that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs, values, and norms (Rutgers University, n.d.).

The Centre for Advance Research on Language Acquisition cited in Zimmermann (2017) <sup>[21]</sup> further defined culture as shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group. Hence, culture encompasses religion, food, wears and how it is worn, language, marriage, music, belief system, morals sitting pattern, mood of greeting, behaviour with loved ones, etc.

### **Cultural Diplomacy Defined**

According to Jora, (2013) <sup>[8]</sup>, the concept of Cultural Diplomacy is often times generally referred to as 'International Cultural Policy' or 'Foreign Cultural Policy'. It tends to base the concepts of Diplomacy (and derived from it Cultural Diplomacy or Public Diplomacy) exclusively around the state.

Schneider (2005) <sup>[14]</sup> defined cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding. Cultural diplomacy presents an avenue for public diplomacy, which basically comprises all that a nation does to explain itself to the world. Since much of cultural diplomacy consists of nations sharing forms of their creative expression, it is inherently enjoyable, and can therefore be one of the most effective tools in any diplomatic toolbox.

Zamorano (2016) <sup>[20]</sup> pointed out that although cultural diplomacy has grown in importance and have made remarkable improvements in recent years, there is still no consensus definition to the concept. In today's globalized and highly interconnected world, cultural diplomacy is receiving renewed attention. Social, economic and geopolitical transformations have led to a new relevance for international cultural policies. Cultural diplomacy is often commonly framed in terms of soft power: the capacity of persuasion and attraction that allows the state to construct hegemony without using coercive methods.

The application and utilisation of social media in diplomacy is also known as digital diplomacy; a new form of diplomacy which involves the use of digital technologies and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp and Weibo by states to enter into communication with their foreign counterparts/publics usually in a non-costly manner to share cultures and values with each other (Adesina, 2017) <sup>[11]</sup>. This author further explained that digital diplomacy is also a well-established method by which nation states: articulate their foreign policy objectives and co-ordinate their efforts to influence the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiations and other such measures, short of war and violence. It is, in other words, the centuries-long means by which states seek to secure particular or wider interests, including the reduction of frictions between or among themselves. It is the core instrument through which the goals, strategies and broad tactics of foreign policy are implemented. It strives to preserve peace and aims at developing goodwill towards foreign states and peoples with a view to ensuring their cooperation or, failing that, their neutrality (p.2).

### **Social Media and Cultural Diplomacy**

Internet users have in recent years witnessed an explosion of social media in communicating and exchanging meaning information and contact between nations. This has caused many in the international community to draw an immediate connection to the perceived power of social media. As a communications medium, the social media is credited in its inherent ability to "instantly access customized information and engage in omnidirectional (all directions) communication on equal footing as other actors" (Wallin, 2013, p.1).

The social media have help in a great measure to change the narrative of how nations communicate and share ideas,

opinions and some critical aspect of culture with one another. It has open international public discourses and global forum with which cultural diplomacy is made possible. Sevin and Ingenhoff (2018) <sup>[15]</sup> observed that the practice of cultural and public diplomacy on social media have the potential to influence how a nation is perceived by target audiences.

As observed by Sawyer (2011) <sup>[13]</sup>, while cultures around the world value their individual traditions, beliefs, and norms that make them unique, social media links people around the world regardless of differences and geographical boundaries.

According to Chen (2012) <sup>[2]</sup>, has brought human society to a highly interconnected and complex level, but at the same time, it challenges the very existence of human communication in the traditional sense. New media not only influences the form and content of information/messages, but it also affects how people understand each other in the process of human communication, especially for those from different cultural or ethnic groups.

Communicating across the cultural dimensions of nations is quite complex and demands an understanding of those cultural values inherent to the people of a given nation. Due to differences in cultural perspectives and beliefs, and the failure of many nations to meet halfway with their demands and conditions, there has been the need for constant negotiations to patch up differences and resolve cultural conflicts arising in between them (Lebrón, 2013) <sup>[9]</sup>.

### **Benefits of Social Media in Cultural Diplomacy**

The social media is a useful tool for the cross-cultural exchanges and exhibitions to get larger promotion among wider audiences. In the process, it helps to encourage people get first experiences in other countries' arts and culture. Social media has indeed revolutionized communications by providing a stable and affordable platform for ongoing dialogue that goes beyond national boundaries among countries (Grincheva, 2013) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Social media has helped to promote interconnectedness and interdependence of our culturally diverse world. It allow people to communicate and gain access to relevant information quickly as well as and engage with others on the Internet. In today's society, there is an increasing number of Internet users so social media has become more popular in daily patterns and routines. The communication that occurs in these online contexts promotes interactive dialogues that build understanding of different points of view. In social media, people have the opportunity to express their opinions to the public and participate in conversations and dialogue through a common virtual medium (Sawyer, 2011) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Given the centrality of communication in diplomacy, it is hardly surprising that the rise of social media should be of interest to practitioners of diplomacy. It is a trend that has influenced most people who are even outside diplomatic culture, to adjust their 'analogue' habits and finding their own voice in a new information sphere with help of social media (Hocking and Melissen, 2015) <sup>[7]</sup>.

### **Challenges in the use of Social media as Tools for achieving Cultural Diplomacy**

Cultural diplomacy is obviously responding to the changes in the international and domestic environment. The extent to which diplomacy is a social institution is now more visible



than ever. Though, new technological capabilities appear to enhance the capacity for forecasting future trends. 'Newness' in diplomacy today has everything to do with the application of new communications technologies to diplomacy (Hocking & Melissen, 2015) <sup>[7]</sup>. This however is not without its attendant challenges.

Adesina (2017) <sup>[1]</sup> identified three cardinal challenges affecting the use of social media in cultural diplomacy, they include:

- **Information leakage:** This happens where government official secret documents are leaked through the social media to cause unrest, mayhem and disaffection among affected nations.
- **Hacking:** Hacking of social media account is another risk which has existed since the advent of the Internet. This is an unauthorised access into another person's account by fraudsters who used same to defraud unsuspected social media users. Worrisome is the activities of most diplomatic rivals, including both state and non-state actors (such as terrorist organizations) who try to hack into government systems and extract information of use to themselves.
- **Anonymity of Internet users:** The culture of anonymity is a big challenge of digital diplomacy. It appears that most people impersonate others by adopting any persona, address or even attack anyone. Most people mimic and pretend to be someone else, or actively seek to cause mischief in the cause of using the social media.

Other notable issues are that of Intercultural conflicts among users, poor electricity supply, low digital media literacy level and inadequate access to the internet in developing countries.

A possible change of strategies require a change in the attitudes, discourses, behaviours, and strategies of representations of Cultural Diplomacy practitioners. The newer approaches to cultural relations involve a necessary dynamics (Jora, 2013) <sup>[8]</sup>. Social media have help to make possible intercultural adaptation. This involves the process of promoting understanding through interaction to increase the level of fitness so that the demands of a new cultural environment can be met (Sawyer, 2011) <sup>[13]</sup>.

### Conclusion

The digital era has brought remarkable changes in the way we communicate and transmit culture. Social media are notable internet enabled communication mediums that have made the sharing and understanding of some critical aspect of culture possible between nations otherwise called cultural diplomacy.

The Social media have changed the narrative of how countries manage their cultural differences and created a social milieu where different cultures converged and cultural diplomacy, transmission and adaptation takes place. However this is not without its attendant challenges as hacking, information leakage, anonymity of most internet users, poor electricity supply and low internet access in developing countries were identified as militating factors affecting the use of social media in cultural diplomacy.

It is the position of this paper that these above mentioned challenges do not outweigh the remarkable gains the application of social media tool in the advancement of cultural diplomacy. It is a welcome development that has

come to stay and better, easier as well as most common means of driving diplomatic relations among nations.

### Recommendations

1. There should be serious enlightenment among social media users to teach them how best to use them. Most social media are unconscious of the cultural diplomacy role that takes place while engaging with user from other nations.
2. There should be full inclusion and implementation of media education in our educational curriculum. This among other will educate students particularly the secondary level on digital media literacy skills to equip them in expeditiously put the social media to use in order to preserve our culture, share and maintain good cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy among developing countries.
3. There should be a total clamp down on the activities of internet hackers by the government. This is pertinent check on cyber-crimes especially social media hackers. This can be done by developing anti-hacking software to help unsuspected social media users.
4. Leaking of government information is a crime. There should be strict measures to punish offenders.
5. Electricity should be improved, especially in developing nations like Nigeria where internet access is hampered as a result of poor electricity supply.
6. Internet access in terms of cost and accessibility should be improved particularly in rural area where internet providers rarely patronise.

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