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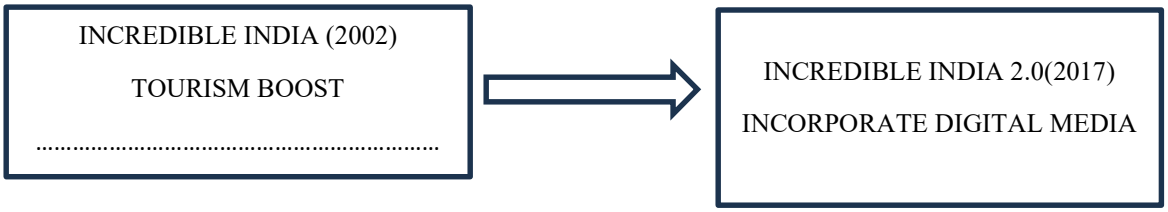
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Incredible India 2.0 : Social Media as a Gateway to Global Branding and Digital Diplomacy

Abstract : This study analysis how social media, especially under the *Incredible India 2.0* campaign, acts as a strategic mechanism for India's global branding and digital diplomacy. Employing secondary data, government reports, social media interpretation, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the paper applies a thematic qualitative approach to analyze India's use of Twitter (now X), YouTube, and other platforms in promoting its cultural heritage, tourism, diaspora interaction, and leadership diplomacy. Vital case studies including International Yoga Day, India's G20 Presidency, and evacuation operations such as Ganga, Kaveri, and Sindhu highlight how digital platforms boost India's soft power while shaping worldwide opinion. Comparative analysis with the United States, China, and the European Union Places India's digital diplomacy within the global communication order. India's branding works best when cultural and developmental narratives are merged with immediate crisis communication, according to the findings. However, sustaining institutional continuity, multilingual outreach, and credibility and reliability in the face of false information are still difficult tasks. The study makes the case that India's digital diplomacy is a cross between real-time strategic communication and soft power projection, providing informative information on how public diplomacy, technology, and global image-making work. To maintain India's standing as important player in digital diplomacy, policy recommendations highlight the importance of different narratives, regional language engagement, AI led monitoring, and cooperation and collaboration with technological platforms.

Keywords : Digital Diplomacy**,** Nation Branding**,** Soft Power, Incredible India 2.0**,** Public Diplomacy**,** Social Media Strategy.

Introduction : The digital era has changed diplomacy by substituting real-time, public-centered digital interaction for traditional state-to-state communication. With its capacity to support nation branding, diaspora outreach, and narrative framing in international politics, social media has become a revolutionary instrument in the field of international relations. The Incredible India campaign was launched in 2002 with the main goal of boosting tourism, marking the beginning of India's journey towards worldwide branding. Incredible India 2.0, a revamped campaign that went beyond tourism to include digital media for wider global participation, was introduced by the government in 2017.



Incredible India 1.0 (c. 2002-2017): Marked by high-production-value television ads and print ads in worldwide publications. The message was artistic and inspirational but inactive. The audience was a consumer.

Incredible India 2.0 (c. 2017-Present): Marked by platform-specific, agile content. It leverages: Promoting hashtags like #IncredibleIndia. Working with international travel and lifestyle influencers. Live-tweeting events like the G20 Summit, International Yoga Day, Content now visibly features "Digital India," space missions (ISRO), and startup success stories, explicitly combining the brand to economic and technological capability. Over the past ten years, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), embassies, and government representatives have adopted social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter to counter misinformation, demonstrate foreign policy priorities, and advance cultural diplomacy. This study explores how India has used social media to combine cultural identity with strategic foreign policy goals by using it as a branding and diplomatic tools and Instruments. The arrival and spread of social media and digital technology have drastically changed how countries engage, communicate, and carry out diplomacy internationally. The conventional frameworks of developing and implementing foreign policy have been reinterpreted by this pattern change, which is sometimes called the "era of digital diplomacy." Once restricted to private meetings and diplomatic cables, the core of diplomacy has now extended beyond geographical borders and found new manifestations via online platforms and channels. Today, diplomats use Twitter accounts as much as they do formal state documents, managing a complex web of social media platforms, online forums, and digital interactions to collaborate with foreign peers, global citizens, and non-state actors. The inclusion of technology in diplomatic practices has not only transformed communication but has also reformed the nature and reach of international relations. Through digital diplomacy, governments can avoid traditional media intermediaries and directly address the global population, impacting public opinion and creating narratives on an exceptional scale.

Research Question: *How has social media under the Incredible India 2.0 framework reshaped India's global branding and Digital diplomacy?*

Literature Review : The notion of nation branding, stated by *Simon Anholt (2007)*, argues that states, like corporations, must project a positive image to gain worldwide advantage. Nation branding incorporates with *Joseph Nye's (2004)* theory of soft power, which highlights the ability of countries to attract and co-operate rather than coerce. Study suggests that countries increasingly dependent on branding to influence foreign publics and build legitimacy in worldwide politics *(Szondi, 2018).* The rise of social media diplomacy ("Twiplomacy") has altered international relations. Studies by *Bjola and Holmes (2020)* demonstrate how international organizations and states use platforms such as Twitter and Facebook for crisis communication and public outreach. *Manor (2021)* highlights that digital diplomacy is no longer a supplementary tool but essential to statecraft. Scholars such as *Singh (2019) and Chatterjee & Mitra (2021)* have explored India's adoption of social media to engage global audiences. India's digital diplomacy has been seen in events such as the International Day of Yoga, diaspora outreach programs, and crisis management during the Ukraine conflict (2022). Yet, current literature often provides narrowly on cultural promotion or case studies, which leaves a gap in comprehending the engagement between social media, branding, and strategic foreign policy. The incorporation of social media into diplomatic practice has fundamentally altered the ways in which states communicate with worldwide publics. Early scholarship emphasized the shift from closed-door, government-to-government diplomacy toward a stronger networked and visible form of communication *(Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Castells, 2008*). This evolution, often termed *digital diplomacy* or *Twiplomacy*, has seen Twitter emerge as a preferred platform due to its immediacy, visibility, and ability to connect with both elites and broader publics *(Manor, 2019; Zaharna, 2020*).*Palash (2021),* in his dissertation *Public Diplomacy in Social Media: An Examination of Twitter Use by Foreign Embassies in the U.S.*, provides one of the most systematic examinations of embassy practices in this domain. Drawing on *Cull's (2019)*

taxonomy of public diplomacy, Palash analyzed the Twitter activity of 27 foreign embassies in Washington, D.C. during January 2020. His findings reveal that while embassies actively use Twitter to project national images, promote cultural narratives, and disseminate official policy positions, their level of interactivity and audience engagement varies widely. Some embassies adopt a broadcasting model, focusing on one-way information dissemination, while others employ dialogic strategies to foster relationships with journalists, policymakers, and diaspora communities.

These findings align with earlier studies of embassy communication. *Pamment (2013)* argued that digital diplomacy reflects an extension of traditional soft power practices, with embassies using platforms to shape narratives and improve visibility. *Sevin and Ingenhoff (2018)* emphasized that embassies often prioritize elite audiences on Twitter, while Facebook and Instagram serve as tools for mass or cultural outreach. Similarly, *Kampf, Manor, and Segev (2015)* highlighted that embassies differ in their thematic emphasis, ranging from political and security narratives to culture and trade promotion. Moreover, research indicates that digital diplomacy is not only about message dissemination but also about building trust and credibility in fragmented media environments *(Adesina, 2017; Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2019)*. *Palash's (2021)* findings reinforce this perspective, demonstrating that embassies that adopt interactive strategies—such as responding to comments, using local hashtags, and engaging with diverse stakeholders—tend to generate higher levels of engagement. The emergence of *digital diplomacy* has been a defining feature of 21st-century international relations. *Shanta Barman (2024)* highlights the transformative role of *digital platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, YouTube, and blogs* in reshaping diplomacy, policy outreach, and global image-building. Her study positions digital diplomacy as a response to the demands of globalization and technological advancement, where foreign ministries increasingly use ICT tools to conduct negotiations, enhance transparency, and engage directly with global citizens. Existing scholarship supports this redefinition. *Hassan (2024)* emphasizes that nearly all UN member states utilize social media in diplomatic affairs, confirming the widespread adoption of *e-diplomacy practices* across the globe. Scholars note that digital diplomacy here serves as both a strategic foreign policy instrument and a public diplomacy tool *(Chaudhuri, 2023; Thussu, 2022)*. At the same time, the literature consistently recognizes risks. Barman (2024) underscores cybersecurity threats, disinformation, and challenges to confidentiality, echoing findings from *Real Instituto Elcano (2022),* which stress the tension between traditional norms of secrecy and the expectations of transparency in digitalized diplomacy. The concept of platform imperialism *(Jin, 2015)* further demonstrates how reliance on Western-controlled platforms creates asymmetries in influence, limiting the sovereignty of developing nations in the digital sphere.

Research Gap : Despite growing studies, limited scholarship systematically links India's *Incredible India 2.0* initiative with its strategic diplomatic outcomes. This paper addresses this gap by evaluating social media as both a branding instrument and a foreign policy tool.

Research Objectives :

1. To analyze how the *Incredible India 2.0* campaign utilizes social media for international branding.
2. To examine the role of social media in shaping and influencing India's foreign policy communication.
3. To evaluate the influence of digital campaigns on India's soft power projection and global perception and standing.
4. To identify challenges and opportunities in merging social media with Digital diplomacy practices.

Methodology : This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and secondary data–based methodology.

Data Sources :

- Government documents: Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Prime Minister of India, MyGov India, PIB.
- Social media analytics: Twitter hashtags (#IncredibleIndia, #IndiaAt75, #G20India) etc., YouTube views, Instagram reach.
- Global indices: Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, Soft Power 30, Brand Finance Nation Brands, Reuters, Associated Press (AP), Bloomberg, BBC, The Economist, TIME, CNN, Forbes, Harvard Business Review.
- Peer-reviewed articles from Scopus, Web of Science, and government reports, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), The Diplomat, Carnegie India, Brookings India, Pew Research Center.

- Industry Reports & Data: NASDAQ, Crunchbase, Statista, Datareportal, Brand Finance Nation Brands Report.

Analytical Framework :

- **Nye's Soft Power Theory** (2004): Evaluating cultural diplomacy, values, and narrative influence.
- **Anholt's Nation Brand Hexagon** (2007): Assessing India's branding across six dimensions (tourism, governance, exports, culture, people, investment).
- **Thematic Analysis**: Identifying recurring themes in India's social media-driven diplomacy.

Analysis and Discussion

Social Media in India's Global Branding : Social media has become the center of *Incredible India 2.0*, transforming promotion from traditional TV and print to interactive digital storytelling.

- **Digital Diplomacy and Leadership Branding: -**The Indian government, especially Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has effectively utilized social media to build a tailored and globally impactful national image, most prominently during India's 2023 G20 Presidency. Through the #G20India hashtag and the theme *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("The World is One Family"), official accounts and the PM's own posts merged policy messaging with vibrant visuals, cultural showcases, and informal leader interactions, demonstrating an image of contemporary yet culturally rooted India. (G20 India Official Website, PMO India's X feed, Sept 2023 ORF, BBC).
- **Economic Powerhouse and Innovation Hub**: social media is actively used by the Indian government to promote India as a global center for startups and digital public infrastructure (DPI). Campaigns such as #StartupIndia demonstrate unicorn success stories across platforms like LinkedIn and X, strengthening India's position as the world's third-largest startup ecosystem and environment (Economic Survey of India 2022–23, PIB). Simultaneously, the global adoption of *UPI* in countries like France, UAE, Singapore, and Mauritius is worldwide promoted via official releases and viral content, portraying India as a leader in fintech and digital governance (NPCI, RBI, Economic Times, Reuters).
- **The Diaspora as Brand Ambassadors: -**The 32-million-strong Indian diaspora is possibly India's most powerful branding tool on social media. Celebrating Indian Festivals Abroad like Diwali and Holi celebrations in Times Square (New York), Trafalgar Square (London), or the Burj Khalifa (Dubai) are widely shared online. This integrates Indian culture and presents it as a part of the global mainstream. Advocacy and Crisis Response*:* The diaspora actively counters negative stories about India and encourages positive stories. They present as a bridge, explaining Indian contexts to worldwide audiences and vice-versa. Event Coverage*:* "Diwali celebrations light up world landmarks" (Times of India); "Modi Madison Square Garden event" (2014). Studies: "The Indian Diaspora as a Strategic Asset"(ORF Report*).*
- **Challenges and Risks in the Current Scenario: -** While social media boosts nation branding, it can also harm India's image by intensifying religious conflicts, political division, environmental concerns, and misinformation. Deepfakes and fake news spread Fastly, sometimes triggering international repercussions and reputational hazards, while isolated incidents involving Indian tourists abroad can reinforce negative stereotypes and harm the *Incredible India* brand. Moreover, social media usually becomes a point of geopolitical information warfare, promoting divisive and hyper-nationalistic descriptions rather than a bold international image (Oxford Internet Institute; Reuters; AP News).

Social Media as Strategic Diplomacy : India has established digital diplomacy through the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), using social media channels like X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube for real-time diplomatic interaction, crisis handling, and diaspora participation. Indian embassies and diplomats consistently share policy changes and urgent information, as seen during the withdrawal of Indian students from Ukraine, while initiatives such as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas are publicized online. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, among the most followed global leaders on social media, strengthens these platforms to encourage India's development, cultural identity, and global leadership ang guidance.

The key features that differentiate social media from traditional media can be outlined under the following factors.

Comparative Positioning

Through campaigns like #IncredibleIndia and the export of its digital public infrastructure (Aadhaar, UPI, Digi Locker, Cowin), India Showcases openness, democratic values, and digital inclusivity particularly across the Global South distinct from the U.S.'s policy-led digital strategy, China's state-centric Digital Silk Road, and the EU's regulatory diplomacy centered on GDPR and ethical norms (RSIS, 2023, Livemint, 2022,Wired, 2021, ORF, 2023).

	Traditional Media	Social media
Creation and Distribution of Content:	Principle of single-to-many recipients model (Tulisova, 2017).	principle of multiple-to-multiple source model (Tulisova, 2017).
Interactivity:	all communication in traditional media is unidirectional; content flows from the creator to the consumer. In terms of technological interactivity, social media has an entirely different nature than traditional media.	social media enables users to engage on content created by their friends, followers, family or peer group. All comments and feedback are in real time (Tulisova, 2017).
Transparency:	The source and origin of the content can be obscure.	The source of information could be easily identifiable and accessible to all. (Tulisova, 2017).
Speed:	A significant amount of time is needed to disseminate information.	Instant and updates and shared information in real time.
Cost and Regulatory Barriers to Content Creation and Distribution:	There are high production and distribution costs with rigorous government regulation. (Bhor et al., 2018).	low entry and distribution costs with platform-based and continually evolving. (Bhor et al., 2018).
Focus or objective:	Platforms through which to gather and shared news and information. (Tulisova, 2017)	Platforms where people come to interact and connect with friends, family, acquaintances and recently also organizations, communities and various causes. (Tulisova, 2017)
Reach and Numbers:	These have a restricted audience and predetermined figures based on geographical location and physical circulation.	These possess a global reach with rapidly scalable audience numbers driven by the internet and algorithms processes.
Convergence:	which is basically format dependent. (Leiner et al., 2009).	Social media Platforms truly represent convergent media types (Leiner et al., 2009).
Nature of Content:	Content is typically formal and polished/refined/edited in nature.	The Material is dynamic, its nature is constantly evolving and, in many cases, content is raw and original, captured and distributed to audiences as events unfold.
Control over Content:	Content is managed by editors, owners, and regulatory authorities.	Content is managed by individual creators and platforms via algorithms and community guidelines.

India's Old and New Public Diplomacy.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH- Traditionally, India has depended on soft power to compensate for finite hard power resources, turning upon the political and moral legacies of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. During the 1950s and

1960s, India utilized its democratic values, rich civilizational heritage and tradition, and commitment to non-aggression through the global anti-colonial movement and the Non-Aligned Movement (Nye, 2004; Markey, 2009). Modifying elements of the British public diplomacy model, India developed approaches centered on international broadcasting, intellectual and research networks, and cultural academic collaborations (Cull, 2008; Melissen, 2005). Additionally, India has aimed though with mixed results to utilize international sporting events as instruments of diplomatic involvement and image-building (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

THE MODERN APPROCH : Since 2000, India has broadened its public diplomacy beyond historical tools by engaging foreign businesses, the Indian diaspora, development collaboration, nation-branding through mega events, and digital reach to younger audiences (Cull 2019, Nye 2004). The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) formally joined social media with the launch of @IndianDiplomacy in 2010, followed by @MEAIndia in 2011 (MEA, Government of India). Today, @MEAIndia is among the most-followed foreign ministry accounts internationally, providing real-time updates on high-level bilateral and multilateral involvements through multimedia information (Twiplomacy, 2023). In contrast, @IndianDiplomacy focuses on cultural storytelling and showing a positive story of Brand India to international audiences (Manor 2019, MEA Annual Report).

COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS FOR RECENT INTERNATIONAL EVENTS ON TWITTER : The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has made social media diplomacy a key instrument of Modern Indian diplomacy, with its X (formerly Twitter) account among the most well-known official foreign ministry accounts worldwide. Platforms like @MEAIndia and @meaMAD allow real-time aid to Indians abroad, substituting slower offline complain mechanisms and improving consular efficiency (Mohilay & Anvity, 2023). This web outreach has assisted significant evacuation and rescue operations, consisting Operation Ganga (Ukraine,2022), Operation Sankalp (Red Sea,2023), Operation Kaveri (Sudan,2023), Operation Indravati (Haiti, 2024), and evacuations from Israel–Palestine and Iran war zones (MEA reports).

Strengths of India's Social Media Diplomacy : India's strong digital presence led by the Prime Minister's and MEA's highly followed social media accounts allows online communication of foreign policy positions and involvement with its 35-million-strong worldwide diaspora. Social media has boosted crisis communication and consular cooperation, as seen during Operation Ganga, while interactive programs such as #AskTheSpokesperson make diplomacy more visible and people-centric. Through planned digital narration, India presents itself as a proponent of digital democracy and a developing voice of the Global South, attaining wide global reach at comparatively low cost compared to conventional diplomatic means.

Weaknesses and Challenges : India's digital diplomacy faces drawbacks due to its significant reliance on Hindi and English, decreasing global reach compared to multilingual strategies implemented by China and the EU. Excessive dependence on Prime Minister Modi's personal social media presence, along with unaligned messaging across ministries, Diminishes institutional stability and narrative clarity. Digital gaps, responsive campaign styles, internet shutdowns, and data-privacy issues further erode inclusive reach and the reliability of India's digital democracy narrative. Moreover, delayed implementation of AI, big-data diplomacy, and advanced multilingual instruments places India at a competitive disadvantage internationally.

Findings : Social media boosts India's soft power by matching cultural diplomacy with foreign policy objectives. *Incredible India 2.0* has successfully broadened branding beyond tourism into strategic diplomacy. India's digital diplomacy is highly effective in diaspora participation but less effective in global geopolitical stories. Obstacles remain in achieving consistency, countering misinformation, and competing with nations with stronger branding strategies.

Conclusion : India's digital diplomacy under Incredible India 2.0 shows how social media has reformed nation branding by presenting India as a technologically proficient and globally involved actor beyond its conventional cultural image. Initiatives such as International Yoga Day, the G20 Presidency, and real-time crisis communication show social media's two role as a soft power enhancer and a key policy tool. However, Obstacles such as leadership-centric narratives, restricted multilingual engagement, and susceptibility to misinformation emphasize the necessity for better institutional collaboration. Overall, a more diverse, resilient, and technologically advanced digital diplomacy framework is significant for sustaining India's global impact in an increasingly interconnected geopolitical environment.

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