Exploring Digital Diplomacy Practices amid Covid-19 Pandemic and its Challenges: Perspectives from Sri Lankan Diplomats

M. G. H. Madusha

University of Colombo, Sri Lanka
mghmadusha@gmail.com

Abstract

The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic forced states to shift their diplomacy practices into digital platforms to stay connected with the outside world while serving their citizens abroad. Consequently, Sri Lanka also enhanced the level of Digital Diplomacy practices to adapt to the 'new-normality' brought by Covid-19. This paper focused on examining the shifts in Digital Diplomacy as a response to the pandemic while exploring the challenges faced by diplomats in adapting to this new form of diplomacy. A snowball sample of eight diplomatic officers attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka were selected for the study. In-depth interviews were conducted for data collection and thematic analysis was used for data analysis. The study found digital diplomacy practices prior to Covid-19 under three main themes namely, traditional digital communication tools, limited digital public engagement and initial steps toward digital services. Digital Diplomacy practices after Covid-19 are presented under five themes as; expanded digital communication social media for public engagement, enhanced online services, adoption of virtual platforms and online portals and data management. This study further found that when practicing Digital Diplomacy, officers face challenges as, absence of legal or policy frameworks, inefficiencies in virtual meetings, officers' reluctance, limitations in capacity, lack of citizens' adaptability, data security issues, inadequate digital platforms and repository systems and, issues due to other state conditions. This study provides useful implications for policy makers on the effective use of Digital Diplomacy practices for national interest.

Keywords: Challenges, Covid-19, Digital Diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

With the impact of globalization and the massive improvement of Information and Communication Technology, internet and social media, diplomatic missions were moved to digital with the purpose of reaching a greater audience while overcoming

the limitations of traditional diplomacy. As per Verrekia (2017) the origins of Digital Diplomacy can be traced back to the United States of America (USA) and after USA, several other countries in Europe have been noted for their attempts to incorporate digital tools into their statecraft. In Asia, India took a leading role in Digital Diplomacy and certain other regions in the world did not have much progress in Digital Diplomacy (Verrekia, 2017).

Particularly, the spread of Covid-19 global pandemic impacted diplomacy in an unprecedented way as the wheels of international diplomacy came to a grinding halt with the physical diplomacy being suspended by restrictions and lockdowns (Manor, 2021). The pandemic forced countries all over the world to accelerate and enhance the use of ICTs across many societal spheres, including diplomacy (Wekesaa et al., 2021). As per Rashica (2020) it was very hard to believe that Digital Diplomacy could replace traditional diplomacy, however, the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic proved the opposite. In the spring of 2020, a number of high-level meetings were held by the leaders of the G7, the G20, the United Nations, and the European Union, using Digital Diplomacy practices and tools (Perrett, 2020, as cited in Hedling & Niklas, 2021).

Sri Lanka, as a part of the international system carried out her public diplomatic missions mainly using conventional methods with fewer involvement of digital platforms, however, with the pandemic, similar to other countries, Sri Lanka was also forced to enhance the 'Digital Diplomacy' practices than before. Yet, the Sri Lankan government still engages in limited digital diplomatic practices in individual and organizational levels without an established Digital Diplomacy strategy, plan, or policy (Jayatilaka, 2020; Ranaweera, 2023). In other words, Sri Lanka's use of Digital Diplomacy is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, even with the limited use, there are success stories of Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka such as 'Contact Sri Lanka' portal and the launch of Sri Lanka Online Platform (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020, 2021), which demonstrates the country's potential to achieve foreign policy goals with Digital Diplomacy. Hence, it is evident that Digital Diplomacy needs to be further embraced into the current foreign affairs of Sri Lanka.

As above, even though Digital Diplomacy is still an emerging and relatively new area to Sri Lanka, many countries in Western, Arab and even in African and Asian continents have started practicing Digital Diplomacy for years. As a result, there is an increasing interest in academia in Digital Diplomacy. Yet, as per Nyewusira (2019), the existing literature on Digital Diplomacy mainly focuses on developed regions such as Europe and America even though the practice is worldwide. Similar ideas were presented by Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei (2021) that although Digital Diplomacy blossoms in many regions, studies conducted in Arab and Middle East are very rare. A similar situation can be observed in the Asian region as well. Thus, a

research gap on the concept of Digital Diplomacy was identified especially among developing or non-Western counties, emphasizing the need to conduct more research on Digital Diplomacy in diverse contexts, as the adaptation of Digital Diplomacy practices in developing or non-westers countries could be rather different or unique. In order to bridge this identified gap, a qualitative study was conducted with the objective of examining the shifts in Digital Diplomacy practices of Sri Lanka as a response to the pandemic, while also exploring the challenges faced by diplomats in adapting to this new form of diplomacy. With this research it is expected to answer the question 'how is Digital Diplomacy practiced in Sri Lanka?'

This research was intended to focus on the experiences and perspectives of diplomatic officers attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Sri Lanka, using in-depth interviews and generating common themes on practices and challenges relating to Digital Diplomacy. The study provided significant research implications on various Digital Diplomacy practices by Sri Lankan diplomats with a comparative analysis between pre and post Covid-19, reflecting Sri Lanka's journey towards digitalization of public diplomacy. Further, challenges faced by diplomatic officers provide various policy implications regarding the way forward with Digital Diplomacy. Findings of this study provide readers with a context-specific understanding of Sri Lanka's experience with Digital Diplomacy.

2. Theories of Diplomacy and Digital Diplomacy

2.1. Diplomacy

The concepts 'diplomacy' and 'public diplomacy' have been used as synonyms which center on diplomatic communication between political entities and people usually in foreign countries but, in some accounts, also domestic publics (Huijgh, 2016). It was observed that there are traditional and modern views of public diplomacy. Traditional or the 20th century public diplomacy is conceptualized in the literature as state-to-state diplomacy with information-messaging, cultural projection and international reputation management (Huijgh, 2016). Bull's view of diplomacy and Watson's characterization of diplomacy – two of the most commonly used definitions for diplomacy as per Bjola (2015), cater for the traditional view of public diplomacy. Bull defined diplomacy as "the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means" (Bull, 1997 as cited in Bjola, 2015). Watson defined diplomacy as "the process of negotiation between political entities which acknowledge each other's independence" (Watson, 1984 as cited in Bjola, 2015). Where both definitions are concerned, it is clear that the most prominent characteristic of diplomacy is conducting negotiations via peaceful means to achieve the interests of states. As per Bjola (2015), both definitions captured the fundamental feature of diplomacy as a nonviolent approach to reconciling interests among international actors, especially states.

The 21st century public diplomacy or the new public diplomacy is built upon the idea of the formation of relations through dialogue and networking activities by many actors above and below the level of national government and different types of nongovernmental actors at home and abroad (Huijgh, 2016). Going with the modern view, many scholars have identified diplomacy as the relationship of various actors in international relations (Purwasito & Kartinawati, 2020), conducted under the guidance of presidents and prime ministers as well as lawyers, scientists, economists, aid workers, and of course, ambassadors (Pop, 2021). Literature reveals that there are several forms of diplomacy based on diplomatic relations, diplomacy engagements and core functions (Constantinou et al., 2016), which cover different aspects of diplomacy, including but not limited to; great power diplomacy (Navari, 2016), developing states diplomacy (Calleya, 2016), crisis diplomacy (Avenell & Dunn, 2016), coercive diplomacy (Jakobsen, 2016), citizen diplomacy (Tyler & Beyerinck, 2016), Digital Diplomacy (Gilboa, 2016) and, consulates and consular diplomacy (Pasarín, 2016).

2.2. Digital Diplomacy

Digital Diplomacy has been interpreted, defined and understood in different yet similar ways by researchers and practitioners alike (Olubukola, 2017). Many terms with different aspects have been used to expalain Digital Diplomacy (Manor, 2018) such as 'e-diplomacy' (Rashica, 2018; Ranaweera, 2023; Verrekia, 2017; Wekesaa et al., 2021; Pop, 2021), 'internet diplomacy', 'network or net diplomacy' (Manor, 2018; Wekesaa et al., 2021), 'cyber diplomacy' (Manor, 2018; Ranaweera, 2023; Wekesaa et al., 2021; Pop, 2021), 'diplomacy 2.0' (Wu & Sevin, 2022; Huxley, 2014; Manor, 2018), and 'virtual diplomacy' (Ranaweera, 2023; Wekesaa et al., 2021).

Due to different viewpoints and terminologies, Digital Diplomacy lacks an official or commonly agreed clear definition (Verrekia, 2017; Manor, 2018). There are different definitions of scholars addressing different arenas of Digital Diplomacy. For instance, Pop (2021) and Wekesaa et al. (2021) defined Digital Diplomacy as the use of internet and ICT with diplomacy. Kurbalija & Höne (2021) defined Digital Diplomacy as use of social media in diplomacy. Huxley (2014) defined Digital Diplomacy as state leaders' activity on social media sites such as Twitter or Facebook. Richard H. Solomon (1997, as cited in Ranaweera, 2023) has comprehensively defined 'virtual diplomacy' as "interactions of an economic, political, and social nature that are conducted through electronics as opposed to traditionally communicating face-to-face." This definition focused on different areas that a diplomat has to focus with the shift of traditional diplomacy towards digital or 'virtual diplomacy'. And Manor (2016) defined Digital Diplomacy as the overall impact ICTs have had on the conduct of diplomacy; ranging from the email to smartphone applications at both the institutional and personal level. Manor has also defined the term very

comprehensively, focusing on the technology, impact, tools and the levels of practicing Digital Diplomacy.

As the theories that can explain the rational of usage and application of digital tools in diplomacy in a sensible manner, two theories were identified, namely; 'practice theory' and 'change management theory'. According to Holmes (2015a) 'practice theory', which emerged out of the "practice turn in social theory" seeks to bridge many of the dualist positions that were obtained from constructivist approaches. There, diplomacy is understood as a discrete practice rather than understanding it though structured theories. Digital Diplomacy professionals are ultimately engaged in the 'practice of politics' through engagement with other foreign and domestic parties using multiple ICT and social media tools and can be understood as a form of 'practice theory in public diplomacy' (Holmes, 2015a). Digital Diplomacy as a form of 'international change management' has been presented in the book "Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice" edited by Bjola and Holmes (2015). Adoption of Digital Diplomacy is an implication of change of practices of how diplomats engage in information management, public diplomacy, strategy planning, international negotiations or even crisis management. According to the authors, there are two dimensions where Digital Diplomacy facilitates change management; namely policy level and institutional level (Holmes, 2015b). Altogether, the above theories try to understand Digital Diplomacy as a practice and as a form of change management. In this study also, it is expected to explore the practice of Digital Diplomacy pursuant to a change in the global phenomena due to the outbreak of a global pandemic, both in policy level and institutional level.

2.3. Conceptual Framework for Digital Diplomacy

Manor (2019) has provided a conceptual framework rooted in the term 'the digitalization of public diplomacy'. He has identified digitalization of public diplomacy as a long-term process in which digital technologies impact the norms, values, and working routines of MFAs, as well as the metaphors or self-narratives that diplomats employ to conceptualize their craft. Hence digitalization of public diplomacy has three dimensions; normative, procedural and conceptual. Manor's framework has also identified three factors; organizational, national and global, which influence the digitalization process of public diplomacy by diplomats (Manor, 2019). Based on the inspirations received from Manor's framework, the following model (Figure 01) has been designed as the conceptual framework of the study.

Figure 01: Conceptual Framework for Digital Diplomacy
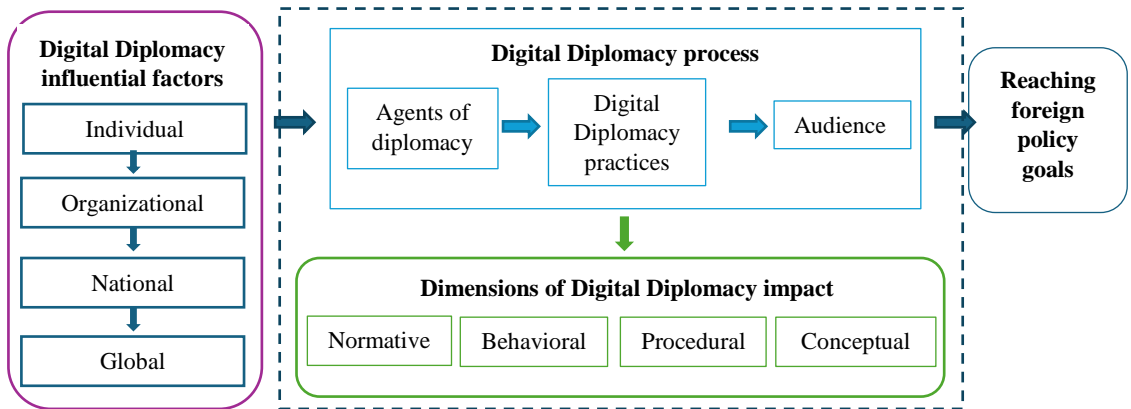
S*ource: Based on the literature review*

2.4. Digital Diplomacy Practices

According to Hedling & Niklas (2021) the 'practice' idiom in Digital Diplomacy can be used to describe a range of concrete phenomena from mundane aspects of local e-mail protocol to ceremonial use of social media in state representation or increasingly structured activities of teleconferenced negotiations in international organizations. Hence it is clear that 'practice' is the established use of a tool. Digital Diplomacy inlcudes the use of social media and several other tools that are being used including messaging applications, email, video conferencing, official websites with digital platforms (Manor, 2016; Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei, 2021; Jayatilaka, 2020; Ariyawardana, 2021) by several countries, which had led established practices all over ther world. As per Madu (2018) official websites were initially utilised solely for providing information however, as of today, these MFA websites facilitate the contact of citizens with diplomatic staff abroad (Abduazimov, 2021), practicing consular diplomacy. Among social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook were popular (Rashica, 2018; Wu & Sevin, 2022; Manor, 2018; Verrekia, 2017), but several other social media including Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram were also in use (Huxley, 2014; Ranaweera, 2023; Bilate & Zou, 2022). Online meetings and conferences were popular with the Covid-19 outbreak and are still in use. Zoom, MS Teams, Google and Tencent platforms were used in such practices (Verrekia, 2017; Ranaweera, 2023; Bilate & Zou, 2022). Chat bots (Manor, 2021) big data modelling (Manor, 2021; Kurbalija & Höne, 2021) smartphone applications (Manor, 2016; Huxley, 2014), Artificial Intelligence (Kurbalija & Höne, 2021) and virtual embassies (Manor, 2018) were among the Digital Diplomacy practices presented in referred literature.

2.5. Challenges of Digital Diplomacy

As Abduazimov (2021) mentioned, Digital Diplomacy has its pitfalls and cannot represent all the benefits of face-to-face diplomacy because it minimizes the non-verbal part of communication in negotiations. European diplomats were speaking out about the constraints of operating online, such as the inability to "read a room" or engage in corridor diplomacy in order to reach consensus on sensitive issues (Barigazzi et al., 2020; Heath, 2020, as cited in Hedling & Niklas, 2021). Many scholars pointed out that cyber security and defense concerns are a challege to Digital Diplomacy due to information leakage and hacking (Pop, 2021; Gunawardane & Jone, 2022). Misleading information (Pop, 2021; Gunarathne, 2019; Abduazimov, 2021), anonymity (Olubukola, 2017; Jayatilaka, 2020), verbal attacks and hate speech (Manor, 2016; Ranaweera, 2023), lack of knowledge about the usage (Rashica, 2018; Verrekia, 2017) and technical barries (Manor, 2016; Purwasito & Kartinawati, 2020) were also identified as common challenges to Digital Diplomacy.

3. Methodology

This study focused on exploring Digital Diplomacy practices by Sri Lanka prior to and after the Covid-19 outbreak and, to identify challenges faced by diplomatic officers when practicing Digital Diplomacy. This is a qualitative study, conducted during the year 2023. Sample of 08 foreign service officers attached to MFA of Sri Lanka were selected using snowball sampling technique. The primacy contact was made through personal contacts and snowball sampling technique was used thereafter. Sample profile of respondents is provided in Table 01. Prior to data collection, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, anonymity and the confidentiality of the collected data. Sample profile was created upon receiving respondent's consent to publish the same. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Both pre-determined and spontaneous questions were raised based on the answers provided by the interviews and further clarifications were sought where necessary. Pre-determined questions were raised using an interview guide. Data was collected from 30th July 2023 to 25th August 2023. Out of the eight interviews, five were conducted as face-to-face interviews and three were telephone interviews. Telephone interviews were conducted with the respondents who were assigned to foreign missions. Data analysis was done using thematic analysis, with the purpose of identifying main Digital Diplomacy practices in Sri Lanka prior to and after Covid-19, and challenges faced by Sri Lankan foreign service officers when practicing it.

Table 01: Sample Profile

Respondent No.	Age	Educational Attainment		Missions assigned by region (Not in order)	Total Experience in Foreign Service (Years)	Grade
		Bachelor's Degree (whether a related discipline or not)	Other qualifications			
01	54	Bachelor's degree in other discipline	Masters's degree in related discipline	South-East Asia, Europe, Middle East	18	Grade I
02	53	Bachelor's degree in other discipline	Professional Qualification and a Postgraduate Diploma in related discipline	Europe, South-East Asia, EU, East Asia	25	Grade I
03	*	Bachelor's degree in related discipline	Masters's degree in related discipline	Europe	*	Grade III
04	55	Bachelor's degree in other discipline	Foreign Diplomatic Trainings	East Asia, Europe. UN	25	Grade I
05	38	Bachelor's degree in related discipline	Masters's degree in related discipline	Europe	08	Grade III
06	56	Bachelor's degree in other discipline	Masters's degree in related discipline	Western & Eastern Europe, South Asia	23	Grade I
07	35	Bachelor's degree in other discipline	-	CHOGM, SAARC	10	Grade II
08	54	Bachelor's degree in other discipline	Reading for a master's degree in a related field	East Asia, South-East Asia, Europe, South Asia, Australia	25	Grade I

*Limited personal information was given by the respondent
**Specific missions assigned were not disclosed based on the request by the respondents.
Source: Field Data, 2023

4. Analysis and Discussion

Analysis of data gathered from interviews has provided different perspectives about Digital Diplomacy practices of Sri Lanka prior to and after the Covid-19 outbreak, and different challenges encountered by respondents when practicing Digital Diplomacy. Based on their responses, themes were identified, and explanations are presented with excerpts in this section.

4.1. Digital Diplomacy Practices Prior to Covid-19 Outbreak

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Sri Lanka started adopting ICT and digital tools in diplomacy since 1990's. MFA has an IT division named 'Cypher Division' which is responsible for handling and introducing ICT tools and practices in the ministry. Several practices were identified as the practices that existed prior to Covid-19. Some of such practices are not in use anymore, while most of these practices were used at a minimum level prior to Covid-19. These practices were categorized under three themes namely; traditional digital communication tools, limited digital public engagement and initial steps towards digitalization and under each theme, several Digital Diplomacy practices that existed prior to Covid-19 are discussed as sub themes.

4.1.1. Traditional Digital Communication Tools

Fax Communication

The use of fax as one of the oldest practices of Digital Diplomacy which was there since 1990's. However, fax was eventually replaced by email. Today, according to respondents, the scanned copy of a fax is being emailed as the formal practice of communication among the ministry and its divisions. However, by the time Covid-19 broke out, respondents implied that the use of fax was no longer there.

> *"The mode of communication when we joined was the Fax. Now we mostly use the fax format. But we transmit the fax messaged via email" (Respondent 06).*

Email Usage

Email has become the main formal mode of communication at MFA and all the respondents have used email since they joined as diplomatic officers. Initially, MFA had used an in-built email system which was later replaced by 'Gmail' with ministry domain (*mfa.gov.lk*). Emails were mainly used to send a formal information faster, till the officers get the hard copy of the same. Rather than including message in email body, emails were used to send with the scanned copies of the official documents attached. Sometimes this attachment is a memo or a 'fax' massage.

> *"We mainly used memos. We emailed the memo. Even in Europe when I wake up in the morning there may be 50 emails in my inbox, from our government and from the UN"* (Respondent 03).

4.1.2. Limited Digital Public Engagement
Official Websites

As a practice of Digital Diplomacy, MFA and individual missions overseas had maintained official websites to provide information to interested stakeholders about Sri Lanka. Prior to Covid-19, websites were merely used to provide basic information about the country and the scope of MFA or the relevant missions. It was clear that prior to Covid-19, official websites were there only to serve the requirement of having a website rather than to serve diplomatic goals through the website. Citizens or foreigners were unable to reach MFA or missions directly through websites.

Social Media Presence

Prior to Covid-19 Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp were the main forms of social media platforms used by MFA for official purposes. Twitter was the recommended form of social media by the MFA to have in every embassy. In the MFA, the ministry, minister and the state minister had twitter accounts. In addition, each embassy and ambassadors also had separate twitter accounts. Ministry also had an official Facebook page which was not active as of now.

> *"By 2017, all departments had twitter. Even the Minister… (purposefully removed the name) …. was also very active on twitter"* (Respondent 03).

WhatsApp for internal communication

WhatsApp was only used for internal communication among the Ministry staff and Missions' staff. When there were special projects, officers planned and communicated such projects through WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp was not used as a mode of communication between citizens and officers prior to Covid-19. Refer to some excerpts from the respondents below.

> *"WhatsApp was there since 2015. We used WhatsApp chats and groups to discuss many matters. Prior to discuss policy matters, we created WhatsApp groups to get inputs"* (Respondent 03).

4.1.3. Initial Steps Toward Digital Services
e-DAS

In 2018, MFA introduced an 'Electronic Data Authentication System' commonly known as e-DAS, to provide consular services to the public, online. e-DAS was developed with the purpose of granting authentication for documents online, providing overseas embassies the ability to check authenticity of documents by scanning a QR code. However, the system was not customer friendly and after the introduction in 2018, there was no further development to the system, until very recently.

"We introduced e-DAS in 2018. When people came with certificates, we verify them, upload a scan copy to the e-DAS and issued a document with a numeric code and a QR code. When the customer goes to the embassy and presents the QR code, embassy can check the uploaded documents in our system. But it was not very customer friendly back then" (Respondent 07).

Online Appointment System

In addition, there was an online appointment system for those who come for consular services even prior to Covid-19. However, the system was a very primary token system and was not user friendly and resulted in many delays.

4.2. Digital Diplomacy Practices After Covid-19 Outbreak

With the sudden outbreak of Covid-19 global pandemic, existing Digital Diplomacy practices were enhanced with new features. In addition, several new practices were introduced to diplomatic officers in Sri Lanka. Such enhanced practices and newly initiated practices are presented below under five themes and several sub themes as; expanded digital communication, social media for public engagement, enhanced online services, adoption of virtual platforms and online portals and data management.

4.2.1. Expanded Digital Communication
Extensive use of email

After Covid-19 outbreak, to prevent the spread of the virus MFA switched from paper-based documents to e-documents. MFA sent emails attaching softcopies of such e-documents. Email was used extensively, reducing the use of paperwork. As a new initiative, email was used as a mode of communication with citizens. Citizens sent emails to the embassy with their requests and responses. Certain consular services were also provided via email. Documents that were submitted physically were sent via email to the consular affairs division for further proceedings. Some documents were sent directly to the consular affairs division by the divisional secretariat offices. Further, embassies also communicated certain information with citizens via email, including community awareness, news and updates regarding the events organized by the embassy for citizens.

"Before Covid when there's a death the people had to physically come to us with documents. But now they email those through the divisional secretariat. Covid-19 was the main reason for that" (Respondent 07).

Revamped Official Websites

During and after Covid-19, major changes were done to MFA and embassy websites. Both MFA and missions frequently published larger amounts of updated information. Also, there were contact portals published in MFA official website for citizens to

contact the MFA. In addition, MFA official website provided links to social media pages handled by the ministry.

"We have 'Contact Sri Lanka portal' and invest Sri Lanka information for foreign investors published on our ministry website" (Respondent 02).

4.2.2. Social Media for Public Engagement
Mandatory Social Media Presence

As per the respondents, after Covid-19 outbreak, embassies were advised to maintain active twitter and Facebook accounts as a mandatory practice. Missions started to use Facebook and Twitter for community interactions with the citizens abroad. Further, the MFA and embassies started official Instagram pages and YouTube channels. They organized certain events online and live streamed via YouTube and Facebook. Information and invitation links for certain events were published in Twitter and Facebook pages. In addition, missions have used their official Facebook pages for economic diplomacy, promoting tourism and national image.

".... for economic diplomacy also we used Facebook a lot. To promote tourism, to promote the image of the country. This happened though the official social media platform of the embassy" (Respondent 05).

Use of WhatsApp and Telegram for Crisis Communication

It was found that diplomatic officers used WhatsApp to communicate with citizens during Covid-19. According to respondents, WhatsApp is still being used to communicate with citizens in conflicting areas. 'Telegram' was also used by the MFA to communicate among diplomatic officers regarding official matters. There were Telegram groups among Ministry officials. In addition to mandatory social media platforms, the MFA and missions adopted different social media platforms such as Viber, Facebook Messenger, LinkedIn and WeChat, based on the available technologies in the host country.

"Recently there was a civil conflict in Sudan. And we brought around 60 Sri Lankans home. We only used social media to because the telephone communications were broken. We exchanged information through WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger" (Respondent 07).

4.2.3. Enhanced online services
Development of e-DAS

e-DAS system, which was a system that existed prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, was rapidly developed after the outbreak. The service has integrated with the Examination Department and Registrar General Department (RDG). Apart from the Sri Lankan missions abroad, e-DAS facility was extended to several other countries as well.

> *"...we have developed e-DAS. Now examination certificates go live. We were given view-only facility by RGD. We're planning to fully integrate so that any citizen abroad can get original birth/ death/ marriage certificates, translated and attested though our missions overseas. We have extended the facility to India, UAE, China, Thailand, Bangladesh also. Through that they can check if a particular document is authenticated or not"* (Respondent 07).

Streamline online appointments

Consular division of the MFA obtained a version of 'Mobitel e-channeling' system as the 24/7 operating call center for online appointments. Once the request was placed, appointment was scheduled 1.5 days after the request with a specific time. With that, waiting time of the individuals were minimized.

Prior to Covid, the MFA delivered a service of issuing a 'Life Certificate' where the relevant citizen was required to be physically present to get the certificate. It was a certification issued annually, to Sri Lankan pensioners who live abroad, certifying that they are among the living. During Covid-19, senior citizens were unable to physically be present at the embassy, therefore, missions introduced a 'Zoom' based practice to contact the pensioner via a video conference and issued life certificates, which is still in use.

> *"Each year, pensioners have to send a life certificate to prove that they are still living. General requirement is that they have to come to us. ...during the pandemic we have introduced a system to interview them via zoom video conferencing to ensure that they are living. Now we're continuing the practice"* (Respondent 06).

4.2.4. Adoption of Virtual Platforms
Virtual Meetings

All the respondents stated that introduction of virtual meetings was one of the main practices newly introduced to Sri Lanka, with the Covid-19 outbreak. Previously, there were tele-conferences on rare occasions, however, in most cases, when the minister wanted to consult diplomats, such meetings were held physically in Colombo. With the overnight lockdowns due to the spreading of Covid-19, the entire world had to find solutions to meet and work remotely. Sri Lanka was on par with the other states when adapting to online meetings. In multi-lateral sessions Sri Lanka adopted the technology used by that organization. Sri Lanka joined both bi-lateral and multi-lateral meetings including SAARC ministerial meeting, UNHRC sessions and several other inter-governmental sessions online using 'Zoom'.

While using Zoom for bi-lateral and community meetings, the Cypher division (IT division of MFA) had introduced 'Web X' platform for meetings within the MFA

and its departments (missions) abroad. It was a more sophisticated platform than Zoom and with more features. MS Teams was also used to conduct online meetings and respondents stated that after Zoom, it was the mostly used meeting platform with external parties.

"Ministry has a separate platform for virtual meetings – Web X. I think compared to zoom, that had more facilities. We used it for both official meetings and negotiations. Once I arranged a meeting on exports in Berlin, and we shared our link with Sri Lanka Export Development Authority" (Respondent 05).

Digital Diplomatic Events

In addition, with the support of digital tools, it was found that Sri Lanka hosted several virtual sessions and events. For the first time, Sri Lanka held a credential ceremony online using Zoom platform. Moreover, several community and cultural engagements were held virtually by individual missions.

"Sri Lanka held a credentials ceremony online, via zoom for the Indian HC, Brazil and Iran Ambassadors to Sri Lanka. We designed our own concept allowing the delegates to show and award credentials by showing it to the camera after a brief introduction. It was 1st time in the world. Then UAE did a similar thing" (Respondent 07).

4.2.5. Online Portals and Data Management
Introduction of 'Contact Sri Lanka' Portal

After Covid-19 outbreak, Sri Lanka introduced several online portals to contact citizens abroad. The MFA introduced a common portal for every citizen outside who wanted to return to Sri Lanka to register with the Ministry. The portal was named as 'Contact Sri Lanka' portal. Other than that, individual missions separately initiated their own portals by way of Google forms, World press portal and other means to gather information of citizens relating to the missions. All the respondents mentioned 'online portals' as a very useful practice to gather information when required.

"Contact Sri Lanka portal was initiated by Dr. Ravinath Ariyasinghe, then foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka. It was a portal opened for Sri Lankans outside, aiming to bring Sri Lankans back to motherland. It worked very well and it really helped lot of people. I think there we have a success story" (Respondent 03).

"In Vietnam during Covid, we created a Google form and shared it among citizens through the embassy Facebook page to create a database" (Respondent 08).

Transition to E-Documents

Covid-19 replaced many hard copies with soft copies. The MFA reduced many paperwork and started to email the soft copies of the documents. Other than in highly important cases, all the official work was done using e-papers. Further, with the introduction of e-newspapers the MFA stopped its old practice of sending a huge parcel of newspapers to each embassy weekly.

Based on the responses it was found that, recently, the Cypher division has started a project to store the scanned copies of documents, instead of maintaining it physically. Documents were scanned and stored in Hard Disks. In addition, the Consular affairs division is using a cloud storage to store their data to which officers can access from anywhere facilitating remote working.

> *"...we started scanning of documents. Cypher division stored the data in hard disks. But in the consular affairs division we store everything in the 'telecom' cloud. For that we can access anytime anywhere"* (Respondent 07).

4.3. Challenges of practicing Digital Diplomacy

Several challenges have been faced by the officials when practicing Digital Diplomacy due to various internal and external reasons. Following paragraphs explain such challenges in detail.

Absence of legal or policy frameworks

There was no consistent national policy on Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka. As a result, there are many duplications and confusions among the staff of the MFA and between the ministry and other Government organizations. On the other hand, there are no clear legal frameworks to govern the practice of Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka. The existing laws do not provide a legal framework regarding the relationship with citizens in a digital age. Also, there are gaps in data security laws all over the world.

> *"There's no national policy or consensus or agreed position with all stakeholders on this matter"* (Respondent 04).

> *"....there is an issue with data security. There are ongoing court cases regarding that. Still there is no law to cover this, not anywhere in the world"* (Respondent 07).

Inefficiencies in virtual meetings

The use of digital technology to have virtual meetings was not always effective. In bi-lateral meetings there are many aspects than verbal communication to reach is best interests for Sri Lanka. It may be a handshake, a friendly chat, or even a conversation during a meal. Based on the country dynamics diplomats had to decide what to tell

and what not to tell. And even during a multi-lateral setting, there are many bi-lateral discussions involved during a walk to the conference hall. But in a virtual meeting none of these were present. Virtual meetings were not effective to discuss sensitive matters in multi-lateral meetings. When voting is scheduled to take place for a resolution or proposal, meeting virtually does not support to hold effective negotiations among states.

> *"Virtual meetings are good, but diplomacy is something which is conducted in person. There is a personal dimension of diplomacy. You meet a person, shake hands, have a meal. That aspect is not there in online communication"* (Respondent 06).

> *"Voting taken via online was a disadvantage to the country against whom a resolution is to be brought. When there were UNHRC resolutions passed online regarding Sri Lanka, Iran and Venezuela, all 3 countries were against it"* (Respondent 03).

Officers' reluctance

It was found that reluctance of diplomatic officers to use Digital Diplomacy practices was a challenge to practice Digital Diplomacy. Due to the absence of proper policy or legal framework to back up the officers towards paper-less diplomacy, officers continued to rely on paper-based communication without adapting to digital technologies. Another reason for this reluctance was the challenge faced by officers when handling social media platforms. Diplomatic officers were reluctant to share information on social media due to the secrecy of the assignments. Some do not intensively use social media due to the fear of getting backfired or gaining a negative image. Also, there may be invasions to privacy.

> *"Officers worried abot using social media. Sometimes there may be backlashes, they are being monitored. Government might find that certain content is not appropriate, communities might give negative comments etc."* (Respondent 06).

Other reasons for reluctance of the officers were individual traits or personalities. Some did not support because they did not like to practice it. Respondents admitted that it is easy to deal with technology if the staff is relatively young. Some seniors were not very much supportive towards digitalization. Some did not fully support Digital Diplomacy because of the fear that their jobs would be replaced by virtual platforms. Already there are virtual embassies with lesser amount of human involvement, so they were worried for their job.

Some officers did not like digitalization because they gained benefits from exploiting the conventional practices of diplomacy. With the introduction of digital practices,

they were unable to gain benefits or to exploit people. Hence, they were not supportive towards Digital Diplomacy.

"Even with this e-system for new passport – many were reluctant. It reduced the time to issue a new passport from 3 months to 3-4 weeks. People don't like it because you can't malpractice when the technology is presented" (Respondent 01).

Limitations in capacity

The lack of human, technical and financial capacities are other challenges. Human capacity issues occurred due to inadequate number of officers and lack of competencies of existing officers. When practicing Digital Diplomacy, IT literacy and training is required but officers had to use ICT tools without proper training. Tech savvy younger generations managed but others lagged behind. Further, missions in general dealt with lack of human resources. Therefore, once the ICT practices came it was an additional burden because there were no adequate staff to handle new practices. Officers, while conducting all the other duties managed databases, maintained contact with citizens online and arranged online meetings.

Practice of Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka was challenging due to poor technological capacity. When Covid-19 pandemic resulted in locked downs, the MFA converted their conventional practices to digital and introduced virtual meetings. But officers faced many technological issues due to poor connectivity. Further, officers assigned to outside missions did not have infrastructure such as video camera, conference rooms for online meetings or other essential equipment to practice Digital Diplomacy. Even though the requests were made, those were not provided overnight. Officers had to find their own solutions to practice Digital Diplomacy.

"Even with UN system Infrastructure was not in place. Global South didn't have any infrastructure. Still not. It's the digital divide. West and developed were far ahead than us" (Respondent 03).

Lack of financial capacity was also a huge challenge for Sri Lanka to practice Digital Diplomacy. Going for ICT always included an initial investment and both software and hardware for ICT were very costly. However, Sri Lanka's economy was not doing well and funding was always a problem. Although the Government of Sri Lanka was very supportive towards adaptation of Digital Diplomacy practices, Government was helpless in some situations.

"….the Government was very supportive. But Government also did not have money. So, when we requested all these equipment, government was not in a position to give approval overnight. It took some time" (Respondent 05).

Lack of citizens' adaptability

Diplomats faced many challenges due to lack of adaptability towards the digital technologies by the citizens. Citizens still relied on paperwork. When the MFA introduced e-DAS system although it fulfilled the need very easily, people were still asking for a printed certification instead of QR code. They were reluctant to trust that a QR code will provide access to authenticated documents.

> *"Even with fully online system, people still want physical documents. Our customers when we only issue a QR code come and ask whether this is all they got and why they were not given any real certificate. Even people in younger generations and even graduates do that. That attitude is there"* (Respondent 07).

Some citizens were reluctant to adapt Digital Diplomacy practices due to poor ICT literacy. Many of the Sri Lankan citizens are not familiar with ICT. When analyzing the mode people used to make online appointments, nearly 40% needed support from a third party to make an appointment using a simple process. Therefore, they are very reluctant to adapt to these new systems. In addition, some citizens are reluctant to adapt to Digital Diplomacy because they did not like it. Some are reluctant due to privacy concerns and some due to their negative attitude towards change. There were citizens who came without appointments and expected the officers to serve them without appointments, which has been a very challenging situation to deal with.

Data security issues

Another major challenge of Digital Diplomacy is security issues. One of the most important features of diplomacy is secrecy. And with the use of ICT tools, there are vulnerabilities to secret information. Certain technologically advanced countries do not use ICT to send and receive confidential information due to the possibility of leakage by hacking.

> *"... confidential emails are sent directly to the personal email of the high commissioner or the ambassador. But I don't think they are secure. Some countries such as Russia do not send their secure communications via electronic means. They dispatch human couriers (people). They don't trust technology"* (Respondent 06).

Also, there were instances where the service providers exploited user data.

> *"Since the online service providers of MFA such as email and social media are companies incorporated in other states, therefore, sensitive information transmitted through their servers may be provided to another party by the company itself for business purposes"* (Respondent 07).

Inadequate digital platforms and repository systems

"The absence of a common network platform (intranet) between the ministry and missions outside, as a challenge. Whenever they wanted to share or find information, they were unable to share it by way of a common folder or platform. Rather, they had to pick one by one separately and email or do it through another social media platform such as WhatsApp. Although the MFA practiced remote working, still all the work was done via email" (Respondents 06 & 07).

"Our computers are not connected. We don't have intranet which I see as a challenge" (Respondent 06).

Except in the consular affairs division, the MFA did not have a data repository system with remote access. There was a data archiving system in place, but data was stored in hard drives instead of a cloud storage. If officers want to refer archived documents, they have to physically come to Cypher division to find it. That was not suitable for a ministry that has its departments outside the country.

Issues due to other state conditions

Practice of diplomacy was challenging due to the conditions and practices of other states in the world. Some countries did not have access to technologies due to sanctions etc., and some countries did not prefer to use certain technologies. In some states digital connections were destroyed due to conflicting situations and practice of Digital Diplomacy was challenging in such situations. Apart from that there were some legal restrictions of other countries that affected the Digital Diplomacy practices in Sri Lanka.

"There were issues with some countries who did not have e-commerce platforms. With them it was hard to manage contacts during Covid" (Respondent 02).

"...we're conducting that (Digital Diplomacy) through modern technology based on availability of facilities in the host countries. In some countries there is no access to ICT. One example is Myanmar. ITC is totally unavailable. May be in Iran as well" (Respondent 04).

It is apparent that both internal and external factors created challenges for the diplomatic officers when practicing Digital Diplomacy.

4.4. Discussion

When comparing Digital Diplomacy practices of Sri Lanka it was found with the empirical literature that certain similar practices have been identified. Manor (2016) mentioned the gradual shift from letters to email as an initial practice of Digital Diplomacy. Similarly, respondents in this study explained that they have transformed

to sending scanned copies of letters through email. Use of fax was identified as a Digital Diplomacy practice in Sri Lanka (Ariyapperuma, 2020, as cited in Ranaweera, 2023). However, this study identified fax as an outdated practice in Sri Lanka. Kurbalija & Höne (2021) and Madu (2018) stated that, states maintained official websites for information purposes even prior to starting of interactions under Digital Diplomacy. Abduazimov (2021) confirms that later, the MFA websites facilitated contact of citizens. Similar findings were revealed by this study.

Twitter and Facebook were the most popular social media platforms in Sri Lankan Digital Diplomacy. Manor (2018), Rashica (2018), Madu (2018) and Ranaweera (2023) also revealed Twitter as the most popular social media platform, followed by Facebook, Instagram and Telegram. Jayatilaka (2020) stated that missions were given the discretion to select social media platforms. According to literature, messaging platforms became popular after the outbreak of Covid-19, and the findings of this study confirm the same. As per literature, conduct of online meetings were standardized only after Covid-19. This study also revealed that Sri Lanka started practicing online meetings only after the outbreak of Covid-19. Abduazimov (2021), Bilate & Zou (2022), Ariyawardana (2021) and Hedling & Niklas (2021) stated that Zoom and MS Teams are popular platforms for video conferencing. Findings of this study have revealed certain practices that were not found in literature. Although there are practices as electronic data authentication system (e-DAS), online appointment system, call center facility and issuing of life certificates via email those were not found in referred literature. The reason for this difference may be due to the fact of leaving consular services out of the traditional definition of diplomacy. As per Pasarín (2016), even though the 20th century disdained consular diplomacy as the *'Cinderella service'* within the MFA, the 21st century has restored the role of the consular affairs segment of diplomacy as an agent of securitization both in civil protection operations and border security policy, because serving citizens abroad can be considered as one of the primacy reasons for the very existence of diplomacy. Pasarín (2016) further states that developments of IT solutions have deeply transformed the management of consular affairs. Similarly, the findings of this study also provide insights on the use of Digital Diplomacy tools towards enhanced 'consular diplomacy'. Additionally, it is being found that use of e-newspapers, hard drive and cloud storage were also unique to this study. Altogether, it has been found that compared to past, the use of enhanced Digital Diplomacy practices after Covid-19 has given Sri Lanka the ability to maintain a proper balance between the interactions between citizens and the MFA, and in state-to-state relations.

When it comes to the challenges, absence of national policies and strategies were identified by Madu (2018) and Bilate and Zou (2022). Similar findings were made under this study. Respondents mentioned inefficiencies in virtual meetings as a

challenge. Abduazimov (2021), Hedling & Niklas (2021) and Rashica (2018) also identified absence of non-verbal communication as a challenge to Digital Diplomacy. Similar to the study, Bilate & Zou (2022) identified personal traits as a reason for reluctance among officers. Further, issues faced by diplomatic officers when handling social media were also identified in studies conducted by Manor (2016) and Ranaweera (2023). Bilate & Zou (2022) have identified 'capacity issue' as a common challenge, especially in third world states. Lack of knowledge about the usage (Rashica, 2018; Verrekia, 2017) and lack of skilled human resources (Bilate & Zou, 2022; Madu, 2018) were identified as human capacity issues of Digital Diplomacy. Bilate and Zou (2022) also found financial issues as a common challenge. Similar to this study, adaptability issues of the citizens due to lack of ICT literacy and poor attitudes were identified as challenges to Digital Diplomacy by Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei (2021) and Bilate and Zou (2022). Further, Manor (2016), Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei (2021), Rashica (2018) and Jayatilaka (2020) identified security issues as a challenge to Digital Diplomacy. However, inadequate digital platforms and repository systems' reliance of paper-based practices and reluctancy of officers due to fear of losing jobs were not identified in referred literature as challenges under Digital Diplomacy practices.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explores the Digital Diplomacy practices in Sri Lanka and challenges faced by the diplomatic officers. The study found a wide range of Digital Diplomacy practices, and challenges in relation to Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka. Five main practices were identified as Digital Diplomacy practices prior to Covid-19 outbreak. After Covid-19 outbreak, existing practices were enhanced with novelties. In addition, certain practices were identified as new practices introduced after the Covid-19 outbreak. Practices such as e-DAS system, online appointment system, issue of life certificates via email, use of e-newspapers and use of paper-less storages in Hard Drives and in SLT Cloud were unique findings of this study. As challenges, the study derived eight major themes with several sub themes. Among those, inadequate digital platforms and repository systems, relying on paper-based practices by the officers and citizens and reluctancy of officers due to fear of losing jobs were challenges unique to this study. This study proposed several policy implications to policy makers of Sri Lanka to enhance public diplomacy through digital means. Sri Lanka has widened Digital Diplomacy practices after Covid-19, but there is room for more. Sri Lanka should develop the Digital Diplomacy practices more to promote nation branding, community engagement and favorable negotiations among state and non-state actors to achieve Sri Lanka's national interests. However, enhancing such practices alone, without addressing the challenges will not provide the expected outcomes. It is recommended to start with setting a consistent national policy that

facilitates Digital Diplomacy, with a sound legal framework which will promote officers and citizens to practice Digital Diplomacy. With that, officers will be motivated to enhance the existing practices towards different dimensions of diplomacy. Simultaneously, the Government should set strategies to gradually mitigate capacity issues and security concerns of Digital Diplomacy. With the above, Sri Lanka will be able to maintain an ideal level of Digital Diplomacy practices that assist the maximization of national interest of Sri Lanka.

6. Limitations and Further Research

The main limitation of this study was the limited sample size and the context-specific nature of the study. Although the study provides valuable policy implications, the findings of the study will be difficult to generalize due to the aforesaid limitations. Scope of this study is also a limitation of this study as it focused mainly on the practices and challenges of Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka. The possibility of observation and data triangulation was limited in zoom and telephone interviews. Future research may focus on conducting more generalizable research beyond the aforementioned limitations. Further research may be conducted to further investigate the findings of this study or on several other areas of Digital Diplomacy with a wider scope.

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