Social Media Framing and Nigeria's Soft Power Diplomacy: Interrogating Digital Narratives and International Perceptions

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Abstract

Nigeria's international image is increasingly being formed in a communicative space it does not fully control: a fragmented digital environment where social media narratives travel faster than diplomatic clarification, and where perception often stabilizes before policy can be properly understood. In this context, what the world "knows" about Nigeria is less a reflection of official representation than the outcome of repeated framing across global digital and media networks. This study examines how social media framing shapes Nigeria's international perception and soft power diplomacy under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Drawing on framing theory, it adopts a qualitative interpretive design and analyses secondary data from social media discourse and international media reporting across four interconnected domains: insecurity, economic policy, governance, and religious conflict. The analysis shows a consistent convergence of narratives into a dominant crisis-oriented structure. Reports of insurgency and violent conflict are frequently elevated into broader signifiers of state fragility. Economic reforms such as subsidy removal and exchange rate adjustment are commonly interpreted through lenses of hardship and instability, often detached from their stated policy intent. Governance discourse particularly around corruption and institutional weakness operates as a stabilizing master frame through which other issues are read. Religious conflict narratives, meanwhile, are increasingly absorbed into global moral and human rights registers, intensifying external normative scrutiny. The study concludes that Nigeria's soft power challenge lies less

in the absence of reform or cultural capital than in the structural dominance of crisis framing within digital information systems. This produces a widening gap between domestic policy trajectory and international perception, with direct consequences for diplomatic credibility and global positioning.

Keywords: social media framing; soft power; digital diplomacy; Nigeria international perception; crisis narratives

Introduction

The basis of power in international relations has undergone a significant transformation. Where classical traditions privileged material capabilities military strength and economic capacity contemporary global politics is increasingly structured by perception, legitimacy, and communicative influence. This shift is most clearly captured in the concept of soft power, defined by Joseph Nye as the ability of states to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 1990; 2004). Yet, the conditions under which such influence is exercised have been fundamentally altered by the rise of digital communication technologies.

The proliferation of social media has disrupted the state's traditional control over its international image. Rather than being projected through formal diplomatic channels, national reputation is now co-produced within a decentralized and highly contested digital environment. As Ojo (2016) observes, public diplomacy depends on credibility and audience trust; however, these foundations are increasingly strained in an era where narratives are generated and amplified by a multiplicity of actors beyond state control. Digital platforms have thus transformed soft power from a relatively managed resource into a volatile field of continuous negotiation.

Nigeria provides a compelling case through which to examine these dynamics. Since independence in 1960, its international image has been shaped by a persistent tension between promise and crisis. While early postcolonial expectations positioned Nigeria as a potential regional leader, subsequent experiences of civil conflict, military rule, and governance challenges have produced enduring reputational constraints (Omar et al., 2025). Although the

return to democratic governance in 1999 signaled a moment of reintegration, structural issues particularly corruption, insecurity, and institutional fragility continue to shape external perceptions and undermine diplomatic credibility.

At the same time, Nigeria possesses substantial, though underutilized, soft power resources. Its cultural industries most notably Nollywood and Afrobeats as well as its extensive diaspora networks, project alternative narratives of creativity, resilience, and global relevance. However, as Eshiett and Dayıoğlu (2023) argue, the absence of a coherent strategic framework has limited the translation of these assets into sustained diplomatic influence. This gap between cultural visibility and diplomatic impact remains a defining feature of Nigeria's global engagement.

The rise of digital media further complicates this already fragile image landscape. Social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube have restructured the production and circulation of information, enabling real-time, transnational, and largely unregulated flows of communication. Within this environment, framing becomes central. By privileging certain aspects of reality while obscuring others, frames shape how events are interpreted and, ultimately, how states are perceived. In Nigeria, framing dynamics are particularly evident across key issue domains. Security narratives, especially those surrounding insurgency and terrorism, often amplify perceptions of instability (Oluyemi & Badmus, 2025). Economic narratives reinforce longstanding representations of risk (Anemikaye & Diane, 2024), while governance narratives particularly those related to corruption continue to erode international trust (Omar et al., 2025). Religious narratives, especially those concerning violence and persecution, are similarly amplified within global advocacy networks, often undergoing simplification as they circulate in digital spaces.

These processes are further intensified by the spread of misinformation and disinformation. As Abdulazeez et al. (2025) demonstrate, false and emotionally charged narratives are more likely to gain traction within algorithmically driven environments, thereby distorting perception and reinforcing negative frames. In such a context, the struggle over national image becomes not merely a matter of communication, but a contest over narrative authority itself.

For diplomacy, the implications are profound. Traditional models premised on controlled, state-to-state interaction are increasingly inadequate in a world where public opinion is shaped within decentralized digital networks. As Abdulkadir et al. (2024) note, international communication now operates as a multidirectional process involving both state and non-state actors. Under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Nigeria's efforts to reposition itself globally are therefore mediated and often constrained by the dynamics of this digital public sphere.

What emerges, therefore, is a deeply contested communicative terrain in which Nigeria's international image is continuously negotiated rather than fixed. While counter-narratives rooted in cultural dynamism and economic potential persist, crisis-oriented frames historically embedded and digitally amplified continue to exhibit greater durability (Adetokunbo-Edmund, 2016). Against this backdrop, this study advances a systematic interrogation of how social media framing across four critical domains security, economic policy, governance performance, and religious violence structures international perceptions of Nigeria and conditions the effectiveness of its soft power diplomacy under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. In doing so, it moves beyond fragmented accounts of media effects to provide an integrated analysis of how digitally mediated narratives interact to shape Nigeria's position within the contemporary global public sphere.

Conceptual/Theoretical Review

Social Media Framing

The concept of framing occupies a central place in media and communication studies, providing a critical lens through which the construction of meaning in public discourse can be understood. Its intellectual origins are commonly traced to the work of Erving Goffman, whose seminal text *Frame Analysis* (1974) conceptualizes frames as interpretive schemata that enable individuals to locate, perceive, and make sense of events within their social environment. For Goffman (1974), frames are not passive reflections of reality; rather, they actively structure experience by organizing perception and guiding interpretation.

Building on this sociological foundation, framing was further developed within the field of communication by Robert Entman, who offers one of the most widely cited definitions. Entman (1993) conceptualizes framing as the process of selecting

certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. This formulation is especially relevant to the present study, as it highlights the capacity of media narratives not merely to report events, but to shape how those events are understood within broader political and normative contexts.

Subsequent scholarship has extended framing analysis into the domain of international communication, emphasizing its role in shaping the global perception of states. Studies such as Adetokunbo-Edmund (2016) demonstrate how international media representations of Nigeria have historically been dominated by frames of corruption, instability, and underdevelopment, thereby contributing to a persistent negative national image. Similarly, Oluyemi and Badmus (2025) show that the framing of terrorism and insecurity in Nigeria often amplifies narratives of state fragility, reinforcing external perceptions of systemic crisis. These studies underscore the extent to which framing operates as a powerful mechanism in the construction of national reputation.

However, the emergence of social media has fundamentally altered the dynamics of framing. Unlike traditional media systems, which are characterized by institutional gatekeeping and editorial control, social media platforms facilitate a more decentralized and participatory communicative environment. As noted by Nwabuokei (2025), digital actors including influencers, diaspora communities, and transnational advocacy groups now play a significant role in shaping public discourse, often rivaling or even surpassing traditional media institutions in terms of reach and influence. This shift has transformed framing into a networked process, in which multiple actors simultaneously construct, contest, and circulate competing interpretations of events.

A foundational strand of this scholarship interrogates the relationship between framing and identity construction within Nigerian journalism. Ajetunmobi (2023), drawing on empirical studies of the farmer–herder crisis and the agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), demonstrates that Nigerian media practices are heavily predisposed toward war-oriented and ethnically coded journalism, often privileging conflict escalation over resolution-oriented narratives. His

analysis reveals a disjuncture between professional ethical frameworks such as those codified by the Nigerian Union of Journalists and actual reporting practices, with the latter frequently reinforcing divisive identities and adversarial frames. This suggests that media framing in Nigeria is not merely reflective of societal tensions but is actively implicated in their reproduction and intensification.

This tendency is further reinforced by the structural logic of journalism itself. As Msughter, Garba, and Rabiu (2023) observe, conflict constitutes the "bread and butter" of news production, rendering it inherently attractive within media economies driven by immediacy and audience engagement. Within the Nigerian context marked by complex intersections of ethnicity, religion, and political contestation this predisposition results in a persistent emphasis on narratives of division and confrontation. The media, in this sense, occupy a paradoxical position: while normatively expected to promote social cohesion and informed discourse, they often function as amplifiers of latent and manifest conflict, shaping public understanding in ways that may exacerbate rather than mitigate tensions.

More recent scholarship extends this critique by examining how specific issue domains are framed within media discourse. For instance, Oluyemi and Badmus (2025) argue that the representation of terrorism in Nigeria operates within a symbolic economy of fear, where acts of violence are framed not only as isolated incidents but as indicators of systemic state failure. Their analysis highlights the symbiotic relationship between media and extremist actors, wherein the former's emphasis on sensationalism inadvertently amplifies the communicative reach of the latter. Similarly, Odoemelam, Mudavanhu, and Baade (2025) demonstrate how differential framing of IPOB agitation across Nigerian newspapers produces divergent audience perceptions, with variations in tone and prominence directly influencing levels of support or resistance among the public and diaspora communities.

Digital Media and Narrative Amplification

The emergence of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the structure and dynamics of the public sphere, reshaping how narratives are produced, circulated, and contested across national boundaries. The classical conception of the public sphere, most notably articulated by Jürgen

Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), envisioned a relatively bounded space of rational-critical debate in which public opinion is formed through deliberation among citizens. While this model was rooted in the institutional realities of print media and face-to-face discourse, it provides an important theoretical baseline for understanding the evolution of contemporary communication systems.

Within this environment, the concept of *digital narratives* becomes central. Digital narratives refer to the structured accounts, interpretations, and representations of events that are created and disseminated through online platforms (Reid, Button, & Brommeyer, 2023). Unlike traditional narratives produced by institutional media, digital narratives are inherently decentralized, iterative, and participatory. They are shaped not only by journalists and state actors but also by influencers, diaspora communities, civil society organizations, and ordinary users whose contributions collectively constitute a dynamic and often contested field of meaning-making.

The contemporary transformation of media systems has reconfigured the processes through which narratives about states are produced, circulated, and stabilized within global discourse. Unlike traditional media environments characterized by hierarchical gatekeeping, digital platforms operate within what has been described as hybrid and participatory communication systems, where users, institutions, and algorithmic infrastructures jointly shape the visibility and meaning of events. As Madsen D (2026) demonstrates through the "ColdplayGate" phenomenon, even trivial or spontaneous occurrences can be rapidly transformed into global narratives through processes of recording, remixing, and memetic circulation. This underscores a critical shift: narratives are no longer confined to editorial production but emerge through networked amplification, where visibility is driven by platform dynamics and user engagement. Similarly, Zhao, Ma, and Ma (2026) conceptualize this process as *narrative contagion*, wherein stories propagate across networks as individuals reproduce and adapt them, thereby creating a cumulative and self-reinforcing narrative structure. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that digital narratives are not static representations but iterative, contagious, and collectively constructed phenomena.

This transformation is particularly consequential in politically sensitive and conflict-prone environments, where digital platforms function not merely as channels of communication but as active agents in shaping conflict dynamics. Orgeret *et al.* (2026), in their study of the Tigray conflict, illustrate how hashtags evolve into "Hatetags" emotionally charged communicative tools that mobilize polarized publics and reinforce antagonistic identities. Their findings demonstrate that algorithmic amplification and repeated symbolic framing can normalize hostility and legitimize extreme interpretations of events. In parallel, Onayinka et al. (2026) show that within the Nigerian digital space, political falsehood narratives are not random distortions but structured narrative forms embedded in deeper struggles over legitimacy and authority. By linking narrative types to emotional triggers such as fear, anger, and cynicism, their work reveals how digital amplification transforms perception into governance stress, eroding institutional trust and social cohesion. These studies collectively challenge earlier assumptions that media merely reflect conflict, instead positioning digital platforms as constitutive environments where conflict meanings are produced and intensified.

Beyond conflict dynamics, the literature also emphasizes the role of interactional and performative mechanisms in shaping narrative amplification. Hermawati A. and Sujana (2026) demonstrate that digital communication is increasingly structured around audience engagement, where message credibility, emotional resonance, and interaction quality determine the reach and impact of narratives. This aligns with the findings of Adegoriolu (2026), who introduces the concept of *digital dogma* to explain how influencer–follower dynamics, combined with algorithmic incentives, produce self-reinforcing echo chambers in Nigeria's digital space. In this environment, provocative and identity-laden narratives are more likely to be amplified, while dissenting or balanced perspectives are marginalized. The implication is that digital platforms do not simply host narratives; they structure the conditions of their survival, privileging those that align with emotional intensity, group identity, and performative authenticity. This dynamic significantly alters the logic of public discourse, shifting it fr
om deliberative exchange to competitive visibility and symbolic dominance.
Importantly, these mechanisms operate within a broader transnational communication ecosystem, where local events are rapidly incorporated into global

narrative circuits. As earlier studies on international communication suggest (Abdulkadir et al., 2024; Abdulazeez *et al*., 2025), digital platforms facilitate the instantaneous globalization of local crises, enabling narratives originating in Nigeria to acquire international visibility within hours. When combined with processes of narrative contagion (Zhao et al., 2026) and memetic amplification (Madsen, 2026), this results in a communicative environment where the boundaries between domestic and international discourse are effectively collapsed. Consequently, narratives about insurgency, religious violence, or economic policy are not simply transmitted to global audiences; they are reconstructed, reframed, and amplified within transnational networks, often in ways that diverge from their original context.

Soft Power Diplomacy, Economic Policy Narratives and International Perception

The concept of soft power has become a central analytical tool in the study of international relations and diplomacy, particularly in understanding how states seek to influence global outcomes beyond coercion or economic inducement. The term was popularized by Joseph Nye, who defines soft power as the ability of a state to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004; 2008). According to Nye, the primary sources of soft power include culture, political values, and foreign policy, particularly when these are perceived as legitimate and morally authoritative by external audiences.

While this formulation provides an essential foundation, it is rooted in a largely state-centric and strategic understanding of international influence. In Nye's framework, states are assumed to possess a significant degree of control over the projection of their image, deploying cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and strategic communication to cultivate favourable perceptions abroad. However, the emergence of digital communication technologies has profoundly complicated this assumption, raising critical questions about the extent to which states can effectively manage their international image in an increasingly decentralized and networked communication environment (Zanella, Neves, & Silva, 2024).

In the digital age, soft power diplomacy is no longer solely a function of deliberate state action; it is increasingly shaped by diffuse and often uncontrollable flows of

information within the global digital public sphere. Social media platforms, in particular, have transformed the landscape of international communication by enabling a multiplicity of actors to participate in the construction of national image (Zanella, Neves, & Silva, 2024). As a result, the production of soft power has shifted from a predominantly top-down process to a more distributed and contested phenomenon, where state narratives compete with alternative representations generated by non-state actors.

Economic policy, often treated within orthodox scholarship as a domain of technocratic decision-making, is increasingly understood as a narrative construct, shaped by competing ideological frames, communicative strategies, and interpretive communities. Contemporary studies demonstrate that economic reforms are not simply implemented; they are discursively produced, justified, and contested through narratives that assign meaning to policy choices. Volchik *et al.* (2025), in their extensive analysis of parliamentary discourse in Russia, reveal how economic policies are embedded within identifiable ideological narratives ranging from neoliberalism to dirigisme each with its own semantic core and justificatory logic. This finding underscores a crucial insight: economic policy is never ideologically neutral but is always narratively framed in ways that shape both domestic interpretation and external perception. Similarly, Breslin and Mattlin (2025) demonstrate how dominant economic narratives about China in Europe evolved through processes of narrative diffusion, where underlying assumptions, selective evidence, and projected future risks coalesced into a coherent yet often reductive interpretive framework. These studies collectively suggest that international perceptions of a country's economy are not derived solely from material indicators but are constructed through circulating narratives that bundle together facts, fears, and expectations.

Within the Nigerian context, the implications of this narrative turn are particularly profound. Economic reforms such as fuel subsidy removal and exchange rate liberalization under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu have been accompanied by intense contestation over their meaning, necessity, and consequences. Udoumoh and Okpala (2026) show that Nigerian media representations of the economy are dominated by frames of crisis, hardship, and structural failure, often symbolized through powerful visual metaphors such as a

"sinking economy" or "inflation-driven scarcity." These representations do not merely reflect economic realities; they actively shape public perception and policy discourse by foregrounding certain interpretations while marginalizing others. Complementing this, Onayinka *et al.* (2026) demonstrate that digital platforms further intensify these dynamics through the proliferation of falsehood narratives particularly those rooted in blame, panic, and ridicule which amplify perceptions of governance failure and economic instability. Together, these studies reveal that Nigeria's economic image is not simply a function of policy outcomes but is mediated through layered narrative processes spanning traditional and digital media.

At the international level, these narratives intersect with broader questions of soft power and geopolitical positioning. Ogele (2025) argues that Nigeria's ability to project influence globally increasingly depends on its capacity to leverage soft power resources, including credible economic narratives that signal stability, opportunity, and institutional competence. However, as Chukwudi and Isaac (2025) demonstrate in their comparative analysis of China and Nigeria, the latter's soft power potential is significantly constrained by fragmented institutional coordination and inconsistent narrative projection. While China's economic diplomacy benefits from a coherent and centrally managed narrative particularly through initiatives such as infrastructure investment Nigeria's economic storytelling remains diffuse, reactive, and often overshadowed by crisis-driven representations. This asymmetry highlights the extent to which economic narratives function as instruments of power, shaping not only perception but also strategic positioning within the global order.

The role of culture and media industries further complicates this landscape, introducing alternative narrative pathways through which economic meaning is constructed and disseminated. Ibrahim *et al.* (2025) demonstrate that film industries such as Nollywood serve as potent vehicles of cultural diplomacy, projecting narratives that can counterbalance negative economic perceptions by highlighting creativity, resilience, and social dynamism. Similarly, studies on Sino-African relations (Salaudeen & Guo, 2025; Faleye & Igechi, 2026) reveal that exposure to economic narratives whether through media or direct engagement significantly shapes public attitudes and behavioural intentions. These findings

suggest that economic perception is not formed in isolation but emerges from the interaction between policy narratives, cultural representation, and experiential knowledge, each reinforcing or contesting the other within a broader communicative ecosystem.

However, the effectiveness of these narrative strategies is contingent upon their ability to engage with the deeper structural and security challenges that underpin Nigeria's economic reality. As Sidiq *et al.* (2026) illustrate in their analysis of counter-narrative approaches to terrorism, the success of narrative interventions depends on their alignment with lived realities and institutional credibility. Where economic narratives are perceived as disconnected from everyday experience particularly in contexts of insecurity, inflation, and governance deficits they risk being dismissed as propaganda, thereby undermining both domestic legitimacy and international trust. This aligns with broader critiques within the literature that emphasize the fragility of narrative credibility in environments characterized by structural inequality and political contestation (Breslin & Mattlin, 2025; Onayinka et al., 2026).

Despite these insights, the literature remains limited in several critical respects. First, while studies have examined economic narratives within domestic or comparative contexts, there is insufficient analysis of how specific policy decisions such as fuel subsidy removal and exchange rate reforms translate into international digital narratives, particularly within fast-moving social media environments. Second, the relationship between economic narratives and soft power outcomes remains under-theorized, with existing studies often treating them as parallel rather than interdependent processes. Third, there is a lack of integrative frameworks that connect economic narratives with other crisis domains such as security and religion despite their evident overlap in shaping Nigeria's global image.

Despite extensive research on Nigeria's insurgency, religious violence, economic policy reforms, and the global framing of crises, significant gaps remain in understanding the interconnected effects of domestic policy decisions, violent conflicts, and international media narratives on both public perception and foreign investment. Existing studies largely operate in disciplinary silos: security-focused

research emphasizes insurgency and religious violence without fully linking these to international perception and investment implications (Adamolekun, 2025; Dorvlo, 2025); economic policy analyses document domestic social and fiscal effects of subsidy removal but provide limited insight into how international social media and global narratives mediate investor confidence and cross-border economic outcomes (Yahaya, 2026; Olugbenga *et al.,* 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Framing Theory not as a convenient analytical device, but as the most intellectually rigorous framework for interrogating how digital narratives actively construct, distort, and circulate Nigeria's international image within the contemporary global information order. The intellectual roots of the theory can be traced to the work of Erving Goffman (1974), who conceptualized "frames" as cognitive structures that organize experience and guide interpretation. For Goffman, social reality is not encountered in a raw or unmediated form; rather, individuals rely on frames to make sense of events, classify occurrences, and assign meaning to situations. This insight is foundational to understanding mediated communication. As later elaborated, communication itself is a staged and patterned activity, characterized by what has been described as "dramatic scripting" and "hyper-ritualization," where events are selectively presented in ways that heighten their symbolic significance (Ytreberg, 2002). In the Nigerian context, this becomes particularly salient: acts of insurgency, violence, or economic crisis are not simply reported; they are *performed, dramatized, and narrativised* in ways that attract attention and shape interpretation.

The theory was further refined by Entman (1993), who provided a more systematic articulation of its core postulations. According to Entman, framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in communication in order to achieve four key functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. These four elements constitute the analytical backbone of framing theory and are directly relevant to this study. For instance, when international media or social media users discuss Nigeria, they do not merely describe events; they define Nigeria's problems (e.g., insecurity or corruption), attribute causes (e.g., governance failure or religious extremism), assign moral evaluations (e.g., incompetence or

instability), and implicitly or explicitly suggest policy responses (e.g., foreign intervention or investor caution). Thus, framing theory enables a systematic interrogation of how narratives about Nigeria are constructed and what meanings they produce.

The application of framing theory in this study is both direct and multi-dimensional. At its core, the theory provides the analytical lens through which the study examines how social media narratives construct Nigeria's international image across the four identified empirical domains: insurgency and violent attacks, religious conflict, economic policy decisions, and crisis narratives linked to foreign investment perception.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design, structured as a multiple-case analysis of how digital narratives frame Nigeria's international image across four domains: insecurity, economic policy, governance, and religious conflict. Rather than treating perception as uniform, the study disaggregates these domains to capture how distinct but overlapping frames shape soft power outcomes. The empirical focus is the global digital public sphere, where Nigeria is represented and interpreted through transnational flows of communication. Data consist of publicly available texts, including social media content (primarily from Twitter/X and Facebook) and international media reports, selected through purposive sampling to capture highly visible and widely circulated narratives. The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, qualitative content analysis identifies recurring frames and patterns across the dataset. Second, critical discourse analysis interrogates how these frames construct meaning, assign responsibility, and reproduce particular images of the Nigerian state within global discourse. To enhance analytical rigor, the study triangulates across data sources and situates each narrative within its broader socio-political context. While not oriented toward statistical generalization, this approach provides a focused and theoretically grounded account of how digitally mediated narratives shape Nigeria's soft power diplomacy in a fragmented and contested communicative environment.

Results/Analysis

Framing Insecurity and the Construction of State Fragility

Digital narratives surrounding insecurity in Nigeria particularly insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, and widespread kidnapping are consistently framed in ways that extend beyond episodic violence to construct a broader image of systemic state fragility. Empirically, major incidents such as recurrent attacks attributed to Boko Haram and ISWAP, alongside mass abductions in states like Kaduna and Zamfara, generate high-visibility digital content across platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and international media outlets. These events are rarely presented as isolated security breaches; rather, they are narrativized as evidence of institutional incapacity and governance failure.

This pattern aligns with the core logic of framing theory as articulated by scholars such as Robert Entman, who argues that frames function by defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. In the Nigerian case, insecurity narratives consistently define the problem as pervasive violence, attribute causality to weak state capacity, and produce moral evaluations centered on governmental failure. The implication is not simply that violence exists, but that the Nigerian state is structurally unable to contain it.

Existing empirical studies reinforce this interpretation. For instance, Oluyemi and Badmus (2025) demonstrate that media representations of terrorism in Nigeria are embedded within what they describe as a "symbolic economy of fear," where repetitive and sensational coverage amplifies perceptions of instability. Similarly, Ajetunmobi (2023) shows that conflict reporting in Nigeria often adopts war-oriented frames, emphasizing escalation, threat, and division rather than resolution. These patterns are further intensified within digital environments, where algorithmic amplification privileges emotionally charged and crisis-oriented content (Zhao et al., 2026; Onayinka et al., 2026).

What emerges from the data is a relatively stable framing structure, summarized below:

Framing Element	**Observed Pattern in Digital Narratives**	**Interpretive Outcome**
Problem Definition	Persistent insecurity, insurgency, kidnappings	Nigeria as a conflict-prone state
Causal Attribution	Weak governance, poor security architecture	State incapacity
Moral Evaluation	Government failure, elite negligence	Loss of legitimacy
Implied Remedy	External intervention, security reform	Reduced sovereign confidence

Source: Authors collection from secondary sources (2023-2026)

This framing structure is significant because it transforms insecurity from a policy challenge into an identity marker. Nigeria is not merely seen as experiencing security threats; it is increasingly constructed as a state defined by insecurity. As Erving Goffman suggests, frames do not simply describe reality—they organize it. In this case, repeated exposure to crisis-oriented narratives consolidates a cognitive schema in which Nigeria is associated with instability, regardless of temporal or regional variation in actual security conditions.

The implications for soft power diplomacy are substantial. As Joseph Nye emphasizes, soft power depends on credibility, attractiveness, and legitimacy. However, the persistent framing of Nigeria as insecure undermines all three. First, credibility is weakened, as the state is perceived as unable to guarantee basic security. Second, attractiveness declines, particularly in relation to tourism, investment, and international partnerships. Third, legitimacy is eroded, as narratives of failure circulate more widely than those of institutional response or resilience.

Moreover, digital amplification ensures that these frames are not confined to domestic audiences but are rapidly integrated into global discourse. International media coverage often reinforces these narratives, creating a feedback loop in which local events are reframed for global consumption and then reabsorbed into

domestic discourse with heightened intensity. As Abdulkadir et al. (2024) note, contemporary international communication operates through such multidirectional flows, blurring the boundary between internal events and external perception.

Crucially, counter-narratives such as military gains against insurgent groups or community resilience initiatives receive comparatively limited visibility. This asymmetry reflects the broader logic of digital media systems, where negative and emotionally resonant content is more likely to achieve virality. The result is a skewed representational field in which crisis narratives dominate, not necessarily because they are more accurate, but because they are more communicatively effective.

The framing of insecurity within digital narratives does not merely reflect Nigeria's security challenges; it actively constructs a durable international image of state fragility. This has direct consequences for the country's soft power diplomacy, constraining its ability to project stability, inspire confidence, and maintain credibility within the global arena under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

Economic Policy Narratives and the Framing of Structural Instability

Economic policy decisions in Nigeria, particularly the removal of fuel subsidies and the liberalization of the foreign exchange regime under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, have generated intensified digital and international narrative contestation. Rather than being interpreted solely as macroeconomic reforms, these policy shifts are frequently reframed within social media and international media ecosystems as indicators of economic distress, institutional uncertainty, and governance volatility. The announcement and implementation of subsidy removal in 2023, in particular, triggered widespread online discourse marked by hashtags and commentary that emphasized "hardship," "inflationary shock," and "economic suffering," reflecting a dominant crisis-oriented framing of reform.

This pattern aligns with the broader theoretical claim advanced by Robert Entman that framing operates by selecting certain aspects of reality and making them salient in ways that shape problem definition and causal interpretation. In the case

of Nigeria's economic reforms, the dominant frame defines the problem not as structural adjustment or fiscal rebalancing, but as immediate socioeconomic distress. The causal attribution is frequently directed toward state policy choices, while moral evaluation often centers on governmental insensitivity or elite detachment from lived realities. The implied solution, within many digital narratives, ranges from policy reversal to external economic caution, particularly from investor-facing audiences.

Empirically, this framing is reinforced by both domestic and international scholarship. Udoumoh and Okpala (2026) observe that Nigerian media representations of the economy are heavily dominated by metaphors of crisis, including "sinking economy" and "inflationary pressure," which shape public interpretation of reform processes. Similarly, Onayinka et al. (2026) demonstrate that digital platforms amplify emotionally charged economic narratives, particularly those rooted in blame and uncertainty, thereby accelerating perceptions of instability. At the international level, Anemikaye and Diane (2024) show that persistent negative framing of African economies contributes to heightened risk perception among global investors, influencing capital allocation decisions and reinforcing structural economic vulnerability.

Within digital discourse, these narrative dynamics produce a relatively consistent framing structure, summarized below:

Framing Element	Observed Digital Narrative Pattern	Interpretive Outcome
Problem Definition	Fuel subsidy removal, inflation, currency depreciation	Economic crisis framing
Causal Attribution	Government policy decisions and reform timing	Policy-driven instability
Moral Evaluation	Hardship, elite insensitivity, governance failure	Reduced legitimacy of reforms
Implied Remedy	Policy reversal, external caution, economic skepticism	Investor hesitation and uncertainty

Source: Authors collection from secondary sources (2023-2026)

What is particularly significant in this framing structure is the transformation of policy reform into a signal of systemic instability. Rather than being understood within orthodox economic logic as corrective measures aimed at addressing fiscal imbalances and market distortions Nigeria's reforms are frequently interpreted through a crisis lens that prioritizes immediate social pain over long-term structural adjustment. This reflects what Breslin and Mattlin (2025) describe as "narrative sedimentation," where accumulated historical perceptions of risk and instability shape the interpretation of new economic events, even when policy intent differs from perceived meaning.

From a soft power perspective, these framing dynamics have direct implications for economic diplomacy and international credibility. As Joseph Nye argues, economic credibility constitutes a core component of soft power, particularly in shaping perceptions of reliability, stability, and attractiveness. However, when reform narratives are consistently framed as crisis signals, they weaken investor confidence and reduce the perceived predictability of the policy environment. This is particularly consequential in emerging economies, where perception often plays a role equal to material indicators in determining capital inflows and strategic partnerships.

The digital dimension further intensifies these effects. Algorithmic amplification ensures that emotionally charged narratives particularly those emphasizing hardship, scarcity, and policy failure gain greater visibility and circulation than technocratic explanations of reform. As Zhao et al. (2026) argue, digital narratives often exhibit "contagion dynamics," where repeated exposure reinforces interpretive convergence around dominant frames. In the Nigerian case, this results in a feedback loop in which domestic hardship narratives are rapidly globalized, and global interpretations in turn reinforce domestic skepticism.

Importantly, counter-narratives emphasizing long-term economic restructuring, fiscal sustainability, or potential investor gains exist but remain comparatively marginal in visibility and engagement. This asymmetry reflects the structural logic of digital communication systems, where salience is driven less by informational accuracy and more by emotional intensity and narrative simplicity. As a result,

complex economic reforms are compressed into simplified interpretive frames that privilege crisis over continuity.

Nigeria's economic policy environment is not only shaped by technical fiscal decisions but is simultaneously reconstituted within digital narrative systems that frame reform as instability. This discursive construction significantly conditions international perception, influencing both investor sentiment and diplomatic credibility. Consequently, economic policy becomes a central site of soft power negotiation, where the success of reform is determined not only by implementation outcomes but also by the framing environments through which those reforms are interpreted globally.

Governance Narratives and the Framing of Corruption and Institutional Fragility

Governance constitutes the most enduring and consequential axis through which Nigeria's international image is constructed within digital and transnational media ecosystems. Unlike episodic narratives of insecurity or cyclical economic reform debates, governance-related discourse produces a more structural framing of the Nigerian state as institutionally fragile and persistently constrained by corruption, elite capture, and weak accountability mechanisms. Empirically, this is reflected in the sustained prominence of global corruption indices, high-profile governance scandals, electoral contestations, and recurring reports of public sector inefficiency, all of which circulate widely across international media platforms and social media networks. These narratives do not merely describe governance challenges; they consolidate a stable interpretive schema through which Nigeria is understood as a state with limited institutional credibility.

This pattern aligns closely with the framing logic articulated by Robert Entman, particularly the proposition that frames define problems, assign causal responsibility, produce moral evaluation, and imply remedies. In governance narratives, the problem is consistently defined as systemic corruption and institutional dysfunction. Causal attribution is directed toward political elites and entrenched governance structures, while moral evaluations frequently emphasize illegitimacy, inefficiency, and accountability deficits. The implied remedies often extend beyond domestic reform prescriptions to include external oversight,

conditional governance assistance, and intensified international scrutiny, thereby repositioning Nigeria within a hierarchy of monitored states rather than equal diplomatic actors.

This framing structure is strongly reinforced by existing scholarship on corruption and international perception. Omar et al. (2025) demonstrate that Nigeria's persistent low performance on global corruption indices significantly erodes its diplomatic credibility and weakens bilateral and multilateral trust. These indices function not merely as measurement tools but as powerful narrative devices that stabilize global perceptions of governance quality. Once circulated within international discourse, such rankings acquire epistemic authority, shaping investor confidence, development partnerships, and diplomatic engagement. In a similar vein, studies on African governance representation indicate that corruption narratives tend to exhibit high durability, often persisting despite periods of reform or institutional improvement due to entrenched cognitive schemas in global media systems.

Within digital environments, governance narratives are further intensified through repetitive circulation and algorithmic amplification. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook function as accelerators of reputational discourse, where corruption-related content particularly when linked to political elites or public scandals achieves high visibility and engagement. This produces a self-reinforcing cycle in which isolated governance failures are extrapolated into systemic judgments about the state as a whole. In this sense, governance framing operates less as a reflection of institutional reality and more as a mechanism of reputational consolidation.

The resulting framing structure can be analytically summarized as follows:

Framing Element	Observed Digital Narrative Pattern	Interpretive Outcome
Problem Definition	Corruption, weak institutions, poor accountability	Structural governance failure
Causal Attribution	Political elite behavior, institutional design flaws	Endemic political dysfunction

Moral Evaluation	Illegitimacy, distrust, lack of transparency	Erosion of state credibility
Implied Remedy	External oversight, conditional reform, sanctions discourse	Reduced sovereign autonomy in perception

Source: Authors collection from secondary sources (2023-2026)

This framing configuration is particularly significant because it shifts Nigeria's international image from a state facing governance challenges to a state defined by governance failure. In contrast to insecurity or economic narratives, which may be interpreted as transitional or policy-contingent, corruption frames tend to be interpreted as structural and enduring. This reinforces what Erving Goffman conceptualizes as the stabilizing function of frames: once a dominant interpretive schema is established, subsequent events are assimilated into it rather than altering it.

From the perspective of soft power diplomacy, the implications are profound. As Joseph Nye argues, soft power depends fundamentally on legitimacy, credibility, and institutional attractiveness. However, persistent governance-related framing undermines each of these pillars by constructing Nigeria as a high-risk institutional environment. This affects not only diplomatic trust but also the willingness of external actors to engage in long-term cooperation, investment, and policy partnership.

Moreover, governance narratives interact dynamically with other crisis frames, particularly those related to insecurity and economic instability, producing a cumulative reputational effect. Once corruption is established as a foundational explanatory frame, it becomes the default lens through which other national challenges are interpreted. For example, insecurity may be attributed to corruption in security procurement, while economic instability may be linked to governance inefficiency. This interconnection strengthens what can be described as a "nested crisis narrative," where governance failure becomes the root frame organizing all other interpretations of the Nigerian state.

Religious Conflict and the Globalization of Moral Narratives

Religious conflict in Nigeria constitutes one of the most globally visible and morally charged domains of international perception, particularly within digital and transnational media ecosystems. Empirically, recurring incidents of violence involving farmer–herder clashes in the Middle Belt, insurgent attacks in the North-East, and episodic communal violence across states such as Plateau, Benue, and Kaduna have consistently attracted international media attention. These incidents are frequently interpreted through religious identity frames, despite scholarship showing that many are rooted in overlapping structural factors including land pressure, climate stress, and governance deficits (Adetunberu & Bello, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2020 reports on Nigeria's Middle Belt conflicts).

Within framing theory, this pattern reflects what Robert Entman describes as moral evaluation framing, where events are not only defined and causally explained but also morally interpreted. In international discourse, particularly within advocacy journalism and human rights reporting, Nigeria is often framed as a site of religious vulnerability or persecution. This interpretive shift is reinforced by reports from international organizations such as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF, annual reports), which classify Nigeria as a "country of particular concern" in certain years, thereby contributing to global moral framing of its religious landscape.

Digital amplification intensifies this process. Social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), facilitate rapid circulation of graphic content, hashtags, and advocacy campaigns that reframe localized violence into global moral narratives. Hashtag activism and diaspora engagement often translate complex conflicts into simplified binaries of religious victimhood and persecution, thereby increasing visibility while reducing contextual complexity. This dynamic is consistent with findings from studies on digital conflict communication, which show that emotionally salient content tends to dominate algorithmically driven information environments (Onayinka et al., 2026; Zhao et al., 2026).

The framing structure is summarized below:

Frame Element	Empirical Pattern	Interpretive Outcome
Problem Definition	Farmer–herder clashes, insurgent violence, communal conflict	Religious insecurity narrative
Causal Attribution	Weak governance, state protection failure	Institutional incapacity
Moral Evaluation	Persecution, human rights violation discourse	Global moral condemnation
Implied Remedy	External pressure, humanitarian intervention discourse	Sovereignty-reduced framing

Source: Authors collection from secondary sources(2023-2026)

From a soft power perspective, this framing has significant consequences. As Joseph Nye argues, soft power depends on moral legitimacy and perceived values. However, when religious conflict is globally framed as systemic persecution, Nigeria's moral authority is weakened in international forums, particularly within Western policy and humanitarian discourse environments.

Cross-Domain Narrative Convergence

Although insecurity, economic policy, governance, and religious conflict appear analytically distinct, the empirical pattern reveals a high level of narrative convergence within digital and international media systems. Across datasets from international reporting and social media discourse, these domains are repeatedly interpreted through a shared explanatory logic: systemic state failure.

For example, insecurity narratives are frequently attributed to corruption in governance structures; economic hardship is linked to institutional mismanagement; and religious violence is interpreted as evidence of state incapacity to provide protection. This interlinkage produces what framing theory conceptualizes as frame reinforcement, where multiple issue frames stabilize into a dominant interpretive structure (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993).

In the Nigerian case, this results in what can be analytically described as a "crisis identity frame" a durable cognitive structure in which Nigeria is perceived not as

a state experiencing discrete challenges, but as a polity defined by persistent instability. Empirical support for this pattern can be observed in the convergence of narratives across major international outlets such as BBC, Reuters, and Al Jazeera, which repeatedly cluster reporting on Nigeria around themes of insecurity, corruption, and economic stress rather than policy differentiation.

Digital media systems intensify this convergence through algorithmic amplification and engagement-driven visibility. Content that reflects crisis conditions consistently achieves higher circulation than stabilizing or corrective narratives. This aligns with findings in computational communication research showing that negative and emotionally charged content tends to dominate networked visibility structures (Zhao et al., 2026).

The implication is that Nigeria's international image is not formed through isolated issue perceptions but through cumulative narrative sedimentation, where repeated exposure across domains produces a consolidated reputational identity.

Soft Power Implications

The convergence of crisis-oriented frames across insecurity, economic policy, governance, and religious conflict produces a structurally constrained environment for Nigeria's soft power diplomacy. While the country possesses significant cultural assets including Nollywood, Afrobeats, and diaspora influence these positive narratives are consistently overshadowed by crisis-driven representations in global discourse.

Within Joseph Nye's framework, soft power depends on attractiveness, legitimacy, and credibility. However, persistent negative framing across multiple domains undermines each of these pillars. Credibility is weakened by governance narratives of corruption and institutional fragility; attractiveness is diminished by insecurity and economic hardship frames; and legitimacy is eroded by religious conflict narratives that circulate within global human rights discourse.

Importantly, this does not imply absence of counter-narratives. Cultural diplomacy efforts and economic reforms do generate alternative representations. However, these narratives face structural disadvantages in digital ecosystems

characterized by asymmetrical visibility, where crisis content achieves greater algorithmic amplification and emotional engagement. As a result, Nigeria's international image becomes skewed toward its most conflict-intensive representations.

The broader implication is that soft power in the digital age is no longer solely state-produced but algorithmically mediated and publicly contested. For Nigeria under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, this creates a structural tension between policy reform efforts and externally constructed reputational realities. The result is a persistent gap between domestic policy intent and international perception, which constrains diplomatic flexibility and economic signaling in global arenas.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how social media framing across insecurity, economic policy, governance performance, and religious conflict shapes Nigeria's international perception and soft power diplomacy under the administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The central finding is that Nigeria's global image is not constructed through isolated issue narratives but through a convergent framing system in which multiple domains of crisis reinforce a unified interpretive structure. First, in relation to insecurity, the analysis shows that insurgency and violent conflict narratives particularly those circulating across international media and digital platforms consistently frame Nigeria as a high-risk environment characterized by state vulnerability. These representations are not merely descriptive of events but structurally stabilize perceptions of institutional weakness, especially when amplified through transnational media circulation. Second, regarding religious violence, the study finds that incidents of intercommunal and insurgent-related violence are frequently decontextualized within global moral discourse. This produces a framing shift from security governance issues to narratives of religious persecution and human rights concern, thereby intensifying Nigeria's reputational exposure within international advocacy and diplomatic arenas. Third, in the domain of economic policy, particularly subsidy removal and exchange rate reforms, the findings indicate that digital narratives are dominated by hardship and instability frames. These frames are reinforced through social media amplification and international reporting,

producing a perception of structural economic fragility even when reforms are aimed at fiscal stabilization and macroeconomic adjustment. Fourth, governance-related narratives especially those linked to corruption and institutional inefficiency function as a foundational explanatory frame that links and reinforces other issue domains. Governance thus emerges not as one category among others but as the dominant interpretive lens through which insecurity, religion, and economic conditions are globally understood.

Policy Implications

The implications of these findings for Nigeria's diplomatic strategy are significant and extend beyond conventional public relations approaches.

1. First, Nigeria's soft power strategy requires a shift from reactive communication to anticipatory narrative governance. Rather than responding to crises after global amplification, state communication structures must engage in continuous framing management that integrates security, economic, and governance messaging into a coherent international narrative architecture.
2. Second, the findings suggest the need for a multi-domain reputational strategy, rather than fragmented sectoral communication. Security diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy must operate as an integrated system rather than parallel initiatives, in order to counteract the convergence of negative frames identified in this study.
3. Third, addressing governance-related framing requires more than external messaging; it requires strengthening the credibility base of international communication. Since governance narratives function as foundational frames in global perception, improvements in transparency, institutional accountability, and policy consistency are essential for long-term soft power recovery.
4. Fourth, in the context of digital media ecosystems, Nigeria must engage strategically with platform-based narrative dynamics, including influencer ecosystems, diaspora communication networks, and algorithm-driven visibility structures. Failure to engage these systems leaves national image construction vulnerable to external framing dominance.

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