RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Media Outrage and Foreign Policy Decisions: A Correlation Study

👤 Deepti Anand

🏛 PG Student, School of International Relations and Peace Studies, Nalanda University, Rajgir (Bihar), India;

✉ deeptianand0504@gmail.com

🔖 Accepted version published on 5 September 2025

ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media has significantly changed how foreign policy and international relations are conducted. Diplomatic decision-making, which was hitherto the sole purview of elites, is now quickly scrutinised by the public and emotionally amplified online. To appease home audiences, governments are under increased pressure to implement forceful or symbolic foreign policy responses due to viral indignation sparked by Twitter hashtags, memes, and online campaigns. This research examines the psychological factors underlying this phenomenon, including the erosion of cognitive "cooling-off" intervals during crises, the fear of reputational damage, and emotional contagion. The article illustrates how viral outrage can intensify conflicts, impede diplomatic negotiations, and undermine logical foreign policy decisions by examining case studies such as the 2019 India-Pakistan Balakot crisis, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and digital nationalism during the Russia-Ukraine war. This paper argues that social media has evolved into a destabilizing force in crisis management, as well as a tool of digital diplomacy, by integrating concepts from political psychology, public opinion theory, and international relations. Ultimately, the results underscore the need for governments to develop strategies to mitigate the risks of online outrage while striking a balance between the requirements for sustained, strategic diplomacy and the necessity of being responsive to public opinion.

Keywords: social media; foreign policy; outrage; international relations; political psychology; digital diplomacy

FULL PAPER

I. Introduction

The link between technology and international politics has undergone an unparalleled shift over the last 20 years. Social media sites like Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter (now X) have become dynamic arenas for diplomacy, altering the way nations interact, compete, and engage in conflict (Kreps, 2020). Social media thrives on speed, visibility, and emotional amplification, in contrast to conventional diplomatic channels that prioritise confidentiality and cautious discussion. The way foreign policy decisions are made is significantly impacted by this structural change.

The emergence of viral outrage as a political force is among the most notable features of this change. Rapid, widespread online displays of indignation, fear, or nationalism that call for prompt action from political authorities are referred to as viral outrage. In contrast to conventional public opinion, which frequently develops gradually through media, polls, and public discourse, viral indignation appears minutes after a military action or diplomatic crisis. Calls for retaliation or harsh replies frequently dominate digital conversations. Leaders' words are analyzed in real-time, and hashtags trend globally. Despite the possibility of escalation or the potential to jeopardize long-term strategic goals, governments may feel pressured to take decisive action due to their sensitivity to both domestic audiences and their international image (Nomikos, 2022).

In the study of international relations, the idea that public opinion might limit foreign policy is not new. The question of whether democratic leaders are constrained by their constituents while making decisions on a global scale has been argued by academics for a long time. The immediacy, scope, and emotional intensity of these forces, however, are what distinguish the social media era from others (Ali, 2023). Instead of being protected by institutional filters or time delays, foreign policy decision-making is now directly subject to viral reactions that can influence leaders' views of domestic legitimacy, negotiating ranges, and negotiation flexibility. This essay argues that social media outrage that goes viral may prompt governments to adopt more assertive foreign policy positions, potentially leading to high-risk crisis management situations. There are five sections to the argument. The study first examines the emergence of social media in international relations, emphasizing how governments have adopted digital tools for propaganda and diplomacy (Zhang, 2023). The psychological mechanics of outrage—how fear, fury, and emotional contagion impact elite decision-making and public behavior—are examined in the second section. Third, it examines examples where global events, such as the 2019

India-Pakistan conflict and the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, were influenced by viral indignation. Fourth, it examines the dangers of this dynamic, demonstrating how it narrows diplomatic space and increases the likelihood of misunderstanding. Lastly, the conclusion offers suggestions on how to mitigate these risks without compromising democratic responsiveness.

This article contributes to a growing body of research that views social media as a structural variable in international politics, rather than just a communication tool, by situating the study at the nexus of political psychology, communication studies, and international relations (Kibtiah et al., 2023). Policymakers and academics alike must understand the psychological effects of viral indignation as the world becomes increasingly digitally connected.

II. Origins of Social Media in International Relations

One of the most significant paradigm upheavals in diplomacy since the end of the Cold War is the emergence of social media in international relations (IR). Traditionally, elite-to-elite contacts and carefully crafted communiqués were used in private settings for diplomacy. In contrast, states are increasingly using social media platforms as tools for communication, persuasion, and even confrontation as part of the digital diplomacy that has emerged in the 21st century (Eggeling, 2023). Social media has reshaped the limits of diplomacy by erasing the distinction between official and unofficial voices, elite and mass politics, and domestic and foreign audiences. This shift is not just technological.

In the late 2000s, governments and foreign ministries began creating official profiles on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, marking the emergence of social media in diplomatic efforts. These early attempts, which aimed to broadcast national positions in real-time to global audiences, were often experimental. As ministries realised the potential of online interaction to influence foreign publics directly, digital diplomacy was institutionalised by 2009–2010 (Tsivatyi, 2022). The practice quickly expanded over the next ten years, progressing from the simple distribution of information to active agenda-setting, narrative development, and real-time crisis management.

The transition from soft power to strategic influence is one noteworthy aspect of this progression. Early on, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power—which emphasizes attractiveness and cultural persuasion—was utilized to construct digital diplomacy. For example, governments showcased their humanitarian efforts, accomplishments, and values through YouTube videos and Twitter campaigns. However, by the 2010s, social media had also evolved into a tool for propaganda and information warfare,

used to undermine international legitimacy, rally followers, and discredit opponents (Reshetnikova, 2023). Examples of this change were China's strategic use of digital platforms to further its Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's use of troll farms and bots to sway perceptions about Ukraine.

Many people point to the Arab Spring (2010–2011) as a watershed in how the world views social media's capacity for diplomacy. In addition to mobilizing domestically, protesters used Facebook and Twitter to expose their difficulties to global audiences, forcing governments to respond in front of a worldwide digital public (SON, 2022). This event made it clear that social media could no longer be dismissed as unimportant to global politics; instead, it was a force that could alter state-society relations beyond national boundaries, impact regime stability, and shape humanitarian responses.

Three overlapping stages of the institutionalisation of digital diplomacy were identified by scholars by the mid-2010s: (1) formation (2009–2010), during which states experimented with official accounts and messaging strategies; (2) consolidation (2013–2017), during which foreign ministries started tracking global opinion using sophisticated analytics like sentiment analysis, network analysis, and hashtag monitoring; and (3) global scaling (2018–present), during which digital diplomacy became inextricably linked to statecraft and influenced negotiations, crisis communication, and even coercive tactics (Tsivatyi, 2022). These stages illustrate how technology has advanced, as well as how the strategic environments of states have evolved.

Social media has become a battleground for narratives as well as a diplomatic instrument. Competition to interpret events, assign blame, and demand solutions comes from governments, non-state actors, international organisations, and even ordinary citizens. Traditional hierarchies are dissolved by this democratisation of diplomacy, which empowers non-state actors to challenge official narratives and encourages governments to take action. Viral indignation has evolved into a form of power that can rival conventional diplomatic tools, marking a significant reconfiguration of international relations in this regard.

III. Psychological Mechanisms of Outrage

The widespread use of social media has opened up new channels for digital diplomacy, but it has also introduced psychological weaknesses into the field of international relations. Particularly, viral indignation feeds on emotional and cognitive processes that hasten the escalation of conflicts and reduce the room for logical decision-making. It is crucial to comprehend these mechanisms in order to

explain why governments frequently take harsh or disproportionate foreign policy measures in response to online criticism.

1. Emotional Contagion and Amplification

The quick dissemination of hatred, fear, and animosity over online networks is known as emotional contagion, and it is one of the characteristics that distinguish social media outrage. Anger is a particularly contagious emotion that can quickly change societal beliefs, according to a neuroscientific study (Stein, 2011). Outrage is exacerbated in a feedback cycle where emotionally charged content spreads more quickly than neutral views on social media sites like Twitter. Leaders may feel pressured to take decisive action if they perceive these viral dynamics as a sign of public demand.

2. Cognitive Biases and Crisis Decision-Making

It has long been recognized that cognitive biases, including overconfidence, threat exaggeration, and attribution errors, can influence the process of making foreign policy decisions (Levy, 2013). By distorting timelines and providing leaders with a skewed view of popular opinion, social media exacerbates these prejudices. For instance, viral hashtags can give the impression that there is broad agreement when, in fact, they reflect a vociferous minority. Leaders may use motivated reasoning in high-stakes scenarios, such as military crises, selectively reading social media outrage as support for harsh tactics (Levy, 2023).

3. Loss Aversion and Reputational Anxiety

Loss aversion, or the propensity of people and nations to favour avoiding losses over achieving comparable gains, is another important psychological component. Leaders may worry that if they do nothing in the face of social media anger, their reputations would suffer both at home and abroad. It can be politically disastrous when leaders are portrayed as weak, unsure, or obedient in viral criticism. As a way to manage their reputation, governments are encouraged by this worry to take assertive foreign policy positions (Beruashvili, 2022).

4. Nationalist Identity and Group Polarization

Nationalist identity politics and social media indignation frequently collide, escalating intergroup conflict. Group polarization—a psychological process whereby collective conversations push groups towards more radical positions—occurs as a result of online platforms serving as echo chambers for nationalist speech. Online nationalist indignation can intensify calls for armed response during global crises, making diplomatic compromise seem politically unfeasible. An obvious example is

the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot conflict between India and Pakistan, in which calls for a military response swiftly grew out of internet indignation over terrorism.

5. Leader Psychology and Personalization of Diplomacy

Lastly, how social media fury is translated into foreign policy action is greatly influenced by the psychology of leaders. According to research, different leaders have varying levels of sensitivity to public opinion; some are especially sensitive to issues related to legitimacy and reputation (Levy, 2023). By framing foreign policy decisions as reflections of a leader's strengths or weaknesses, social media expedites the personalisation of diplomacy. Because leaders may respond to viral narratives that cast doubt on their resolve rather than out of strategic calculation, this personalization enhances the risk of snap judgments.

6. Social Media as Psychological Warfare

Adversaries can use social media indignation as a psychological operation tactic in addition to influencing domestic decision-making. To impede decision-making in competing governments, states, and non-state actors employ coordinated anger, bots, and disinformation campaigns (Kim et al., 2018). Adversaries can exert fictitious pressure on foreign governments by inciting viral indignation, which raises the possibility of a misunderstanding and an escalation.

All things considered, social media anger uses basic psychological processes—such as leader psychology, cognitive bias, loss aversion, emotional contagion, and group polarization—to coerce governments into adopting assertive foreign policy positions. These dynamic turns diplomacy into a reactive act influenced by online audiences, undercutting logical thinking.

IV. Case Studies: Viral Outrage and Foreign Policy Crises

1. India–Pakistan Crisis (Pulwama–Balakot, 2019)

One of the worst foreign policy crises between India and Pakistan in recent memory was brought on by the 2019 terrorist assault in Pulwama, which claimed the lives of over 40 Indian paramilitary forces. Although bilateral hostility had traditionally been caused by cross-border terrorism, the Pulwama assault signalled a shift in the way social media affected crisis dynamics. Hashtags like #PulwamaRevenge and #IndiaStrikesBack became viral within hours of the incident, sparking millions of tweets calling for military action (Bukhari, 2024). The psychology of indignation was clear: politicians and media outlets boosted the propagation of nationalist discourse, which went viral. Because of emotional contagion, it became politically impossible to exercise restraint. The Indian government approved the first cross-border

bombing between the two nations since 1971 in response to intense digital pressure on Balakot. The intensity and speed of social media outrage hastened the decision and enhanced the stakes for escalation, according to analysts, even though India may have retaliated independently of digital discourse (Freedman & Williams, 2021). This instance illustrates how the conventional "cooling-off" phase is compressed by digital fury, leaving leaders with little time for deliberation. Social media effectively served as a force multiplier and agenda setter, prompting the Indian government to take a firm stance in order to avoid appearing weak at home.

2. U.S.–Iran Tensions After Soleimani's Assassination (2020)

In January 2020, Iranian General Qasem Soleimani was assassinated by a U.S. drone strike, which caused indignation throughout the Middle East and beyond. Hashtags like #HardRevenge inspired millions of Iranians to demand retribution on social media. Simultaneously, party differences in the United States heightened online discussions, with some denouncing the strike as a reckless escalation and others applauding it as a display of power (Freedman & Williams, 2021).

The psychological process of reputational worry was crucial for Iran. Soleimani was portrayed by viral outcry as a national hero whose death necessitated justice, rather than merely as a military figure. Iran responded to pressure by attacking American bases in Iraq with retaliatory missile strikes. The decision was influenced by the need to publicly show strength in front of digital audiences, even if the strikes were planned to minimise American casualties. President Trump's belligerent response to Iran's threats, which sparked domestic outcry, included tweets warning of more escalation. This episode illustrates how social media indignation transforms intricate strategic calculations into reactive performances, personalizing diplomacy and narrowing the negotiation space.

3. Russia–Ukraine Conflict and Digital Nationalism (2014–2022)

The Russia–Ukraine conflict offers a longer-term perspective on how social media outrage influences global responses. Russia has used digital platforms as a tool to incite indignation and disseminate false information both locally and abroad since annexing Crimea in 2014. Viral indignation on international platforms during the 2022 invasion sparked support for Ukraine, resulting in historic sanctions against Russia and extensive military aid from Western nations (Freedman & Williams, 2021).

This case illustrates the psychological effects of moral framing and group polarization in online environments. Viral photos of civilians suffering and hashtags like #StandWithUkraine galvanised Western audiences, putting tremendous

pressure on their governments to take swift action. Leaders in the US and Europe had to deal with the reputational consequences of being indifferent to viral outrage in addition to strategic concerns. State-run digital ecosystems, on the other hand, fuelled nationalist indignation in Russia by portraying the battle as an existential defence of Russian identity. The dual character of digital anger is illustrated by this dual dynamic: worldwide outrage mobilises democratic responses, while domestic indignation reinforces authoritarian legitimacy. It strengthened Russia's commitment to escalation while simultaneously strengthening Ukraine's diplomatic position.

V. Risks and Implications of Viral Outrage in Foreign Policy

The aforementioned case studies illustrate the significant impact of social media indignation on crisis diplomacy. Digital platforms pose systemic hazards to global stability, even as they can increase transparency and provide governments with a direct line of communication with the people. These hazards arise not just from technology dynamics but also from the previously mentioned psychological forces that interact destabilizingly with diplomatic structures.

1. Escalation and Miscalculation

The possibility of escalation is the most immediate threat posed by viral fury. Social media breaks down the conventional diplomatic timetables, giving governments less time for discussion. Emotional amplification and viral hashtags can create pressure to strike back quickly, frequently before intelligence analyses and strategic planning are finished. Fasinu et al. (2024) note that although digital diplomacy accelerates communication, it also increases the risk of misinformation and heightened tension. Even little errors in judgment brought on by viral indignation can have disastrous results in conflicts between nuclear-armed adversaries, like India and Pakistan.

2. Polarization of Domestic Audiences

Outrage on social media also limits foreign policy options by escalating domestic political polarisation. Online publics often divide into pro- and anti-government groups during crises, viewing diplomatic events through nationalist or partisan lenses. According to Matsuo et al. (2023), internet users' interpretations of the same events during the diplomatic crisis between Japan and Korea varied, frequently demonising the opposing domestic party more than the foreign enemy. Because any attempt at de-escalation runs the risk of being interpreted as surrender in the digital sphere, such polarisation restricts leaders' capacity to seek compromise.

3. Undermining Traditional Diplomacy

Confidentiality, gradualism, and ambiguity are classic components of diplomacy that enable states to express their intentions while maintaining room for discussion. These systems are undermined by viral fury, which demands visibility and immediacy. Democracies are particularly susceptible to digital pressures, according to Kreps (2020), since open media settings make it challenging to shield leaders from popular demands. This dynamic weakens the backchannel negotiations that are essential to crisis resolution and limits the flexibility of bargaining ranges.

4. Weaponization of Outrage by Adversaries

The deliberate use of viral outrage by adversaries poses an additional risk. Both states and non-state actors can utilize bots, fake accounts, and disinformation campaigns to instigate anger in other nations. Adversaries might force foreign governments to make snap judgements or paralyse them by escalating divisive narratives or nationalist demands (Freberg & Palenchar, 2013). The weaponization of indignation blurs the distinction between intentional manipulation and genuine popular sentiment, introducing a psychological warfare element into international affairs.

5. Long-Term Erosion of Rational Decision-Making

Finally, a long-term decline in the logic of foreign policy decision-making could result from the cumulative influence of viral anger. Instead of viewing foreign policy as a process of strategic calculation, leaders who manage in digital environments may increasingly perceive it as a performance for online audiences. The institutional safeguards that have historically maintained global peace may be undermined as a result of this change, which, over time, may normalize aggressive posturing and reactive decision-making (Fasinu et al., 2024).

In conclusion, social media presents serious hazards, including escalation, polarisation, manipulation, and the breakdown of reasoned decision-making, even while it also presents new avenues for diplomatic communication. These factors underscore the need for governments to adopt innovative approaches to managing online discontent, including enhanced media literacy, strategic communication strategies, and procedures for shielding crisis diplomacy from online pressures.

VI. Discussion

This study has shown that the viral indignation on social media platforms significantly influences foreign policy behavior by intensifying psychological biases,

accelerating decision-making, and exerting pressure on leaders to take assertive positions. Two points of view must be balanced in the conversation.

First, by providing immediate access to global events and empowering underrepresented voices to shape policy, social media contributes to the democratisation of diplomacy. According to Kreps (2020), digital platforms shift the balance of support for foreign policy by disseminating knowledge and enlisting the help of otherwise marginalised constituencies. In this way, fury is a reflection of sincere calls for national assertion, responsibility, and transparency.

However, social media has a double-edged impact on global politics, as Zhang (2023) highlights. Publics are empowered, yet performative politics are encouraged, discourse is radicalised, and diplomatic flexibility is limited. Outrage-driven diplomacy turns into a show in which leaders take action in response to perceived reputational threats that are amplified by online audiences rather than strategic considerations.

Second, this study emphasises how social media may serve as a mirror and a tool for influencing public opinion. Zeitzoff et al. (2015) demonstrate how social media networks can skew perceptions of consensus even if they frequently mirror current policy divisions. Even when a limited fraction is magnified by bots, misinformation, or algorithmic prejudice, viral fury may seem to be universal. Furthermore, Norah and Akpanke (2024) contend that depending on how online groups organise around narratives, social media can either intensify or de-escalate conflict. This implies that outrage is not always destabilizing and that its impacts depend on how elite reactions, institutional protections, and online mobilization interact.

VII.   Conclusion

The data from case studies and psychological theories indicate that social media indignation is a structural force in international relations, rather than merely a communication phenomenon. Viral indignation prompts countries to adopt riskier and more assertive foreign policy positions by amplifying emotional contagion, reinforcing nationalist identities, and constraining leaders due to concerns about their reputation. The cases of Russia and Ukraine, India and Pakistan, and the United States and Iran demonstrate how social media indignation heightens misunderstandings, collapses deliberation timeframes, and forces leaders into escalation. Long-term effects include the digitisation of diplomacy, with global crises playing out on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter just as much as in formal diplomatic settings. The rational underpinnings of decision-making that

support global order have been undermined by digital platforms, even as they have increased engagement in foreign policy.

Ultimately, this study highlights the need for developing new guidelines and protections to mitigate the mental strain associated with online indignation. To protect foreign policy against performative escalation, governments must invest in institutional firewalls, digital literacy, and strategic communication. Without such safeguards, social media runs the risk of turning diplomacy into a volatile, reactionary field where calculating statecraft is less important than viral emotion.

VIII. Limitations

While this research has provided theoretical and empirical insights into the role of social media outrage in foreign policy, several limitations remain.

1. Case study scope: Although representative, the emphasis on Russia-Ukraine, India-Pakistan, and the United Nations-Iran fails to represent the variety of digital outrage dynamics in non-state actors, smaller nations, and multilateral organisations. The focus of future research should be expanded to encompass environments in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

2. Methodological constraints: Descriptive reports of social media activity and secondary literature are used extensively in the investigation. More accurate insights into the evolution of outrage and its impact on decision-makers can be obtained through quantitative techniques such as sentiment analysis or network mapping.

3. Causality vs. correlation: It is still challenging to prove a link between government action and social media outrage. Leaders can use Outrage to justify policies they have already planned to implement. It takes mixed-methods research that combines policymaker interviews, psychological trials, and computational analysis of digital trends to disentangle causality.

4. Rapid technological change: The dynamics of indignation are altered by new apps, algorithm tweaks, and changing user demographics on social media platforms, which undergo rapid evolution. Results from established platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) may not apply to decentralized networks or new ecosystems like TikTok.

Even with these limitations, the study lays the groundwork for additional research into the psychological strains of viral diplomacy and the changing relationship between social media and international relations.

Works cited

Annual Review of Political Science, 4, 67–92.
　　　https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.67

Fasinu, E. S., Lawal, M., & Oni, B. (2024). Digital diplomacy in the age of social media: Challenges and opportunities for crisis communication. *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research, 7*(3), 24–38. https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-0TOOED5F

Goldgeier, J., & Tetlock, P. E. (2001). Psychology and international relations theory.

Kinder, D. R., & Weiss, J. A. (1978). Instead of rationality: Psychological perspectives on foreign policy decision making. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 22*(4), 659–718.

Kreps, S. E. (2020). *Social media and international relations* [Element]. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108920377

Mintz, A., & DeRouen Jr, K. (2010). Psychological factors affecting foreign policy decisions. In *Understanding foreign policy decision making* (pp. 97–120). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511757761.006

Renshon, J., & Renshon, S. A. (2008). The theory and practice of foreign policy decision-making. *Political Psychology, 29*(4), 509–536. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00647.x

Zeitzoff, T., Kelly, J. F., & Lotan, G. (2015). Using social media to measure foreign policy dynamics: An empirical analysis of the Iranian–Israeli confrontation (2012– 13). *Journal of Peace Research, 52*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343314558700

Zhang, Q., & Xie, B. (2023). The double-edged sword role of social media in international politics. *Media and Communication Research, 4*, 8–14. https://doi.org/10.23977/mediacr.2023.040302