Navigating constraints and harnessing opportunities in cultural diplomacy: Advancing inter-state trust in Kenya–United States relations

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diplomacy is an increasingly important instrument of bilateral engagement, yet its trust-building effects depend on the political, institutional, financial, cultural, mobility and technological conditions within which cultural interaction occurs. This article examined the challenges and opportunities associated with using cultural diplomacy to strengthen inter-state trust and bilateral relations between Kenya and the United States. The study was guided principally by Soft Power Theory, complemented by liberal institutionalist and relational perspectives that explain how attraction, repeated interaction, reciprocity and durable institutional linkages can contribute to trust. A mixed-methods approach employing descriptive and evaluative research designs was used. The target population comprised diplomats and foreign-affairs officials, cultural practitioners, educational and exchange-programme participants, media and communication professionals, academic and institutional actors, and diaspora/community stakeholders in Kenya and the United States. Stratified random sampling supported the quantitative component, while purposive and snowball sampling were used to reach specialized and information-rich participants. The article draws on 359 completed survey responses, open-ended questionnaire narratives, key-informant and expert interviews, and four focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages and mean scores, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically and triangulated across data sources. Major constraints were inadequate funding, visa and mobility barriers, cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes, political and institutional inconsistency, weak programme sustainability and technological inequalities. Conversely, respondents identified strong opportunities in educational exchange, institutional collaboration, creative-industry engagement, digital diplomacy, diaspora and alumni networks, youth participation and media cooperation. Institutional collaboration and expanded exchange programmes each recorded a mean of 4.64, while social-media and media partnerships received unanimous strong endorsement (M = 5.00). The study concludes that cultural diplomacy contributes most effectively to bilateral trust when engagement is reciprocal, inclusive, adequately resourced, institutionalized and sustained beyond individual programmes. It recommends diversified financing, improved mobility support, stronger bilateral institutional coordination, systematic alumni engagement, expanded creative-industry diplomacy and investment in inclusive digital infrastructure.

Keywords: Bilateral Relations; Cultural Diplomacy; Inter-State Trust; Kenya–United States Relations; People-to-People Diplomacy, Soft Power

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy has become an increasingly significant component of contemporary international relations as states seek to build relationships with foreign societies through education, arts, cultural exchange, media, heritage, sports and people-to-people engagement. Unlike approaches that depend primarily on formal negotiation, economic leverage or political bargaining, cultural diplomacy emphasizes interaction, attraction, mutual learning, dialogue and relationship-building. Cummings (2003) conceptualizes cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among peoples to foster mutual understanding, while Nye (2004, 2011) locates culture and credible values among the resources through which states may generate attraction and voluntary cooperation. The Kenya–United States relationship provides a useful setting for examining these dynamics. Bilateral relations have been supported by educational exchanges, university partnerships, leadership initiatives, artistic and cultural engagement, media interaction, diaspora networks and community-based relationships (Moshtari & Ghorbani, 2025). Programmes such as Fulbright, the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), the Mandela Washington Fellowship, EducationUSA initiatives, university exchanges and professional programmes create repeated opportunities for Kenyan and American citizens and institutions to interact. The diplomatic significance of these initiatives extends beyond their immediate educational or cultural purposes. Repeated interaction may reduce stereotypes, increase cultural familiarity, create professional and institutional networks and strengthen confidence. Cultural diplomacy can therefore contribute to the social foundations upon which broader bilateral cooperation develops. However, programmes capable of generating goodwill may simultaneously encounter inadequate financing, difficult travel processes, bureaucratic inefficiencies, shifting political priorities, persistent stereotypes, unequal access and weak post-programme follow-up.

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1.1 Statement of the Problem

Kenya and the United States have maintained extensive educational, cultural, professional and people-to-people interactions over several decades. These engagements create opportunities for mutual understanding and complement formal diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, the existence of cultural diplomacy programmes does not automatically produce sustainable bilateral trust. Existing scholarship has extensively examined cultural diplomacy in relation to soft power, public diplomacy, national image, attraction and mutual understanding, but comparatively less empirical attention has been paid to the practical conditions that determine whether cultural diplomacy remains accessible, inclusive, sustainable and capable of generating durable relationships, particularly in African–United States bilateral relations. In the Kenya–United States context, resource inequalities, visa and mobility regulations, institutional arrangements, changing political priorities, media narratives, stereotypes, technological disparities and unequal access can determine who participates, whether relationships continue after programmes end and whether interpersonal goodwill develops into sustained institutional cooperation. The article therefore evaluates cultural diplomacy as a relational and institutional process whose trust-building effectiveness depends on overcoming structural constraints while strategically exploiting emerging opportunities.

1.2 Research Objectives

i. Identify the principal financial, mobility, cultural, political, institutional, sustainability and technological barriers;
ii. Assess how these barriers influence participation, continuity, inclusiveness and trust-building;
iii. Examine opportunities for strengthening cultural diplomacy; and
iv. Propose strategies for improving its sustainability and bilateral impact.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Soft Power Theory

The analysis is principally anchored in Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory. Nye (2004, 2011) argues that states can influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or material inducement. Culture, political values, educational institutions and legitimate foreign policies can become sources of influence when foreign publics regard them as credible and attractive. Educational exchanges, cultural programmes, artistic collaboration and people-to-people initiatives therefore constitute potential soft-power resources. Yet possession of attractive cultural resources does not automatically translate into durable influence. The conversion of attraction into trust depends on credibility, accessibility, institutional continuity and relationships through which positive perceptions can be reinforced over time. This theoretical qualification is particularly relevant to the present study because the article investigates the structural conditions that enable or constrain the conversion of cultural engagement into inter-state trust.

2.1.2 Liberal Institutionalism and Complex Interdependence

Liberal institutionalist perspectives and complex interdependence complement Soft Power Theory by emphasizing the role of repeated institutional interaction and multiple channels of international cooperation. Keohane and Nye (1977) argue that contemporary international relations involve connections among governments, universities, civil society, businesses, cultural organizations, media institutions, professional communities and citizens. In Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy, institutional stability matters because relationships embedded in durable organizations, agreements, exchange networks and partnerships may survive political transitions, whereas initiatives dependent on short projects or individual champions are more vulnerable to disruption.

2.1.3 Relational Public Diplomacy and Social Capital

A relational perspective further explains why continuity, reciprocity and networks are central to cultural diplomacy. Zaharna (2010) argues that public diplomacy can operate through relationship-building rather than one-way messaging. Social Capital Theory similarly emphasizes the role of networks and repeated interaction in generating cooperation and trust (Putnam, 2000). From this perspective, the analytical question is not simply whether cultural activities attract attention, but whether they create durable relational infrastructure connecting Kenyan and American individuals and institutions.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Financial, Mobility and Accessibility Constraints

Empirical and policy scholarship shows that cultural diplomacy is resource-intensive. Exchange programmes, artistic collaborations, academic partnerships and professional mobility require sustained financing for travel, accommodation, scholarships, administration, cultural production, monitoring and follow-up. Goff (2017) emphasizes the institutional character of cultural diplomacy, while Melissen (2005) and Cull (2008) stress the importance of

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sustained engagement rather than episodic communication. Resource asymmetries can also affect reciprocity because states with stronger diplomatic networks and cultural institutions possess greater capacity to finance and project cultural programmes. Mobility barriers compound these inequalities. Visa requirements, travel costs, documentation processes and administrative uncertainty can narrow participation, especially among emerging artists, students, grassroots organizations and participants without strong institutional sponsorship. Digital exchange can partially mitigate mobility constraints, but it does not fully substitute for immersive interpersonal contact.

The wider public-diplomacy literature reinforces the importance of access and sustained resourcing. Cull (2008) treats exchange and cultural diplomacy as core public-diplomacy functions whose effectiveness depends on credible implementation, while Nye (2008) argues that soft-power resources generate influence only when they are translated through credible public engagement. Cowan and Arsenault (2008) further show that collaboration requires sustained cross-national participation rather than one-off communication. Together with Goff (2017) and Melissen (2005), these studies suggest that financing is not merely an administrative input: it determines the duration, reciprocity and reach of cultural engagement.

Mobility is equally central because exchange-based diplomacy relies on opportunities for direct contact. Deardorff (2006) demonstrates that intercultural competence develops through processes that require engagement, reflection and assessment, while Allport (1954) emphasizes the conditions under which meaningful contact can reduce prejudice. Educational-exchange scholarship likewise treats international mobility as a public-diplomacy mechanism that connects participants and institutions (Metzgar, 2016). When travel costs, visa procedures or weak institutional sponsorship exclude otherwise qualified participants, these relational mechanisms are weakened and the benefits of cultural diplomacy become unevenly distributed.

2.2.2 Cultural Misunderstandings, Stereotypes and Representation

Cultural diplomacy is intended to reduce social distance, yet participants may enter exchanges with stereotypes, incomplete media representations and limited intercultural knowledge. Allport's (1954) contact perspective suggests that meaningful interaction can reduce prejudice under appropriate conditions, while Deardorff (2006) emphasizes intercultural competence as a developmental outcome of sustained engagement. Bennett (1993) similarly links intercultural learning to movement beyond ethnocentric interpretation. These perspectives imply that cultural contact is most likely to contribute to trust when programmes encourage reciprocal learning, cultural orientation, reflection and sustained interaction rather than superficial exposure.

Research on public diplomacy similarly cautions that communication without dialogue may reproduce rather than correct distorted perceptions. Cowan and Arsenault (2008) distinguish monologue from dialogue and collaboration, arguing that reciprocal engagement can be more appropriate where mutual understanding is the objective. Cull (2008) places listening alongside cultural diplomacy and exchange as a core public-diplomacy function, while Zaharna (2010) emphasizes relational approaches built on communication, culture and networks. These perspectives complement Allport (1954), Bennett (1993) and Deardorff (2006) by locating stereotype reduction within sustained, reciprocal communication rather than simple cultural exposure.

The literature therefore points to programme design as a critical variable. Intercultural contact is more likely to generate durable understanding when participants have opportunities to interpret difference, question inherited assumptions and work collaboratively across cultural boundaries (Bennett, 1993; Deardorff, 2006). Nye (2008) also stresses credibility in public diplomacy, suggesting that attraction is undermined when cultural communication appears one-sided or disconnected from participants' lived experience. Cultural diplomacy aimed at trust-building consequently requires representation that is plural, dialogic and sufficiently sustained to allow perceptions to change through experience.

2.2.3 Political, Institutional and Sustainability Challenges

Cultural diplomacy is embedded within wider political relationships and is therefore vulnerable to leadership changes, diplomatic tensions, shifting immigration policies and changing funding priorities. Cull (2008) and Gilboa (2008) emphasize credibility, dialogue and continuity as important features of contemporary public diplomacy. Institutionalization can protect cultural relationships from short political cycles by embedding them in universities, cultural organizations, alumni networks and formal partnerships. Sustainability is therefore not equivalent to completing an event or exchange; it depends on whether relationships, communication and collaboration continue after the formal programme ends.

Institutional continuity is repeatedly identified as a condition for effective public diplomacy. Gilboa (2008) argues that public diplomacy requires multidisciplinary and systematic approaches rather than isolated activities, while Cull (2008) emphasizes the interdependence of listening, exchange, cultural diplomacy and network-building. Cowan and Arsenault (2008) add that collaboration is strongest where actors participate in joint ventures with defined goals. These insights align with Keohane and Nye's (1977) emphasis on multiple channels of interdependence and with Zaharna's (2010) relational approach, which treats networks as infrastructure for durable engagement.

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Political transitions can therefore affect cultural diplomacy indirectly by altering budgets, mobility rules, institutional priorities and the credibility of commitments. Melissen (2005) situates contemporary public diplomacy within long-term relationship-building, and Nye (2008) links effective soft power to credibility and civil-society participation. Where programmes are embedded in universities, cultural organizations, alumni associations and formal partnerships, they acquire institutional anchors that can outlast changes in individual office-holders. Sustainability thus depends on organizational memory, diversified partnerships and mechanisms for continued interaction after formal programmes conclude.

2.2.4 Technology, Media and Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy has expanded the scale and continuity of international cultural engagement. Bjola and Holmes (2015) and Manor (2019) show how digital platforms reshape diplomatic communication and network formation. Digital tools can support virtual exchanges, collaborative classrooms, online exhibitions, webinars, podcasts and continued alumni engagement. However, Norris (2001) demonstrates that unequal connectivity, affordability and digital skills can reproduce exclusion. Digital diplomacy is therefore both an opportunity and a structural challenge: it expands reach while requiring investment in infrastructure, equipment, literacy and inclusive access.

Digital diplomacy scholarship shows that technology changes both the scale and the structure of diplomatic engagement. Manor (2019) conceptualizes digitalization as a long-term transformation of diplomacy that enables institutions to interact with publics online, while Manor and Pamment (2019) show that digital platforms can create new opportunities for diplomatic visibility and network positioning. Arsenault (2009) similarly links emerging digital communication to more interactive forms of public diplomacy. Read alongside Bjola and Holmes (2015), these studies indicate that digital tools can extend relationships beyond the temporal and geographic limits of physical exchange.

However, technological reach should not be equated with equal participation. Norris (2001) demonstrates that digital divides reflect inequalities in access, affordability and skills, while Cowan and Arsenault (2008) stress that meaningful collaboration requires more than message transmission. Digital cultural diplomacy is therefore most useful when platforms support dialogue, co-creation and continuity and when institutions address connectivity, equipment and digital-literacy barriers. This literature supports a hybrid approach in which digital engagement complements, rather than automatically substitutes for, face-to-face cultural contact.

2.2.5 Educational Exchange, Creative Industries, Diaspora and Institutional Partnerships

Educational exchanges and university partnerships create repeated interpersonal and institutional contact, while creative industries can reach audiences beyond conventional diplomatic channels. Cummings (2003) and Goff (2017) locate educational and cultural exchange at the heart of cultural diplomacy. Diaspora networks also sustain transnational social and professional relationships and can act as bridges between countries. Institutional partnerships are particularly important because they can convert individual exchange experiences into durable cooperation through joint research, alumni networks, artistic collaboration, mentorship and professional associations.

Educational exchange has a particularly strong institutional dimension. Metzgar (2016) shows how higher-education institutions can function as public-diplomacy actors by bringing international cohorts into sustained educational environments, while Nye (2008) identifies education, culture and credible civil-society engagement as important soft-power resources. Cummings (2003) and Goff (2017) likewise position cultural and educational exchange within the broader architecture of cultural diplomacy. These studies suggest that universities contribute not only through student mobility but also through joint research, faculty networks, professional collaboration and long-term institutional partnerships.

Diaspora and creative-industry engagement widen this relational field beyond state institutions. Ho and McConnell (2019) conceptualize diaspora diplomacy as multidirectional diplomatic activity occurring across the boundaries of domestic and foreign spheres, highlighting diasporas as actors with enduring transnational connections. Zaharna (2010) similarly emphasizes networks and relational communication, while Cowan and Arsenault (2008) foreground collaboration and co-production. Creative practitioners, alumni and diaspora communities can therefore operate as cultural intermediaries who sustain contact, circulate cultural knowledge and connect institutions and publics across borders.

2.3 Research Gap

The literature establishes the relevance of soft power, public diplomacy, cultural exchange, digital diplomacy and relational engagement, but several gaps remain. First, much scholarship focuses on attraction, national image and public diplomacy rather than directly examining how cultural diplomacy contributes to inter-state trust. Second, there is limited empirical work centered specifically on Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy and the conditions under which interpersonal goodwill becomes sustained institutional and bilateral confidence. Third, earlier work is often qualitative or descriptive, leaving room for mixed-methods evidence that combines stakeholder survey results with interviews, questionnaire narratives and focus group discussions. Finally, the literature does not sufficiently integrate

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the constraints and opportunities of cultural diplomacy within a single relational framework. This study addresses these empirical, contextual, methodological and analytical gaps by examining how structural barriers and emerging opportunities shape the trust-building potential of Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed descriptive and evaluative research designs within a mixed-methods approach. The descriptive design documented the forms, structures and processes of Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy, while the evaluative design assessed its contribution to inter-state trust, the constraints limiting its effectiveness and the opportunities for strengthening bilateral engagement. Combining quantitative and qualitative evidence enabled the study to capture both broad stakeholder patterns and detailed explanations of how cultural diplomacy was experienced and interpreted.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Kenya and the United States, focusing on institutional and operational sites where Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy is implemented. In Kenya, the study covered relevant diplomatic and foreign-affairs structures, universities and exchange networks, cultural organizations, media institutions and programme alumni. In the United States, the study included institutions and communities involved in Kenya-related educational, cultural and diaspora engagement, including university and exchange-programme networks and relevant cultural and professional actors. The two-country design was appropriate because it captured perspectives from both sides of the bilateral relationship and allowed the study to examine cultural diplomacy as a reciprocal transnational process rather than from a single-country viewpoint.

3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised adults with direct knowledge, professional responsibility, participation or demonstrable experience in Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy and related bilateral engagement. Stakeholder categories included diplomats and foreign-affairs officials, cultural diplomacy practitioners, artists and other creative practitioners, educational and exchange-programme participants, media and communication professionals, academic and institutional actors, programme administrators, and diaspora/community leaders. The estimated accessible population used for quantitative sampling was approximately 3,000 individuals: about 1,760 in Kenya and 1,240 in the United States. Eligibility was based on substantive relevance to the study variables rather than institutional affiliation alone.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

A mixed-methods sampling strategy combining stratified random, purposive and snowball sampling was used. For the quantitative component, the accessible population was stratified by major stakeholder category to promote representation of diplomats and foreign-affairs actors, cultural practitioners, exchange participants, media professionals and diaspora/community actors. Using an estimated accessible population of approximately 3,000 and a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, the target quantitative sample was approximately 353 and was adjusted to 360 for practical allocation across stakeholder categories and the two country contexts. A total of 359 completed survey responses were obtained. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling identified information-rich key informants with specialized expertise or direct involvement, while snowball sampling facilitated access through professional, institutional, alumni, diplomatic and diaspora networks. Four focus group discussions were also conducted.

Table 1

Survey exposure to Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy (N = 359).

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretive relevance
Direct participation in Kenya–USA cultural diplomacy programmes	294	81.9%	Most respondents had direct programme exposure.
Participated once	130	36.2%	A substantial group had first-hand exposure.
Participated 2–3 times	162	45.1%	Largest group had repeated exposure.
Participated more than 5 times	67	18.7%	A notable group had extensive repeated engagement.

Table 1 demonstrates that the survey findings were largely informed by respondents with direct experience of Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy programmes. Of the 359 respondents, 294 (81.9%) reported direct programme participation. Repeated exposure was also substantial: 162 respondents (45.1%) had participated two to three times, 130

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(36.2%) once, and 67 (18.7%) more than five times. This high level of direct and repeated engagement strengthens the experiential basis for respondents' assessments of the constraints and opportunities associated with cultural diplomacy. The pattern is consistent with relational public diplomacy and social-capital perspectives, which emphasize repeated interaction and sustained networks as mechanisms through which familiarity, cooperation and trust can develop (Putnam, 2000; Zaharna, 2010). Accordingly, the exposure profile provides an appropriate empirical foundation for interpreting the subsequent findings on funding, mobility, institutional continuity, sustainability, technology, reciprocity and other dimensions of Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured key-informant interview guides, focus group discussion guides and documentary sources. The questionnaire generated quantitative data on programme participation, perceptions of cultural diplomacy, constraints, opportunities and trust-related outcomes, while open-ended items provided narrative evidence. Semi-structured interviews enabled diplomats, programme administrators, policy experts, institutional representatives and other specialized respondents to explain their experiences in greater depth. Focus group discussions captured shared and contrasting perspectives among participants with relevant exchange and cultural-diplomacy experience. Interviews and FGDs were conducted face-to-face where feasible and through secure virtual platforms where necessary. With informed consent, sessions were recorded and supplemented by field notes.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies, percentages and mean scores. These statistics were used to summarize levels of participation and stakeholder assessments of constraints and opportunity pathways. Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses, interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically. Themes were developed in relation to the study objectives, including funding, mobility, stereotypes, political and institutional continuity, sustainability, technology, educational exchange, creative industries, diaspora and alumni engagement, and reciprocity. Methodological triangulation was used to compare survey findings, narrative responses, interviews and focus groups, thereby strengthening the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance and research authorization were obtained before data collection. The study received institutional research approval from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology and applicable national research authorization in Kenya, together with permissions from participating institutions where required. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to decline or withdraw, and the measures used to protect confidentiality. Participant identifiers were used where appropriate, and audio recordings, transcripts and digital files were stored securely. Research assistants were trained in ethics, informed-consent procedures, confidentiality, instrument administration, note-taking, transcription and data security.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Financial and Resource Constraints

Funding and resource constraints emerged as one of the most persistent structural challenges affecting the effectiveness and sustainability of cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States. Participants acknowledged the transformative potential of educational exchanges, cultural festivals, artistic collaborations, research partnerships and community-based cultural initiatives, but emphasized that such activities require sustained financial and institutional support. Inadequate resources restrict programme scale, shorten implementation periods, reduce opportunities for follow-up and limit participation by individuals and communities that cannot independently absorb the costs associated with travel, accommodation, programme fees and related expenses. Funding constraints therefore affect more than the number of activities that can be implemented; they shape who participates, how long engagement can be sustained and whether relationships established through cultural encounters can develop beyond initial contact. This finding supports Goff's (2017) emphasis on the institutional and resource foundations of cultural diplomacy and reinforces relational approaches to diplomacy that regard continuity and repeated interaction as necessary conditions for building durable relationships.

The qualitative evidence further demonstrates that funding constraints can directly affect the range and continuity of cultural and educational exchange mechanisms. One exchange programme participant argued that *"Beyond exchange programs like Fulbright, summer language institutes should be revived and better funded. The creative arts industry offers an underutilized avenue—establishing formal pathways for Kenyan artists to tour the US would powerfully showcase Kenyan culture."* (RQ-US-08, Exchange Programme Participant, 22 May 2026). This observation

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broadens the funding question beyond established educational exchanges by drawing attention to language programmes and artistic mobility as complementary channels of cultural engagement. The evidence suggests that inadequate financing may produce not only fewer programmes but also a narrower cultural-diplomacy architecture in which well-established exchange mechanisms survive while potentially valuable initiatives in language, music, performing arts and other creative sectors remain underdeveloped. This finding can be read alongside Cull (2008), who identifies exchange diplomacy as a distinct and sustained dimension of public diplomacy, and Cowan and Arsenault (2008), whose emphasis on collaboration highlights the importance of creating opportunities for actors from different societies to work together rather than merely communicate with one another. From this perspective, sustained financing provides the institutional capacity through which dialogue and collaboration can be repeatedly enacted.

The findings also demonstrate the close relationship between financial sustainability and the wider political and administrative environment within which cultural diplomacy operates. As the Coordinator of Study Abroad and Exchange Programs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison explained, *"The primary challenges are political. Varying immigration policies across different U.S. administrations have frequently disrupted exchange programs. Funding is another critical barrier; several summer language institutes that were vital to facilitating international engagement have shut down due to discontinued financial support."* (Interview, 11 June 2026). This testimony indicates that financial constraints should not be treated as an isolated operational problem. Funding decisions interact with immigration rules, political priorities and institutional policies to determine whether programmes remain viable and whether participants can access them. Goff's (2017) institutional perspective is particularly relevant here because cultural diplomacy depends upon organizational structures capable of sustaining cultural engagement over time. Similarly, Nye's (2008) argument that soft-power resources do not automatically translate into desired outcomes helps explain why the possession of cultural assets alone is insufficient. Kenya may possess significant cultural resources—including music, performing arts, heritage, languages and creative industries—but their diplomatic potential depends partly upon the existence of credible and adequately resourced channels through which those cultural resources can reach and interact with foreign publics. Inadequate financing can weaken precisely these channels by restricting mobility, reducing programme frequency and limiting the duration and diversity of engagement.

The evidence therefore suggests that financing should be conceptualized as part of the relational infrastructure of cultural diplomacy, rather than merely as an administrative input or programme cost. Where cultural diplomacy seeks to generate trust through repeated interaction, reciprocity and sustained relationships, financial instability can interrupt the process through which initial cultural encounters develop into longer-term networks and institutional partnerships. This interpretation both supports and extends the literature reviewed. Cull (2008) and Cowan and Arsenault (2008) demonstrate the importance of exchange and collaborative engagement, while Goff (2017) emphasizes the institutional foundations necessary for cultural diplomacy and Nye (2008) cautions against assuming that cultural attractiveness automatically produces influence. The Kenya–United States evidence adds an important empirical dimension by showing that resource stability affects the entire relational pathway: it influences access to cultural encounters, continuity of interaction, opportunities for follow-up, collaborative activity and ultimately the durability of relationships generated through those encounters. Diversifying support through government appropriations, university partnerships, private-sector sponsorship, philanthropy, alumni participation and diaspora networks could therefore reduce dependence on short funding cycles while widening participation. Such diversification would be particularly important for ensuring that cultural diplomacy is not disproportionately accessible to economically advantaged participants. Viewed in this way, sustainable financing is not peripheral to cultural diplomacy; it is one of the structural conditions through which cultural resources can be converted into sustained engagement, relational continuity and, over time, more durable forms of inter-state trust.

4.2 Visa, Mobility and Accessibility Constraints

Visa restrictions, administrative delays, high travel costs, documentation requirements and uncertainty surrounding travel authorization were repeatedly identified as barriers to cultural and educational exchange between Kenya and the United States. These constraints reduce participation and may disproportionately affect first-time travellers, students, artists and cultural practitioners without strong institutional or financial backing. The finding reinforces the literature reviewed in Section 2.2.1, which emphasizes that cultural diplomacy depends fundamentally on opportunities for direct interaction. Where legitimate mobility is difficult, expensive or unpredictable, fewer individuals are able to participate in the interpersonal encounters through which cultural knowledge is exchanged, stereotypes are challenged and relationships are established. As one American student FGD participant observed, *"Exchange programmes change people's perspectives, but many qualified students never get the opportunity because of financial and travel barriers."* (American student FGD participant, 16 May 2026). Mobility constraints therefore influence not only programme participation but also the social inclusiveness of cultural diplomacy by shaping whose experiences and perspectives become represented in international exchange.

The significance of mobility becomes clearer when considered against theories of intercultural contact and competence. Allport's (1954) contact perspective emphasizes the potential of meaningful interpersonal interaction to

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reduce prejudice under appropriate conditions, while Deardorff (2006) conceptualizes intercultural competence as a developmental process involving attitudes, knowledge, skills and interaction across cultural differences. Cultural exchange programmes can provide environments in which such processes occur, but their relational potential depends on participants being able to access them in the first place. Cowan and Arsenault (2008) similarly emphasize collaboration as an important dimension of public diplomacy, requiring opportunities for actors from different societies to interact and undertake activities together. The findings of the present study therefore add a practical dimension to these perspectives: the benefits associated with contact, intercultural learning and collaboration remain constrained when financial and administrative barriers prevent potential participants from entering the spaces in which those processes occur.

Mobility policy should consequently be understood as part of the enabling institutional environment of cultural diplomacy rather than as a peripheral administrative matter. As one policy expert stated, *"If governments want stronger people-to-people diplomacy, they must make legitimate educational and cultural mobility more accessible and predictable."* (Policy expert, interview, 4 June 2026). Predictable visa procedures, clearer documentation processes and adequate travel support can facilitate legitimate educational and cultural mobility while preserving applicable immigration and security requirements. In the Kenya–United States context, reducing unnecessary uncertainty surrounding legitimate cultural and educational travel could broaden participation and strengthen opportunities for sustained people-to-people engagement. Mobility barriers are therefore also relational barriers: by determining who can participate in cross-cultural encounters, they influence the opportunities through which interpersonal familiarity, intercultural understanding and longer-term trust can develop.

4.3 Cultural Misunderstandings, Stereotypes and Representation

Persistent stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings also constrained bilateral engagement. Respondents associated misconceptions with limited direct exposure, incomplete media representations and insufficient intercultural knowledge. Direct interaction repeatedly emerged as an effective corrective because it allowed participants to replace inherited assumptions with lived experience. This is consistent with Allport (1954), Bennett (1993) and Deardorff (2006), whose work suggests that sustained contact and intercultural learning can reduce prejudice and improve understanding.

> "*Before coming here, most of what I knew about Africa came from the media. After living in Kenya, I realized how incomplete those images were."* (American student FGD participant, 16 May 2026)
>
> "*The most effective way is through continuous cultural exchange programs involving music, film, and youth arts collaborations between Kenya and the USA. Such programs help citizens understand each other beyond politics*." (RQ-K-01, Cultural Practitioner, 18 June 2026)

The qualitative evidence also indicates that stereotype reduction was strongest when participants moved from mediated images to direct, reciprocal experience. This finding accords with Bennett (1993) and Deardorff (2006), who link intercultural learning to the development of more complex ways of interpreting cultural difference. It further supports Cull's (2008) emphasis on listening and Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) distinction between one-way communication and dialogue. For Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy, the implication is that programmes should create structured opportunities for participants from both countries to speak, listen, collaborate and reflect rather than relying primarily on cultural display.

4.4 Political, Institutional and Sustainability Challenges

Political and institutional inconsistency emerged as another major constraint on the capacity of cultural diplomacy to generate sustained inter-state trust. Cultural diplomacy is intrinsically long-term because relationships, mutual familiarity and confidence between societies develop cumulatively rather than through isolated encounters. Political and administrative systems, however, frequently operate according to much shorter cycles. Changes in government, diplomatic priorities, administrative leadership, immigration policies and funding allocations can consequently disrupt programmes before the relationships they generate have matured. This creates a temporal tension between the long-term relational logic of cultural diplomacy and the shorter political, budgetary and administrative cycles through which many cultural initiatives are implemented. The findings therefore support Cull (2008), Gilboa (2008) and Zaharna (2010), whose approaches to public and relational diplomacy emphasize credibility, sustained engagement and relationship-building rather than episodic communication or one-off diplomatic activities.

The respondents particularly emphasized institutionalization as a means of protecting cultural diplomacy from political and leadership transitions. Where programmes depend heavily on particular political leaders, diplomats, administrators or individual cultural champions, their continuity may become vulnerable when those individuals leave office or institutional priorities change. As one policy expert observed,

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> "*Cultural diplomacy cannot depend solely on individual champions; it must be embedded within national policy and supported by strong institutions to remain effective over time."* (Policy expert, interview, 2 July 2026)
>
> "*The greatest challenge is ensuring continuity beyond political transitions. Cultural diplomacy should be institutionalized so that programmes continue regardless of changes in government*." (Policy expert, interview, 25 June 2026)
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> "The programme ended, but the relationships didn't. We still keep in touch, collaborate on projects, and continue learning from one another." (FGD participant, 28 May 2026)
>
> "The success of cultural diplomacy should not be measured by the number of exchange programmes conducted, but by the strength and longevity of the relationships they continue to generate." (Policy expert, interview, 9 July 2026)

These perspectives indicate that institutionalization performs an important stabilizing function. Embedding cultural diplomacy within durable policy frameworks, universities, cultural organizations, bilateral institutions and formal cooperation agreements can provide continuity even when political leadership and immediate foreign-policy priorities change. Responsibility for maintaining cultural relationships is thereby distributed across multiple institutions rather than concentrated in particular office-holders or temporary projects. This pattern is consistent with Keohane and Nye (1977) emphasis on multiple channels of interaction in sustaining international cooperation and suggests that institutional density can provide cultural relationships with resilience against political disruption.

Continuity, however, also depends on what happens after formal cultural programmes have ended. Weak alumni engagement, limited monitoring and evaluation, short project cycles and inadequate follow-up mechanisms can allow relationships established through exchanges to lose momentum even when the initial programme itself is successful. The qualitative evidence demonstrates that participants may nevertheless sustain relationships independently after formal institutional engagement has concluded. One FGD participant explained, *"The programme ended, but the relationships didn't. We still keep in touch, collaborate on projects, and continue learning from one another."* (FGD participant, 28 May 2026). This finding is significant because it demonstrates that the relational effects of cultural diplomacy may extend well beyond the official duration of an exchange. It also resonates with Cowan and Arsenault (2008), who identify collaboration and continuing joint activity as deeper forms of public diplomatic engagement. Alumni networks, collaborative projects, institutional partnerships and continuing professional communication can therefore function as mechanisms through which temporary cultural encounters are transformed into durable transnational relationships. From the perspective of trust-building, these post-programme interactions are especially important because repeated contact provides opportunities for initial interpersonal goodwill to develop into continuing cooperation, familiarity and confidence.

The evidence consequently suggests that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy should be assessed not only through immediate programme outputs but also through the durability and institutionalization of the relationships produced. As one policy expert emphasized, *"The success of cultural diplomacy should not be measured by the number of exchange programmes conducted, but by the strength and longevity of the relationships they continue to generate."* (Policy expert, interview, 9 July 2026). This perspective challenges output-oriented approaches that equate success primarily with numbers of exchanges, participants, events or cultural activities. Such indicators remain useful for measuring programme reach, but they reveal relatively little about whether relationships persist, generate subsequent collaboration or contribute to broader institutional cooperation. Long-term monitoring frameworks could therefore incorporate indicators such as sustained alumni interaction, repeat collaboration, joint cultural or academic projects, institutional partnerships and continued cross-border networks. In the Kenya–United States context, durable university and cultural-institution agreements, bilateral coordination mechanisms, active alumni systems and longitudinal monitoring could help preserve relational gains across political transitions. The findings therefore extend existing relational approaches to cultural diplomacy by suggesting that institutional continuity constitutes a bridge between interpersonal relationships and longer-term inter-state trust: when relationships generated through cultural exchange are repeatedly sustained, connected and embedded within organizations, interpersonal goodwill has greater potential to accumulate into institutional cooperation and a more durable reservoir of trust between states.

4.5 Technology and Infrastructure Barriers

Digital technologies expand the reach, continuity and accessibility of cultural diplomacy by enabling cultural actors, institutions and participants to maintain interaction beyond the temporal and geographical limits of conventional exchange programmes. Digital platforms can facilitate virtual performances, online exhibitions, educational exchanges, professional networking and sustained communication among participants who might otherwise be separated by distance and the financial costs associated with international travel. In the context of Kenya–United States cultural relations, this capacity is particularly significant because digital engagement can connect artists, students, cultural practitioners, educational institutions and wider publics across considerable geographical distance. This finding is consistent with Manor (2019) and Bjola and Holmes (2015), who demonstrate how digital technologies have expanded

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the communicative environment within which contemporary diplomacy operates. Manor and Pamment (2019) similarly show that digital environments can create new forms of visibility, interaction and connection that extend diplomatic engagement beyond conventional institutional and physical settings.

Importantly, however, the findings suggest that digital engagement should not be conceptualised as a substitute for physical cultural encounters. Rather, respondents viewed digital diplomacy as a complementary mechanism capable of sustaining relationships established through face-to-face exchanges while simultaneously extending participation to audiences that may not be reached through conventional programmes. As one policy expert explained:

> *"Digital diplomacy should complement—not replace—face-to-face exchanges because it allows relationships to continue and reach audiences that traditional programmes cannot."* (Policy expert, interview, 9 July 2026)

This observation highlights an important distinction between the reach of cultural diplomacy and the relational depth that may emerge through sustained interpersonal encounters. Digital platforms can enable frequent communication, continued interaction and wider dissemination of cultural content, but face-to-face exchanges provide opportunities for participants to experience cultural practices directly, develop interpersonal relationships and engage with social contexts that may be difficult to reproduce fully through mediated communication. A hybrid approach may therefore provide a stronger basis for sustained cultural engagement: physical exchanges can initiate or deepen interpersonal relationships, while digital platforms can preserve those relationships after participants return to their respective countries. From this perspective, digital diplomacy contributes not merely by increasing audience size but by providing an infrastructure through which cultural relationships can be maintained over time.

At the same time, the findings reveal an important contradiction within the expansion of digital cultural diplomacy. The same technologies that make cross-border engagement more accessible can generate new forms of exclusion when participation depends on reliable internet connectivity, affordable data, adequate digital devices, stable electricity and sufficient digital literacy. Respondents' emphasis on affordability constraints, power interruptions, inadequate equipment and digital-literacy gaps indicates that access to digital cultural diplomacy is socially and materially uneven. This finding reflects Norris's (2001) warning that digital inequality can reproduce existing social disparities rather than automatically overcome them. Consequently, the expansion of digital cultural diplomacy does not necessarily translate into broader inclusion. Communities with stronger technological infrastructure and greater economic resources may participate more consistently and visibly, while underserved communities risk remaining peripheral to the very cultural networks that digital diplomacy is intended to broaden.

The findings therefore qualify optimistic accounts of digital diplomacy by demonstrating that technological reach must be distinguished from meaningful and equitable participation. Manor (2019) and Bjola and Holmes (2015) show that digital platforms can extend diplomatic communication and sustain networks across distance, while Manor and Pamment (2019) demonstrate the new possibilities for visibility and connection created by digital environments. The present study adds an important contextual dimension to these arguments: digital technologies contribute most effectively to cultural diplomacy when the material conditions necessary for participation are addressed alongside the communication technology itself. For Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy, this implies that investment in digital programmes should be accompanied by attention to connectivity, affordability, equipment, electricity and digital capability, particularly among communities that have historically had fewer opportunities to participate in international cultural exchange. Such an approach would allow digital platforms to function not simply as instruments for disseminating cultural content, but as mechanisms for sustaining reciprocal relationships, widening participation and supporting the longer-term accumulation of interpersonal and institutional trust across the two countries.

4.6 Quantitative Evidence on Strategic Opportunities

The survey provided strong quantitative support for institutional collaboration, expanded exchange programmes and digital/media partnerships as opportunities for strengthening cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States. As summarized in Table 2, respondents expressed particularly strong support for increased collaboration between Kenyan and U.S. cultural institutions and for the expansion of exchange programmes involving students, artists and diplomats. Both indicators recorded identical mean scores of 4.64, with 64.3% of respondents strongly agreeing and 35.7% agreeing. The absence of neutral or negative responses on these two indicators indicates a high level of consensus regarding the importance of institutional cooperation and expanded opportunities for interpersonal exchange. This pattern suggests that respondents did not view cultural diplomacy primarily as a series of isolated cultural events, but as a process requiring sustained institutional linkages and repeated interaction across different sectors of society.

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Table 2

Selected quantitative indicators relevant to opportunities for strengthening cultural diplomacy (N = 359).

Opportunity indicator	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral/ other	Mean
Increased collaboration between Kenyan and U.S. cultural institutions can improve inter-state trust	231 (64.3%)	128 (35.7%)	0	4.64
Expanding exchange programmes for students, artists and diplomats enhances bilateral understanding	231 (64.3%)	128 (35.7%)	0	4.64
Social media and media partnerships can strengthen cultural diplomacy	359 (100%)	0	0	5.00
Media coverage positively influences perceptions of Kenya–USA relations	66 (18.4%)	128 (35.7%)	165 (46.0%)	3.17

The strongest quantitative result concerned the potential role of social media and media partnerships, for which all 359 respondents strongly agreed, producing a mean score of 5.00. This unanimous endorsement contrasts sharply with respondents' assessment of the contribution of existing media coverage to perceptions of Kenya–United States relations. On the latter indicator, only 18.4% strongly agreed and 35.7% agreed, while the remaining 46.0% comprised neutral and strongly disagreeing responses, resulting in a substantially lower mean of 3.17. The contrast between these two indicators is analytically important because it distinguishes respondents' perceptions of the potential of media and digital platforms from their assessment of the current performance of existing media coverage. The findings therefore suggest that respondents recognized considerable opportunities for digital and media diplomacy but were considerably less convinced that existing media practices were already realizing that potential.

This distinction is consistent with the digital-diplomacy literature. Bjola and Holmes (2015) and Manor (2019) emphasize the capacity of digital technologies to expand diplomatic communication, connect dispersed audiences and sustain networks beyond the geographical limitations of conventional diplomacy. The exceptionally high support for social media and media partnerships in the present study reinforces this argument within the Kenya–United States context. However, the more moderate assessment of existing media coverage demonstrates that technological availability alone does not guarantee effective cultural diplomacy. Digital platforms must be accompanied by credible content, meaningful representation, reciprocal communication and opportunities for sustained engagement. As discussed elsewhere in the findings, inequalities in internet access, affordability, equipment and digital literacy may further determine who can participate in these emerging diplomatic spaces. The quantitative evidence therefore supports the potential identified in the digital-diplomacy literature while simultaneously demonstrating a gap between technological opportunity and its effective utilization in bilateral cultural relations.

Similarly, the strong endorsement of institutional collaboration and expanded exchange programmes reinforces relational and institutional approaches to diplomacy. Keohane and Nye (1977) emphasize the importance of multiple channels of interaction in sustaining international relationships, while Zaharna (2010) places relationships and networks at the centre of communication and public diplomacy. The present findings provide empirical support for these perspectives by showing that respondents strongly associated deeper institutional cooperation and expanded interpersonal exchange with improved bilateral understanding and trust. Taken together, the three highly rated opportunities; institutional collaboration, expanded exchanges and digital/media partnerships; point toward a mutually reinforcing model of cultural diplomacy. Institutional partnerships can provide continuity, exchange programmes can generate direct interpersonal relationships, and digital platforms can extend and sustain those relationships beyond the duration of physical encounters. The quantitative evidence therefore suggests that strengthening Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy requires not a single intervention, but an interconnected architecture combining institutional cooperation, interpersonal exchange and digitally sustained engagement.

4.7 Educational Exchanges and University Partnerships

Educational diplomacy emerged as one of the strongest opportunity pathways for strengthening cultural diplomacy and inter-state trust between Kenya and the United States. Expanding scholarship access, student mobility, faculty exchanges, collaborative research, joint academic initiatives and leadership programmes can broaden the social foundations of bilateral engagement by creating sustained opportunities for individuals and institutions to interact across national and cultural boundaries. Educational exchanges are particularly significant because their effects may extend beyond the formal duration of a programme: participants acquire intercultural knowledge, establish professional and personal networks and may subsequently maintain relationships with host institutions and fellow participants. This finding is consistent with Cummings (2003), whose discussion of cultural diplomacy recognizes educational exchange as an important mechanism of international cultural engagement. It also reflects the relational logic of Keohane and Nye (1977), since universities and educational institutions create multiple channels of cross-border interaction that can persist beyond particular diplomatic events or individual participants.

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The findings further suggest that universities should be understood not simply as venues for exchange programmes but as increasingly important institutional actors in international relationship-building.

> *"Universities have become diplomatic actors in their own right. Joint research projects create partnerships that continue long after individual exchange programmes end."* (Policy expert, interview, 30 June 2026)
>
> "*Expand educational exchanges, support joint artistic productions, invest in innovation partnerships, include rural communities, and evaluate programs based on the quality and longevity of relationships rather than simply the number of events."* (Former United States Ambassador to Kenya, interview, 18 July 2026)

Joint research, faculty collaboration, institutional agreements and continuing academic networks can transform individual educational encounters into more durable forms of institutional cooperation. This is important for cultural diplomacy because relationships embedded within universities are potentially less dependent on short political cycles and may continue despite changes in governments, diplomatic personnel or immediate foreign-policy priorities. Educational diplomacy can therefore operate simultaneously at two interconnected levels: at the interpersonal level, it facilitates direct cultural learning and relationship formation; at the institutional level, it creates networks and partnerships through which those relationships can be reproduced and sustained. In this respect, the findings extend the relational perspective by showing how repeated academic interaction can provide an institutional structure through which interpersonal connections develop into longer-term cross-border cooperation.

The evidence also indicates that the future effectiveness of educational diplomacy depends on widening participation and connecting educational exchange with other forms of cultural and collaborative engagement. As the former United States Ambassador to Kenya emphasized, *"Expand educational exchanges, support joint artistic productions, invest in innovation partnerships, include rural communities, and evaluate programs based on the quality and longevity of relationships rather than simply the number of events."* (Former United States Ambassador to Kenya, interview, 18 July 2026). This perspective moves educational diplomacy beyond conventional student mobility by linking it with artistic collaboration, innovation, community inclusion and long-term relationship-building. It also reinforces the study's broader finding that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy should not be evaluated solely through short-term output indicators such as numbers of exchanges or events. Rather, attention should be given to whether programmes generate sustained networks, continuing collaboration and institutional partnerships. Within Kenya–United States relations, expanding educational diplomacy while deliberately including participants beyond established urban and institutional networks could broaden the constituencies involved in bilateral engagement. Educational diplomacy thus offers a pathway through which individual encounters can develop into professional networks, institutional partnerships and, over time, more durable foundations for inter-state trust.

4.8 Arts, Creative Industries and Cultural Entrepreneurship

The creative economy emerged as a major but comparatively underutilized opportunity for strengthening cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States. Music, film, dance, theatre, visual arts, literature, cuisine, heritage and cultural festivals provide forms of cultural communication that can reach audiences beyond those normally engaged through formal diplomatic and educational programmes. Unlike conventional state-centred diplomacy, creative and artistic encounters can operate through performance, storytelling, shared experience and cultural expression, allowing individuals to encounter another society through its people and cultural practices. Artist residencies, joint productions, touring programmes, film festivals, exhibitions and collaborative performances can therefore diversify the actors involved in bilateral engagement while expanding cultural diplomacy beyond governmental institutions. This interpretation is consistent with Goff (2017) understanding of cultural diplomacy as engagement through cultural expression and exchange and with Nye (2004) broader conception of culture as an important source of attraction within soft power. However, the findings also suggest that cultural resources acquire diplomatic significance not merely because they are attractive, but because they create opportunities for interaction and relationship formation. Artists and cultural practitioners are particularly important within this process because they can communicate with audiences that formal diplomatic actors may find difficult to reach. As one American performing artist explained,

> "*Governments should invest more in artist exchange programmes because musicians, dancers, actors, and filmmakers reach audiences that traditional diplomacy often cannot*." (AI-01, American Performing Artist, 7 July 2026) (AI-01, American Performing Artist, 7 July 2026).

The observation highlights the capacity of artists to function as non-state cultural intermediaries who create connections through artistic practice rather than formal diplomatic messaging. This supports the relational orientation advanced by Zaharna (2010), which shifts attention from information transmission toward networks, interaction and relationship-building. It also resonates with Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) emphasis on collaboration, particularly where artists from different societies move beyond presenting their cultures to one another and instead participate in joint creative activity. A collaborative production involving Kenyan and American musicians, filmmakers, dancers or theatre practitioners, for example, creates a different form of diplomatic engagement from the unilateral presentation of national

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culture because participants jointly produce, interpret and negotiate cultural meaning. Creative collaboration can therefore provide spaces in which cultural difference is encountered through shared activity rather than simply observed from a distance.

The findings further indicate that the diplomatic potential of the creative economy depends on reciprocity and sustained opportunities for cultural mobility. Cultural diplomacy becomes more relational when Kenyan artists have meaningful opportunities to perform, exhibit and collaborate in the United States while American artists are similarly able to engage directly with Kenyan communities and cultural institutions. Such two-way engagement can help avoid an overly promotional model in which culture is primarily used to project a favourable national image. Instead, artist exchanges, residencies, touring programmes and joint productions can generate repeated interpersonal contact, professional networks and continuing creative partnerships. In this respect, the study extends conventional soft-power interpretations by suggesting that the diplomatic value of the creative economy lies not only in the attraction generated by cultural products, but also in the relationships created through cultural participation and co-creation. For Kenya–United States relations, greater investment in reciprocal artistic mobility and collaborative cultural production could therefore broaden the constituencies participating in bilateral relations and provide additional pathways through which cultural familiarity, mutual recognition and longer-term relational trust can develop.

4.9 Digital Diplomacy, Diaspora and Alumni Networks

Digital platforms emerged as an important opportunity for extending the geographical reach and temporal continuity of cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States. Virtual exchanges, collaborative classrooms, podcasts, digital exhibitions, social-media engagement and online cultural events enable cultural interaction to continue without requiring participants to remain physically co-located. Their strategic value therefore lies not only in their capacity to reach larger and geographically dispersed audiences, but also in their ability to sustain communication after formal exchanges and cultural programmes have concluded. This finding is consistent with Bjola and Holmes (2015) and Manor (2019), who emphasize the growing importance of digital technologies in expanding diplomatic communication and network formation. However, the present findings add a relational dimension by indicating that digital platforms can function as mechanisms of continuity: rather than treating online engagement primarily as a means of disseminating information, cultural diplomacy can use digital communication to preserve relationships, facilitate subsequent collaboration and maintain cross-border networks established through earlier interpersonal encounters.

Exchange alumni provide an especially important illustration of this continuity. Participants indicated that relationships developed during exchanges frequently persisted through alumni networks, professional associations and social-media communication. As one exchange participant explained,

"We still collaborate through alumni networks, professional associations, and social media, which keeps the partnership alive long after returning home." (Exchange participant, 15 June 2026)

> *"The Kenyan diaspora represents an important bridge between our two countries because they maintain enduring social, cultural, and professional connections that benefit both societies."* (Policy expert, interview, 14 July 2026)

This finding supports Zaharna (2010) relational approach, which places networks and relationship-building at the centre of public diplomacy, and also resonates with Putnam (2000) emphasis on the value generated through social networks and sustained interpersonal connections. Alumni should therefore be understood not simply as former beneficiaries of cultural-diplomacy programmes but as potential long-term participants in bilateral relationship-building. Through professional collaboration, mentorship, joint initiatives, cultural activities and continuing interpersonal communication, alumni networks can preserve and multiply the relational effects of an exchange programme. In this sense, the conclusion of a formal exchange need not represent the end of the diplomatic process; it can mark the transition from institutionally organized contact to participant-sustained networks capable of generating further interaction.

Diaspora communities similarly constitute important reservoirs of cultural knowledge, professional experience, social capital and transnational networks. As one policy expert observed, *"The Kenyan diaspora represents an important bridge between our two countries because they maintain enduring social, cultural, and professional connections that benefit both societies."* (Policy expert, interview, 14 July 2026). Diaspora communities occupy a distinctive position within cultural diplomacy because their continuing connections with both home and host societies allow them to facilitate cultural interpretation, professional networking, artistic collaboration, educational linkages and community-level engagement across borders. When combined with active alumni networks and digital platforms, diaspora engagement can contribute to a more decentralized and socially embedded form of cultural diplomacy that extends beyond government-sponsored programmes. The findings therefore extend Putnam (2000) network perspective and Zaharna (2010) relational approach by demonstrating how digital connectivity, alumni relationships and diaspora networks can operate together as mechanisms of relational continuity. Within Kenya–United States relations, these interconnected networks provide opportunities to preserve relationships established through formal exchanges, generate new collaborations and sustain the repeated cross-border interaction through which interpersonal and institutional trust can accumulate over time.

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4.10 Reciprocity as the Organizing Principle

A recurrent theme across the evidence was that cultural diplomacy becomes more credible and relationally meaningful when it is structured around reciprocity. Cultural engagement perceived primarily as one-sided promotion may increase visibility and familiarity, but it does not necessarily create the mutual recognition required for sustained trust. By contrast, programmes that incorporate listening, dialogue, mutual learning and opportunities for participants from both societies to contribute to the substance and direction of cultural engagement create stronger foundations for reciprocal relationships. This finding is consistent with Zaharna (2010) relational approach to public diplomacy, which emphasizes relationship-building, and networks rather than unilateral communication. It also qualifies a narrow interpretation of Nye (2004, 2008) soft-power framework. Cultural attraction remains important, but the evidence from this study suggests that attraction alone is insufficient for durable trust-building unless audiences and partners are also recognized as active participants in the diplomatic relationship. The importance of reciprocity was articulated particularly clearly by the former United States Ambassador to Kenya, who observed:

> "*Every country pursues cultural diplomacy partly to advance national interests. The key distinction is whether it is reciprocal. Genuine cultural diplomacy involves listening and learning from one another rather than simply promoting one country's culture."* (Former United States Ambassador to Kenya, interview, 18 July 2026)

This observation acknowledges that cultural diplomacy inevitably operates alongside national interests while distinguishing between cultural engagement based predominantly on projection and engagement based on mutual participation. The distinction is significant in asymmetrical bilateral relationships because differences in financial resources, global cultural visibility and institutional capacity can influence whose culture receives greater exposure and whose perspectives shape programme priorities. Reciprocity does not necessarily require identical resources or equivalent programme scale; rather, it requires meaningful opportunities for both sides to contribute, interpret, respond and influence the relationship. Joint artistic productions, reciprocal educational exchanges, collaborative research, two-way cultural mobility and jointly designed programmes can therefore move cultural diplomacy from the presentation of culture toward the co-production of shared experiences.

The findings consequently suggest that reciprocity functions as an important mechanism connecting cultural engagement with trust formation. When participants perceive that their identities, cultural knowledge and perspectives are respected, cultural encounters are more likely to generate mutual recognition and a sense of shared ownership. This interpretation is consistent with Cowan and Arsenault (2008) emphasis on collaboration as a deeper form of public diplomacy because collaboration requires participants to move beyond communication toward undertaking activities together. In the Kenya–United States context, this implies that sustainable cultural diplomacy should create space not only for American institutions and cultural actors to engage Kenyan audiences, but also for Kenyan artists, students, scholars, cultural institutions and communities to shape and participate meaningfully in engagement with the United States. The evidence therefore extends relational approaches by positioning reciprocity as a condition through which cultural contact can move from exposure and attraction toward mutual recognition, shared ownership and more durable relational trust.

4.11 Integrated Interpretation

The findings reveal a central paradox in Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy: many of the mechanisms capable of generating interpersonal and inter-state trust are simultaneously constrained by the political, institutional, economic and technological structures through which they operate. Educational exchanges create opportunities for meaningful interpersonal contact, intercultural learning and professional network formation, yet funding limitations, visa restrictions and travel costs restrict participation. Digital technologies extend cultural engagement beyond geographical boundaries and enable relationships to continue after physical exchanges, yet inequalities in connectivity, affordability, equipment, electricity and digital literacy can exclude underserved communities. Cultural and artistic programmes provide opportunities to challenge stereotypes through direct cultural encounter, while media narratives may simultaneously reproduce simplified or negative representations. Similarly, institutional partnerships can preserve relationships beyond individual programmes, but political transitions, fragmented coordination, changing priorities and short funding cycles can undermine their continuity. These tensions demonstrate that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy cannot be understood solely by examining individual programmes; it must also be assessed in relation to the wider environment that enables or constrains sustained cultural interaction.

The evidence therefore supports conceptualizing cultural diplomacy as a relational ecosystem rather than as a collection of isolated programmes or communication activities. Within this ecosystem, educational institutions, cultural organizations, artists, students, exchange alumni, diaspora communities, media organizations, digital platforms, government agencies and other actors interact through overlapping networks. The effectiveness of one component may depend on the functioning of others. An educational exchange, for example, may initiate interpersonal relationships, but alumni networks and digital communication can sustain those relationships after participants return home; institutional partnerships can subsequently provide opportunities for further collaboration, while adequate funding and predictable

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mobility arrangements enable additional participants to enter the network. This interpretation is consistent with Keohane and Nye (1977) emphasis on multiple channels of interaction and Zaharna (2010) relational emphasis on networks and relationship-building. It also resonates with Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) understanding of collaboration as a deeper form of public diplomacy. Viewed collectively, the findings indicate that cultural diplomacy becomes more resilient when these mechanisms reinforce one another rather than functioning as disconnected interventions.

This relational interpretation also clarifies the place of attraction within the trust-building process. Consistent with Nye (2004, 2008) soft-power perspective, cultural attractiveness can generate interest, familiarity and willingness to engage. The findings of the present study, however, suggest that attraction should be understood as an entry point rather than an endpoint in the development of durable bilateral trust. Cultural diplomacy contributes most effectively when attraction creates opportunities for interaction; repeated interaction facilitates relationship formation; relationships develop into networks; and networks become embedded within sustained institutional cooperation. Reciprocity, continuity and shared participation are important throughout this process because they help transform cultural exposure into relationships that participants perceive as credible and mutually meaningful. The Kenya–United States evidence therefore suggests a relational pathway through which cultural resources may contribute to longer-term trust: attraction → interaction → relationship formation → network development → institutionalization → durable inter-state trust. At the same time, funding instability, mobility restrictions, digital inequality, political transitions and representational imbalances can interrupt this pathway at different stages. Understanding cultural diplomacy as a relational ecosystem thus helps explain both its trust-building potential and the structural conditions that determine whether that potential is ultimately realized.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This article examined the challenges and opportunities associated with using cultural diplomacy to strengthen Kenya–United States bilateral relations and inter-state trust. Funding constraints, visa and mobility barriers, cultural stereotypes, political and institutional inconsistency, sustainability weaknesses and technological inequalities reduce participation and interrupt the continuity necessary for long-term trust-building. At the same time, expanded educational exchanges, university partnerships, creative-industry collaboration, digital diplomacy, diaspora and alumni networks, youth engagement, community initiatives and media cooperation offer substantial opportunities. Quantitative results reinforce this conclusion: respondents expressed very high support for stronger institutional collaboration and expanded exchange opportunities (M = 4.64) and unanimous strong support for leveraging social-media and media partnerships (M = 5.00). The central conclusion is that successful cultural diplomacy requires more than cultural events; it requires institutionalized, reciprocal, inclusive, sustained and adequately resourced relationships. Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy should therefore be understood as relational infrastructure capable of providing continuity and resilience to the broader bilateral relationship.

5.2 Recommendations

Kenya and the United States should diversify financing for educational and cultural diplomacy by combining public funding with university collaboration, private-sector partnerships, philanthropy, alumni networks and diaspora participation. Institutions should improve support for legitimate educational and cultural mobility through stronger coordination among embassies, universities, exchange organizations and programme administrators. Cultural diplomacy should be institutionalized more deliberately within Kenya–United States bilateral relations through durable coordination frameworks, university and cultural-institution agreements and long-term collaborative programmes. Sustainability mechanisms; including alumni engagement, mentorship, follow-up projects, digital communities and institutional partnerships; should be treated as core programme components rather than optional post-programme activities.

Monitoring and evaluation should move beyond event and participation counts toward relationship durability, continued collaboration, perception change, institutional partnerships, alumni activity and long-term trust outcomes. Investment in digital infrastructure and digital literacy should accompany the expansion of digital diplomacy so that virtual cultural engagement does not reproduce existing inequalities. Both countries should expand creative-industry diplomacy involving musicians, filmmakers, visual artists, writers, dancers, cultural entrepreneurs and heritage practitioners while widening participation for youth, rural communities, emerging artists and disadvantaged students. Reciprocity should guide programme design through listening, co-creation, mutual learning and shared ownership.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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