Beyond cultural exchange: Constraints, sustainability and emerging opportunities in Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diplomacy has become increasingly important in contemporary international relations as states and non-state actors use educational, cultural, institutional, and people-to-people engagement to complement conventional diplomacy. However, the sustainability of such engagement depends on the financial, mobility, representational, institutional, political, and technological conditions within which cultural programmes operate. This study examined the constraints affecting cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States and assessed emerging opportunities for strengthening its sustainability, inclusiveness, and resilience. The study was guided by Soft Power Theory and Liberalism Theory and employed descriptive and evaluative research designs within a mixed-methods approach. The target population comprised stakeholders involved in or knowledgeable about Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy, including diplomatic and foreign-affairs actors, cultural practitioners, exchange-programme participants, media professionals, university and programme representatives, and diaspora and community actors. From an accessible population of approximately 3,000, a target quantitative sample of 360 respondents was established, of whom 359 completed the questionnaire. Stratified random sampling was used to select questionnaire respondents across stakeholder categories and country contexts, while purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify information-rich qualitative participants. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, open-ended responses, and documentary analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations where appropriate, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically and integrated with quantitative findings through methodological triangulation. The findings identified five interconnected constraints: inadequate and unstable financial resources, visa and mobility barriers, cultural stereotypes and representational limitations, political and institutional discontinuity, and unequal technological connectivity. Conversely, educational and university partnerships, creative-industry collaboration, digital diplomacy, diaspora and alumni networks, and community-based engagement emerged as important opportunities for widening participation and sustaining bilateral cultural relations. The study concludes that sustainable Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy requires a transition from episodic cultural encounters to institutionalized, reciprocal, and networked relationships capable of enduring funding cycles, political transitions, and geographical barriers. It recommends diversified financing, improved mobility facilitation, strengthened university and multi-actor partnerships, structured diaspora and alumni engagement, hybrid physical-digital programming, broader socioeconomic and geographical inclusion, and evaluation mechanisms that prioritize the quality and longevity of relationships.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Digital Diplomacy, Kenya–United States Relations; International Relations; Sustainability

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy occupies an increasingly important position within contemporary international relations as governments and non-state actors seek forms of engagement capable of complementing conventional state-to-state diplomacy. Broadly understood as the exchange of ideas, information, arts, language, and other dimensions of culture to foster mutual understanding, cultural diplomacy provides channels through which societies interact beyond traditional diplomatic negotiations (Cummings, 2003; Goff, 2013). Educational exchanges, artistic collaborations, cultural festivals, academic partnerships, media engagement, sports, diaspora networks, and other forms of people-to-people interaction can promote familiarity, facilitate intercultural understanding, and establish interpersonal and institutional relationships across national boundaries (Goff, 2013; Nye, 2004).

The significance of these processes has increased as diplomacy has become more dispersed among state and non-state actors. Although governments remain central diplomatic actors, universities, cultural institutions, artists, media organizations, civil society groups, diaspora communities, professional associations, and individual citizens

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increasingly participate in transnational engagement. This development corresponds with Keohane and Nye's (1977) conception of complex interdependence, in which international relations operate through multiple channels connecting governments and societies. It also reflects the relational turn in public and cultural diplomacy, which emphasizes dialogue, listening, collaboration, reciprocity, and relationship-building rather than exclusively one-directional projection of national culture (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008; Zaharna, 2010).

However, the existence of cultural exchange does not automatically produce effective or sustainable diplomacy. Cultural programmes operate within political, economic, institutional, social, and technological environments that can either facilitate or constrain their effectiveness. Educational and professional exchanges depend on financial resources and cross-border mobility, while sustained cultural engagement requires institutional coordination and mechanisms capable of preserving relationships after individual programmes conclude. Relational approaches to public diplomacy are particularly relevant in this respect because they shift attention from short-term communication outcomes toward networks, relationships, and sustained engagement (Zaharna, 2010; Goff, 2013).

This distinction between cultural exchange as an event and cultural diplomacy as a sustainable relational process is particularly important. Short-term exchanges, performances, conferences, festivals, and visits can create meaningful encounters, but their longer-term diplomatic significance depends partly on whether relationships persist beyond the original programme. Sustainable cultural diplomacy therefore requires attention to structures that facilitate continued interaction, including alumni associations, university partnerships, recurring programmes, professional networks, community collaborations, digital platforms, and other institutional and social connections. Such mechanisms are consistent with a relational understanding of diplomacy in which the durability and quality of relationships become important dimensions of diplomatic engagement (Zaharna, 2010).

The Kenya–United States relationship provides a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. Bilateral engagement includes educational and professional exchanges alongside wider cultural and institutional interaction. Programmes such as Fulbright and the Young African Leaders Initiative's Mandela Washington Fellowship have provided formal channels through which Kenyan and American students, professionals, leaders, and institutions interact. These initiatives form part of a wider history of educational and people-to-people engagement within Kenya–United States relations.

Technological transformation has further altered the environment within which such engagement occurs. Digital technologies have affected diplomatic institutions, practices, audiences, and patterns of interaction, expanding opportunities for engagement beyond conventional face-to-face diplomacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019). Virtual exchanges, collaborative research, online cultural dialogue, digital storytelling, social-media engagement, and other forms of digitally mediated interaction can extend communication across geographical boundaries and help sustain relationships after physical exchanges conclude. At the same time, digital diplomacy should not automatically be equated with universal access: disparities in connectivity, infrastructure, technological resources, and digital literacy can affect who is able to participate meaningfully in digitally mediated international engagement (Manor, 2019).

These developments expose an important gap in cultural diplomacy scholarship. Existing literature has provided substantial theoretical and conceptual insight into soft power, public diplomacy, cultural exchange, relational engagement, and digital diplomacy (Nye, 2004, 2011; Cull, 2008; Zaharna, 2010; Goff, 2013; Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019). However, these strands of scholarship do not sufficiently explain how financial constraints, mobility barriers, institutional discontinuity, cultural representation, and technological inequality interact within a specific bilateral relationship to influence the sustainability of cultural diplomacy. Similarly, emerging opportunities such as digital engagement, diaspora and alumni networks, university partnerships, and creative-industry collaboration require closer empirical examination as potential mechanisms for overcoming weaknesses in episodic cultural-exchange models.

Against this background, this article advances the argument that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not simply on the existence or frequency of cultural exchanges but also on the enabling environment through which temporary encounters are transformed into sustainable transnational relationships. Cultural diplomacy becomes more resilient when relationships are embedded across universities, cultural organizations, diaspora and alumni networks, community organizations, digital platforms, and other state and non-state structures. Conversely, cultural diplomacy may remain vulnerable when programmes are episodic, financially insecure, administratively inaccessible, politically dependent, or disconnected from mechanisms for continued engagement.

This argument shifts analytical attention from cultural diplomacy as a collection of activities toward cultural diplomacy as relational infrastructure. The critical question is therefore not simply whether exchanges, festivals, scholarships, performances, or institutional visits occur, but whether these activities create relationships, networks, and institutional arrangements capable of sustaining interaction beyond the lifespan of individual programmes.

The empirical evidence supporting this argument derives from a broader investigation of cultural diplomacy and inter-state trust between Kenya and the United States. The present article isolates the dimension concerned specifically with constraints, sustainability, and emerging opportunities. Evidence was obtained from 359 questionnaire

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respondents together with key-informant interviews, open-ended questionnaire responses, focus group discussions involving cultural-diplomacy stakeholders, and documentary analysis. This combination enables the article to examine structural constraints alongside participants' experiences of bilateral cultural engagement.

The findings reveal a central paradox. Participants recognized the diplomatic potential of educational exchanges, cultural interaction, artistic collaboration, institutional partnerships, and people-to-people engagement, while simultaneously identifying structural conditions that restrict participation and undermine continuity. Funding limitations constrain programme reach and follow-up; visa and mobility barriers restrict access; stereotypes affect perceptions; political and institutional discontinuities weaken programme stability; and technological inequalities limit the inclusiveness of digital engagement.

Nevertheless, the evidence also identifies significant opportunities for overcoming these constraints. Universities can provide institutional continuity across political cycles; digital technologies can facilitate post-exchange interaction; diaspora and alumni networks can preserve transnational connections; creative industries can engage audiences beyond formal diplomatic circles; and community-based initiatives can broaden cultural diplomacy beyond national capitals and diplomatic elites. Collectively, these mechanisms indicate the potential value of diversified networks involving both state and non-state actors in sustaining Kenya–United States cultural relations.

The article consequently makes three contributions. First, it provides context-specific empirical evidence concerning the structural conditions affecting cultural diplomacy within Kenya–United States relations. Second, it connects cultural diplomacy scholarship with questions of institutional continuity and sustainability by examining the conditions under which short-term cultural encounters can develop into longer-term relationships. Third, it identifies a practical transition from episodic exchange toward sustainable cultural relations, emphasizing multi-actor partnerships, mobility accessibility, diversified financing, digital continuity, and institutionalized networks as enabling conditions for more resilient cultural diplomacy.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although Kenya and the United States maintain substantial educational, artistic, institutional, diaspora, media, and people-to-people connections, the existence of cultural exchange does not by itself ensure sustainable cultural diplomacy. The broader problem is that bilateral cultural engagement operates within financial, mobility, representational, institutional, political, and technological constraints that can limit access, continuity, reciprocity, and long-term relationship building. Existing scholarship has examined many of these constraints separately, but relatively limited empirical attention has been given to how they interact as an enabling environment for sustainable Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. This study addresses that gap by examining the conditions that weaken or strengthen the transition from episodic cultural encounters to durable bilateral cultural relations.

1.2 Research Objective

To examine the constraints affecting cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States and assess emerging opportunities for strengthening its sustainability, inclusiveness, and resilience.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Soft Power Theory

Soft Power Theory is principally associated with Joseph S. Nye, who developed the concept to explain forms of international influence that operate through attraction rather than coercion or material inducement. Nye (2004, 2011) distinguishes soft power from the military and economic instruments commonly associated with hard power. Soft power derives principally from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies when these are regarded as attractive or legitimate by others. From this perspective, international influence can emerge not only through what states compel or pay others to do but also through the relationships, preferences, perceptions, and attraction generated through non-coercive interaction.

The theory is particularly relevant to cultural diplomacy because cultural and educational engagement constitutes an important arena through which attraction and mutual familiarity can develop. Educational exchanges, artistic performances, cultural programmes, academic partnerships, international broadcasting, sports, and people-to-people interaction expose participants to the cultures, institutions, values, and social experiences of other societies. As Nye (2004) argues, culture can constitute a source of soft power where it is attractive to others. Cultural diplomacy can therefore create opportunities through which states and societies develop favourable perceptions and relationships without relying primarily on conventional political, economic, or military instruments.

Applied to Kenya–United States cultural relations, Soft Power Theory helps explain why educational exchanges, cultural programmes, artistic collaboration, university partnerships, media engagement, and other forms of

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people-to-people interaction may have diplomatic significance. Such encounters can create familiarity, challenge pre-existing perceptions, facilitate intercultural understanding, and generate relationships between individuals and institutions. This theoretical logic corresponds with the broader understanding of cultural diplomacy as an exchange of cultural resources intended to foster mutual understanding among peoples and societies (Cummings, 2003). It also supports the relational potential identified in contemporary cultural-diplomacy scholarship, where cultural interaction is understood as capable of extending diplomatic engagement beyond formal government-to-government channels (Goff, 2013).

Soft Power Theory is nevertheless insufficient on its own to explain the sustainability of cultural diplomacy. Attraction generated through a cultural encounter does not necessarily produce a durable relationship. A successful exchange programme, performance, scholarship, or cultural event may create positive perceptions while leaving unresolved the institutional and structural conditions necessary for continued engagement. Financial constraints may prevent programmes from continuing; visa and mobility barriers may restrict participation; unequal cultural representation may affect reciprocity; political transitions may disrupt institutional support; and technological inequalities may limit access to digital engagement. These conditions are central to the present study but are not fully explained by an attraction-centred conception of soft power. The study therefore uses Soft Power Theory primarily to explain the attraction and relational potential of cultural engagement, while recognizing that attraction alone cannot account for the institutional conditions required to transform short-term cultural encounters into sustainable diplomatic relationships. This limitation creates the need for a complementary theoretical perspective capable of explaining cooperation, institutions, interdependence, and the participation of multiple actors in international relations.

2.1.2 Liberalism Theory

Liberalism provides the second theoretical foundation of the study. In international relations, liberal approaches challenge the assumption that relations among states are determined exclusively by competition for power and security. Liberal scholarship emphasizes the possibilities of cooperation, interdependence, international institutions, repeated interaction, and the participation of actors beyond national governments. Particularly relevant to this study is the work of Keohane and Nye (1977), whose concept of complex interdependence demonstrates that contemporary international relationships operate through multiple channels connecting governments, institutions, organizations, and societies.

Complex interdependence is useful for understanding cultural diplomacy because cultural relations rarely operate exclusively through ministries of foreign affairs or diplomatic missions. Universities, cultural institutions, artists, civil-society organizations, media organizations, professional associations, diaspora communities, private-sector organizations, exchange-programme alumni, and individual citizens can participate in international relationship-building. The current literature review similarly recognizes this plurality of actors and connects it to the multiple channels described by Keohane and Nye (1977). Cultural diplomacy can therefore be understood as part of a wider network of transnational relationships through which state and non-state actors contribute to bilateral engagement. Liberalism is also relevant to the question of sustainability because institutions can facilitate repeated interaction and preserve cooperation over time. Cultural relationships that become embedded in universities, exchange programmes, professional networks, cultural organizations, bilateral initiatives, alumni associations, and other institutional arrangements are potentially less dependent on individual events or temporary political circumstances. Institutionalization can provide mechanisms for coordination, information-sharing, repeated interaction, and continuity, thereby allowing relationships generated through cultural encounters to extend beyond individual programmes.

This perspective is especially important for examining the constraints addressed by the study. Institutional fragmentation can weaken coordination among cultural-diplomacy actors, while political transitions may affect programme priorities and continuity. Financial inequalities can influence which actors participate and who controls programmes, while mobility restrictions can reduce the number and diversity of people entering transnational networks. These challenges demonstrate that opportunities for international cooperation are conditioned by the institutional and structural environment within which interaction occurs. The existing literature similarly recognizes that the multiplicity of cultural-diplomacy actors can be a source of strength while also creating fragmentation when institutions operate without adequate coordination.

Liberalism further provides a useful basis for understanding the emerging opportunities investigated in this study. University partnerships can institutionalize cooperation through research and educational exchange; diaspora and alumni networks can sustain transnational connections; digital platforms can facilitate continued interaction across geographical boundaries; creative industries can connect cultural producers and audiences; and multi-actor partnerships can distribute cultural diplomacy across governmental and non-governmental institutions. Such arrangements reflect the liberal proposition that sustained international cooperation can develop through institutions, networks, repeated interaction, and interdependence rather than through interstate governmental relations alone.

Liberalism nevertheless has limitations for the analysis of cultural diplomacy. Institutional cooperation does not necessarily guarantee equal participation, mutual cultural recognition, or the elimination of power asymmetries. Actors

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within an interdependent relationship may possess unequal financial, institutional, technological, and mobility resources. Furthermore, the existence of institutions does not automatically ensure that cultural relationships are reciprocal or inclusive. The theory therefore helps explain the institutional and cooperative environment of cultural diplomacy but requires greater attention to the specific conditions that determine whether such cooperation becomes sustainable and broadly accessible.

2.1.3 Theoretical Synthesis

Soft Power Theory and Liberalism Theory consequently illuminate different but complementary dimensions of the study. Soft Power Theory explains how culture, educational exchange, and people-to-people engagement can generate attraction, familiarity, and relational opportunities, while Liberalism explains how institutions, networks, interdependence, and multiple actors can organize and sustain cooperation. Neither theory alone, however, fully explains why some cultural encounters develop into durable relationships while others remain episodic.

The study therefore brings the two theoretical perspectives together through a sequential analytical logic. Soft power helps explain the diplomatic potential created by cultural encounters, while liberalism helps explain the institutional and relational mechanisms through which that potential may be sustained. The empirical question then becomes whether the conditions surrounding cultural engagement—resources, mobility, reciprocal representation, institutional continuity, and network or digital connectivity—enable that progression to occur. This theoretical synthesis provides the foundation for the Enabling Conditions for Sustainable Cultural Diplomacy (ECSCD) analytical framework developed in this article. The framework does not replace Soft Power Theory or Liberalism Theory. Rather, it operationalizes insights from these theories for examining the specific conditions affecting Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. Its central proposition is that cultural encounters create diplomatic possibilities, but enabling conditions determine whether those possibilities develop into sustainable forms of international engagement.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Constraints Affecting Cultural Diplomacy

Financial and organizational resources constitute an important constraint on the continuity and inclusiveness of cultural diplomacy. Cultural exchanges frequently require substantial investment in international travel, scholarships, programme administration, artistic production, accommodation, institutional coordination, and post-programme engagement. Where resources are inadequate or unstable, programmes may reach fewer participants, become dependent on short funding cycles, or lack mechanisms for sustaining relationships after formal activities conclude. Recent empirical research by Zhu and Faucher (2026), based on purposively sampled interviews, an exploratory questionnaire, focus-group discussions, and an online symposium involving United Kingdom cultural organizations, identified resource misalignment among the operational challenges affecting cultural diplomacy. Their findings further showed weaknesses in coordination, organizational knowledge flows, and evaluation practices, suggesting that resource limitations are intertwined with broader institutional capacities rather than constituting an exclusively financial problem.

Evidence from international cultural relations also demonstrates that unequal resources can affect mobility and participation. Bouquerel, Dabdoub Nasser, and Magkou (2026), examining cultural mobility within European Union external cultural relations in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean through policy analysis, interviews, programme evaluations, and practitioner experience, identified fragmented funding frameworks, scarce resources, mobility inequalities, and structural power asymmetries. Their analysis demonstrates that cultural programmes may formally promote international exchange while participants continue to encounter unequal practical opportunities to cross borders and access internationally funded cultural networks. Although their study concerns European Union relations with the Mediterranean rather than Kenya–United States relations, it illustrates how financial capacity and mobility can operate as interconnected conditions of participation.

Mobility constitutes a particularly important constraint because much cultural diplomacy continues to depend upon physical encounters. Educational exchanges, artistic tours, academic collaboration, professional programmes, and cultural festivals frequently require participants to cross national borders. Bouquerel et al. (2026) found that visa restrictions, travel costs, fragmented support systems, and wider inequalities affected cultural mobility in the Mediterranean context. Similarly, Zhu and Faucher (2026) identified bureaucratic constraints and limited mobility among the challenges encountered by cultural organizations. These findings suggest that mobility policies are not external administrative matters but form part of the environment within which cultural diplomacy is implemented. Where international mobility is costly, unpredictable, or administratively difficult, participation may become disproportionately accessible to individuals and institutions possessing greater financial resources and organizational support.

Cultural representation and difference constitute another empirical concern. International cultural engagement brings participants into contact with representations of societies that may already have been shaped by media narratives, political discourse, historical experiences, and stereotypes. Zhu and Faucher (2026) identified cultural difference as one

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of the contextual and relational challenges affecting cultural-diplomacy practice. This reinforces the importance of examining not only whether cultural encounters occur but also how knowledge and cultural meaning are negotiated across organizational and national boundaries. Cultural diplomacy that relies on narrow representations or insufficient contextual understanding may reproduce rather than challenge simplified perceptions of other societies.

Institutional fragmentation presents a related challenge. Cultural diplomacy typically involves ministries, diplomatic missions, universities, cultural organizations, media institutions, civil-society organizations, private-sector actors, artists, and other stakeholders. While this plurality can widen participation, empirical evidence indicates that coordination across institutional boundaries may be difficult. Yu and Faucher (2026) found that knowledge exchange across organizational interfaces was inconsistent and that evaluation practices remained ad hoc. Comparable evidence from African diaspora diplomacy also points to institutional weaknesses. Yelwa and John (2026), in their qualitative examination of Nigeria's diaspora diplomacy, found that institutional intervention was constrained by structural weaknesses, limited mandates, and inadequate inter-agency coordination. Although the Nigerian case differs from Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy, it illustrates the broader problem of translating multi-actor diplomatic activity into coordinated and sustainable institutional practice.

Technological transformation introduces a further set of constraints. Digital platforms can expand diplomatic reach, but the capacity to employ them effectively varies considerably among institutions and societies. Bilate and Zou (2022) examination of digital diplomacy in Ethiopia identified weaknesses in digitization strategies, policy mechanisms, and institutional commitment as obstacles to effective implementation. More directly relevant to Kenya, Mutisya et al. (2024) examined digital diplomacy in Kenya and South Africa using exploratory and descriptive approaches and purposively selected diplomatic professionals. Their study demonstrates the growing importance of digital platforms in African foreign-policy practice while also locating digital diplomacy within institutional and professional structures that shape its effectiveness.

Digital engagement therefore cannot automatically be treated as an inclusive substitute for physical cultural exchange. Access to reliable internet infrastructure, appropriate devices, digital skills, institutional capacity, and credible online communication varies across populations. Consequently, digital expansion may increase the reach of diplomacy while simultaneously reproducing inequalities affecting those who lack sufficient technological access. This is particularly significant for cultural diplomacy that seeks to include rural communities, grassroots cultural practitioners, economically disadvantaged participants, and organizations operating outside well-resourced urban and institutional environments.

Taken together, these empirical studies demonstrate that constraints affecting cultural diplomacy are interconnected rather than isolated. Resource limitations can restrict mobility; mobility barriers can narrow participant diversity; limited representation can affect mutual understanding; institutional fragmentation can weaken programme continuity; and technological inequalities can restrict attempts to compensate for geographical barriers through digital engagement. Nevertheless, much of the available empirical evidence examines these constraints in other bilateral, regional, or institutional contexts, or considers individual constraints separately. This creates a need to examine how these conditions interact within Kenya–United States cultural relations and how participants themselves experience their effects on sustainability, inclusion, and continuity.

2.2.2 Emerging Opportunities for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Cultural Diplomacy

Alongside these constraints, empirical scholarship identifies several opportunities through which cultural and public diplomacy can become more sustainable and networked. Digital diplomacy represents one of the most significant developments. Mutisya et al. (2024), in their study of Kenya and South Africa, demonstrate the increasing integration of digital communication into African foreign-policy practice. Digital platforms can expand diplomatic audiences, facilitate interaction, and reduce dependence on conventional physical channels of engagement. Their relevance to cultural diplomacy lies particularly in their capacity to connect institutions and participants across geographical distance and maintain communication beyond the duration of physical programmes.

Empirical evidence also demonstrates the potential of digital communication to support relationship-building with diaspora communities. Manor and Adiku (2021) conducted a longitudinal analysis of 830 Facebook posts published by Ethiopian, Kenyan, and Rwandan embassies in 2016 and 2020. They found that embassies used social media to interact with followers, respond to criticism, publicize offline events, and disseminate information relevant to diaspora communities. Their study conceptualizes digital diaspora diplomacy around relationship-building, community strengthening, and relationship leveraging. These findings are particularly relevant to Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy because they demonstrate that diaspora relationships can be maintained through communication networks extending beyond episodic physical encounters.

Diaspora engagement more broadly provides opportunities for sustaining transnational relationships. Ho and McConnell (2019) conceptualize diaspora diplomacy as an arena in which diasporas interact with states and other diplomatic actors across the conventional boundaries between domestic and foreign affairs. Within the Kenyan context,

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Mwazighe (2021), using a qualitative case-study design and evidence from government institutions, found that diaspora engagement could contribute to Kenya's national interests through investment, skills, remittances, and broader participation in national development. Although that study primarily examined economic interests rather than cultural diplomacy, its findings demonstrate the institutional and relational potential of diaspora communities as enduring transnational networks.

Universities and educational partnerships constitute another important opportunity. Unlike temporary cultural events, university relationships can sustain repeated exchanges through student mobility, academic collaboration, joint research, professional networks, and institutional agreements. Educational institutions can therefore provide organizational continuity even when particular cultural programmes or political administrations change. This potential is especially relevant to Kenya–United States relations, where educational exchange and university interaction constitute established channels of people-to-people engagement. From the perspective of the present study, the significance of such partnerships lies not merely in the number of participants exchanged but in their capacity to create institutional relationships and networks that persist beyond individual programmes.

Creative industries similarly broaden the actors and audiences participating in cultural diplomacy. Musicians, filmmakers, visual artists, performers, cultural entrepreneurs, media producers, and other creative practitioners can establish direct connections with foreign audiences without depending exclusively on government-managed diplomatic programmes. Digital distribution further increases this potential by enabling cultural content to circulate internationally and allowing artists and audiences to maintain interaction across borders. Creative-industry collaboration consequently offers a pathway through which cultural diplomacy can become more decentralized and participatory, although the sustainability of such engagement continues to depend on resources, institutional support, mobility, and digital access.

Digital media can also contribute directly to cultural representation. Zhang and Ong'ong'a (2022), in a content analysis of 1,200 Facebook posts from CGTN Africa and BBC News Africa, found that international media used social-media content to promote African values and culture while generating interaction with online audiences. Although their study concerns international broadcasting rather than bilateral cultural diplomacy, it demonstrates how digital communication can provide spaces in which cultural narratives are circulated, interpreted, and contested. Digital diplomacy therefore offers opportunities not simply for increasing audience reach but also for sustaining interaction around cultural representation. The literature consequently points toward a more diversified model of cultural diplomacy involving educational institutions, diaspora communities, alumni, digital networks, cultural practitioners, media organizations, civil society, and governmental institutions. These actors can provide overlapping channels of interaction that reduce reliance on a single programme, institution, funding source, or mode of engagement. Such diversification is consistent with the need for cultural diplomacy to remain functional across political transitions, geographical distance, and changing technological environments.

Despite these developments, an important empirical gap remains. Existing studies provide useful evidence on cultural-diplomacy constraints, digital diplomacy, diaspora engagement, mobility, institutional coordination, and other dimensions of international cultural relations, but these issues are commonly examined within different national or regional settings and as separate analytical problems. There remains limited empirical understanding of how financial resources, mobility, cultural representation, institutional continuity, and technological connectivity interact simultaneously within Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. Similarly, insufficient attention has been given to whether educational partnerships, creative-industry collaboration, digital engagement, diaspora and alumni networks, and community-based initiatives can operate collectively as mechanisms for overcoming these constraints and sustaining bilateral cultural relationships. The present study addresses this gap by examining constraints and emerging opportunities within the same bilateral setting and by assessing how they shape the sustainability, inclusiveness, and resilience 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 was appropriate because the study sought to identify and characterize the constraints, experiences, perceptions, and emerging opportunities associated with cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States. It enabled the study to describe patterns relating to financial and organizational resources, mobility, cultural representation, institutional continuity, technological access, and other conditions affecting bilateral cultural engagement. The evaluative design complemented this approach by facilitating an assessment of the extent to which existing cultural-diplomacy arrangements supported sustainability, inclusiveness, continuity, and resilience, as well as the potential of emerging mechanisms to strengthen future engagement.

The mixed-methods approach enabled quantitative and qualitative evidence to be used complementarily. Quantitative questionnaire data provided evidence concerning broader patterns in stakeholder perceptions, while

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qualitative evidence from interviews, open-ended questionnaire responses, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and documentary analysis provided explanatory depth concerning participants' experiences of the institutional, financial, political, cultural, and technological conditions surrounding bilateral cultural engagement. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence enabled the study to establish patterns while also examining how participants experienced and interpreted the conditions underlying those patterns.

The present article draws specifically on the component of the broader investigation concerned with the constraints affecting Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy and emerging opportunities for strengthening its sustainability, inclusiveness, and resilience. It therefore represents a focused analysis of a distinct research objective within the broader study of cultural diplomacy and inter-state trust building.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Kenya and the United States because the research examined cultural diplomacy within the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The two-country setting enabled the study to obtain perspectives from stakeholders situated on both sides of the relationship rather than interpreting bilateral cultural diplomacy exclusively from one national context. Kenya was selected because of its established diplomatic, educational, cultural, and people-to-people relations with the United States and its participation in educational exchanges, arts and cultural programmes, university collaborations, professional exchanges, media engagement, diaspora activities, and other forms of cultural interaction. The United States was correspondingly included as the bilateral partner and as a major location of institutions, programmes, practitioners, and participants involved in Kenya–United States cultural engagement.

The study area was therefore defined relationally rather than as a single geographically bounded locality. Participants were drawn from relevant institutions and stakeholder categories in both countries based on their involvement in or knowledge of bilateral cultural diplomacy. This approach was appropriate because Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy is inherently transnational and operates through governmental, institutional, professional, educational, cultural, and interpersonal networks across the two national contexts.

3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised individuals directly involved in, knowledgeable about, or affected by cultural-diplomacy activities linking Kenya and the United States. The population reflected the multi-actor character of contemporary cultural diplomacy and included educational-exchange participants, cultural practitioners and artists, media professionals, diplomatic and policy actors, university representatives, programme administrators, civil-society participants, diaspora and community actors, and other stakeholders with relevant experience of bilateral cultural engagement.

These categories were included because the study sought perspectives extending beyond formal governmental diplomacy. Cultural relations between Kenya and the United States involve both state and non-state actors, and the inclusion of diverse stakeholder categories enabled the research to capture experiences relating to programme participation, institutional coordination, cultural representation, international mobility, digital engagement, sustainability, and emerging opportunities.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

A quantitative sample of 360 respondents was established for the broader study. Stratified random sampling was used to select questionnaire respondents across the relevant stakeholder categories and country contexts. The use of stratification was appropriate because the study population consisted of heterogeneous groups participating in Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. The technique therefore facilitated representation of the relevant stakeholder categories while allowing questionnaire respondents within the established strata to be selected for participation. Of the targeted 360 questionnaire respondents, 359 completed the questionnaire, representing a response rate of approximately 99.7%. Of these respondents, 194 (54.0%) were based in the United States and 165 (46.0%) were based in Kenya. The geographical distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents

Respondent location	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
United States	194	54.0
Kenya	165	46.0
Total	359	100.0

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For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants possessing specialized knowledge or direct experience of Kenya–United States cultural engagement. These included policy and institutional experts, educational and exchange actors, cultural practitioners, and other participants capable of providing detailed perspectives on programme funding, mobility, cultural representation, institutional coordination, political continuity, technological change, and emerging forms of bilateral engagement.

Snowball sampling supplemented purposive sampling where appropriate by facilitating access to additional participants with specialized knowledge or experience relevant to the research. This was particularly useful for reaching information-rich participants located within professional, diplomatic, cultural, educational, and transnational networks relevant to Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. Four FGDs were also conducted with participants drawn from relevant stakeholder categories, including individuals with experience in educational exchange, cultural practice, media, and related forms of people-to-people engagement. The FGDs facilitated examination of shared and contrasting experiences and enabled recurring issues to be explored in greater depth than was possible through standardized questionnaire items.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured key-informant interview guides, FGD guides, open-ended questionnaire items, and documentary analysis. The use of multiple data-collection instruments enabled the study to obtain quantitative evidence concerning broader stakeholder patterns while simultaneously generating qualitative evidence capable of explaining participants' experiences and interpretations. The structured questionnaire generated quantitative information concerning respondents' experiences and perceptions of Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. Questionnaire items addressed programme participation, perceived effectiveness, and constraints affecting participation and continuity, and opportunities for strengthening bilateral cultural relations. Open-ended questionnaire items enabled respondents to elaborate on their experiences and recommend improvements, particularly concerning programme costs, visa and mobility procedures, institutional follow-up, accessibility, and sustainability.

Semi-structured key-informant interviews were conducted with participants possessing specialized diplomatic, institutional, educational, policy, and cultural experience. The semi-structured format ensured that interviews addressed the principal research themes while allowing participants sufficient flexibility to explain issues arising from their professional and institutional experiences. Interviews generated detailed evidence concerning funding decisions, administrative procedures, mobility, institutional coordination, political continuity, cultural representation, and emerging forms of bilateral engagement. Among the senior practitioner perspectives incorporated into the wider evidence base was that of a former United States Ambassador to Kenya. This testimony was treated as one component of the broader triangulated dataset and was interpreted alongside evidence generated from other participant categories rather than being used as a substitute for the wider empirical evidence.

FGDs were conducted to facilitate interactive discussion among participants with relevant experience of cultural and people-to-people engagement. The discussions enabled participants to compare experiences, identify recurring challenges, and explore differing perspectives concerning mobility, cultural representation, programme accessibility, institutional continuity, technological engagement, and opportunities for improving bilateral cultural relations. Documentary analysis complemented the primary evidence. Relevant institutional documents, policy materials, programme information, and published materials concerning cultural diplomacy and Kenya–United States relations were examined to provide contextual evidence and facilitate comparison with questionnaire, interview, and FGD findings. The use of multiple sources strengthened the study's capacity to examine the research objective from different stakeholder and evidentiary perspectives.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize respondent characteristics and response distributions, while means and standard deviations were calculated where appropriate to establish patterns in responses concerning cultural-diplomacy constraints and emerging opportunities. The quantitative analysis therefore provided an empirical overview of the prevalence and relative importance of issues identified by respondents. Qualitative evidence obtained from key-informant interviews, FGDs, and open-ended questionnaire responses was analyzed thematically. The analysis involved organizing the qualitative evidence, coding relevant responses, comparing recurring ideas, and grouping related codes into broader themes corresponding to the research objective.

The thematic analysis combined deductive and inductive processes. Deductive coding was informed by the research objective and the literature concerning cultural diplomacy, sustainability, mobility, cultural representation, institutions, and digital engagement. Inductive coding allowed additional themes and explanations to emerge directly from participants' experiences rather than restricting the analysis exclusively to predetermined categories. The

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quantitative and qualitative evidence was subsequently integrated through methodological triangulation. Questionnaire findings were compared and interpreted alongside key-informant interviews, FGDs, open-ended responses, and documentary evidence to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence across the different sources. Particular attention was given to recurring themes concerning financial and organizational resources, mobility, cultural representation, institutional continuity, technological connectivity, educational partnerships, creative-industry collaboration, digital engagement, diaspora and alumni networks, and community-based initiatives.

This analytical procedure enabled the study to move beyond a descriptive catalogue of individual challenges and opportunities by examining the relationships among the conditions affecting cultural diplomacy and the mechanisms through which participants considered bilateral cultural engagement capable of becoming more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research complied with established procedures governing studies involving human participants. Approval of the research proposal was obtained through the Directorate of Postgraduate Studies at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST), Ref. MMU/COR: 509099, dated 15 June 2026. National research authorization in Kenya was subsequently obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) under Research Licence No. NACOSTI/P/26/4191447, issued on 19 June 2026. Institutional permissions were also obtained from organizations that facilitated participant access and recruitment in the two national contexts, including ICD USA and Element Experiential LLC in the United States and the GoDown Arts Centre and Bomas of Kenya in Kenya. These institutional permissions preceded the relevant data collection and did not replace the requirement for voluntary individual informed consent.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study. Confidentiality and privacy safeguards were applied during data collection, storage, analysis, and reporting. In reporting qualitative findings, questionnaire respondents, FGD participants, and other non-public participants were identified using participant codes or appropriate general categories to protect confidentiality. Where evidence from individuals occupying identifiable public professional roles was reported, attribution was limited to circumstances in which such reporting was appropriately authorized. Dates accompanying qualitative quotations were reported to enhance methodological transparency while maintaining the confidentiality protections applicable to individual participants.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The findings are presented in accordance with the study objective, which examined the constraints affecting Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy and assessed emerging opportunities for strengthening its sustainability, inclusiveness, and resilience. Evidence from questionnaires, key-informant interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), open-ended questionnaire responses, and documentary analysis revealed five principal constraints: financial and resource limitations, visa and mobility barriers, cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes, political and institutional discontinuity, and technological and infrastructural inequalities. The study further identified educational and university partnerships, arts and creative industries, digital diplomacy, diaspora and alumni networks, reciprocity, and wider community participation as important opportunities for strengthening bilateral cultural relations.

Questionnaire evidence from 359 respondents demonstrated that the constraints and opportunities examined were not confined to isolated qualitative experiences. The quantitative evidence established broader patterns in stakeholder perceptions, while qualitative evidence provided explanatory depth concerning how and why these conditions affected programme accessibility, continuity, inclusiveness, and relationship sustainability. Accordingly, the findings are organized around the study's key variables and discussed against relevant extant literature.

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Table 2

Summary of Key Variables and Principal Findings

Key variable	Principal finding	Implication for cultural diplomacy
Financial and organizational resources	Inadequate and unstable resources constrained programme reach, participation, follow-up, and continuity.	Resource instability weakens sustainability and disproportionately affects less-resourced participants.
Mobility and accessibility	Visa restrictions, travel costs, administrative requirements, and uncertainty restricted participation.	Mobility barriers reduce opportunities for direct intercultural contact and widen inequalities in access.
Cultural representation	Stereotypes and incomplete cultural knowledge constrained mutual understanding.	Direct and reciprocal cultural engagement can challenge generalized and mediated perceptions.
Political and institutional continuity	Political transitions, policy inconsistency, weak coordination, and short programme cycles undermined continuity.	Institutionalization is necessary to sustain relationships beyond individual programmes and administrations.
Technological and network connectivity	Digital technologies expanded opportunities, but technological inequality constrained participation.	Hybrid physical-digital engagement can broaden access and sustain relationships while addressing digital exclusion.

4.1.1 Financial and Resource Constraints

Financial and organizational limitations emerged as one of the most consistently identified constraints affecting Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. Participants emphasized that educational exchanges, artistic collaborations, festivals, professional visits, academic partnerships, and community initiatives require not only initial financing but also resources for mobility, implementation, follow-up, and continuity.

> "*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)

The finding demonstrates that financial constraints affect considerably more than the number of programmes that can be implemented. Limited resources restrict participant diversity, reduce opportunities for international mobility, constrain institutional follow-up, and make programmes vulnerable to short funding cycles. Participants without strong institutional sponsorship—including emerging artists, grassroots cultural practitioners, rural participants, and economically disadvantaged students—may consequently face greater difficulties accessing cultural-diplomacy opportunities.

> "*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."* (Coordinator, Study Abroad & Exchange Programs, University of Wisconsin–Madison, interview, 11 June 2026)

These findings are consistent with the empirical literature reviewed in Section 2.2, which identifies resource availability, organizational capacity, and funding continuity as important conditions for sustainable international cultural engagement. They also support relational approaches to cultural diplomacy by demonstrating that financing is not merely an administrative input but part of the infrastructure through which international relationships are established and sustained. The findings further reveal an important relationship between financial sustainability and inclusion. Where participation depends heavily on personal financial resources or institutional sponsorship, cultural diplomacy may disproportionately benefit individuals and organizations already possessing greater social and institutional capital. Resource capacity therefore influences not only programme sustainability but also the social composition and representativeness of cultural diplomacy.

4.1.2 Visa, Mobility and Accessibility Constraints

Visa restrictions, administrative delays, high travel costs, documentation requirements, and uncertainty concerning travel authorization emerged as significant barriers to cultural engagement. These constraints affected educational, artistic, academic, and professional exchanges and were perceived as particularly difficult for first-time travellers and participants without substantial institutional or financial support.

> "*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)

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> "*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)

The findings demonstrate that programme availability does not necessarily amount to programme accessibility. An exchange opportunity may formally exist but remain practically inaccessible to individuals who cannot meet its financial, administrative, documentation, or travel requirements. This result is consistent with the literature reviewed in Section 2.2 concerning inequalities in international cultural mobility. It also corresponds with Allport (1954) contact proposition, which emphasizes the importance of meaningful interpersonal contact in challenging prejudice and generalized perceptions. The present findings demonstrate that such contact depends first upon participants having practical access to opportunities for cross-border interaction.

Mobility should therefore be understood as part of the enabling infrastructure of cultural diplomacy rather than merely an immigration or administrative issue. When legitimate educational and cultural mobility is predictable and accessible, opportunities for direct intercultural interaction increase. Conversely, when international mobility becomes expensive, uncertain, or administratively difficult, participation contracts and the social reach of cultural diplomacy becomes narrower.

4.1.3 Cultural Misunderstandings, Stereotypes and Representation

Persistent stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings constituted another significant constraint. Respondents associated misconceptions with limited direct exposure, incomplete media representations, political narratives, and insufficient intercultural knowledge. Direct interaction repeatedly emerged as an important corrective because it enabled participants to compare generalized or mediated perceptions with lived experience.

> "*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)

These findings are consistent with Allport (1954), Bennett (1993), and Deardorff (2006), whose respective works emphasize interpersonal contact and intercultural learning as mechanisms through which prejudice, ethnocentric assumptions, and intercultural misunderstanding may be reduced. They also support Goff's discussion of cultural diplomacy and relational approaches emphasizing dialogue and mutual learning rather than unilateral cultural projection.

The evidence suggests that cultural representation should be reciprocal and plural. Cultural diplomacy may have limited capacity to generate genuine understanding when one society is represented through narrow, generalized, or highly curated images. Programmes involving diverse participants, multiple cultural voices, community interaction, collaborative activities, and opportunities for questioning and dialogue are better positioned to expose participants to the complexity of the societies with which they engage. The finding therefore connects representation with accessibility. Expanding cultural diplomacy to include rural communities, grassroots practitioners, young people, independent artists, and other underrepresented actors can simultaneously broaden participation and produce more diverse representations of Kenyan and American societies.

4.1.4 Political, Institutional and Sustainability Challenges

Political and institutional inconsistency emerged as another major constraint. Cultural diplomacy is intrinsically relational and long-term, whereas political priorities, administrative leadership, immigration policies, and funding allocations can change comparatively quickly. Weak alumni engagement, limited monitoring and evaluation, short project cycles, inadequate institutional coordination, and leadership transitions can consequently cause relationships established through cultural programmes to lose momentum.

> "*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)
>
> "*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)

These findings support Cull (2008), Gilboa (2008), and Zaharna (2010), whose work emphasizes credibility, relationship-building, and continuity rather than isolated communication activities. They also correspond with Keohane and Nye (1977) conception of international relationships as operating through multiple channels connecting states and societies.

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The findings nevertheless demonstrate that institutional plurality alone does not guarantee continuity. Without adequate coordination, multiple programmes may remain disconnected, duplicate activities, compete for scarce resources, or fail to generate cumulative diplomatic effects. Institutionalization through university partnerships, cultural-organization agreements, bilateral coordination mechanisms, alumni networks, and long-term monitoring systems can therefore preserve relationships across changes in political administrations and funding cycles.

4.1.5 Technology and Infrastructure Barriers

Digital technologies presented both constraints and opportunities. Respondents identified unequal internet access, affordability limitations, power interruptions, inadequate equipment, infrastructure weaknesses, and digital-literacy gaps as factors capable of excluding underserved communities from digitally mediated cultural engagement. This finding is consistent with Manor (2019) and Bjola and Holmes (2015), who demonstrate the expanding importance of digital technologies within contemporary diplomatic practice. It also corresponds with Norris's (2001) observation that digital inequalities can reproduce existing social divisions. Digital diplomacy therefore cannot automatically be regarded as inclusive simply because it removes the requirement for physical travel.

At the same time, participants viewed virtual engagement as an important mechanism for widening participation and sustaining relationships created through physical exchange. Digital communication can enable students, artists, professionals, and community actors who cannot travel internationally to participate in certain forms of bilateral cultural interaction. It can also maintain relationships after participants return from physical exchanges. The evidence therefore supports a hybrid rather than exclusively digital approach to cultural diplomacy. Physical encounters provide cultural immersion and intensive interpersonal contact, while digital platforms can provide continuity, wider participation, and opportunities for subsequent collaboration. Addressing technological inequality is consequently necessary if digital diplomacy is to widen rather than reproduce existing patterns of exclusion.

4.1.6 Emerging Opportunities for Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Cultural Diplomacy

Alongside the constraints identified above, participants identified several opportunities through which Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy could become more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient. These opportunities involved educational and university partnerships, arts and creative industries, digital engagement, diaspora and alumni networks, reciprocal cultural programming, and wider community participation. The opportunities were not viewed as isolated interventions. Universities could provide institutional continuity; creative industries could diversify the actors and publics involved; diaspora and alumni networks could sustain relationships beyond formal programmes; digital platforms could extend engagement across geographical distance; and community-based initiatives could broaden participation beyond traditional diplomatic and institutional elites.

The findings therefore suggest that strengthening bilateral cultural diplomacy requires more than creating additional programmes. It requires mechanisms through which individual cultural encounters can develop into continuing interpersonal, professional, institutional, and community relationships.

4.1.7 Educational Exchanges and University Partnerships

Educational diplomacy emerged as one of the strongest opportunity pathways for strengthening Kenya–United States cultural engagement. Participants identified scholarships, student mobility, faculty exchanges, collaborative research, joint academic initiatives, conferences, visiting-scholar arrangements, innovation partnerships, and leadership programmes as mechanisms capable of generating sustained interpersonal and institutional relationships. The findings suggest that universities should be understood not merely as venues for exchange programmes but as diplomatic actors capable of providing institutional continuity. Academic relationships can continue through changing political administrations and diplomatic personnel because they may become embedded within research collaborations, institutional agreements, professional networks, and recurring student and faculty exchanges.

> "*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)

These findings are consistent with Cummings (2003), whose discussion of cultural diplomacy recognizes educational exchange as an important mechanism of international cultural engagement. They also correspond with the relational logic of Keohane and Nye (1977), because universities create multiple and recurring channels of cross-border interaction that can persist beyond particular diplomatic events and individual participants.

The present findings extend this literature by emphasizing institutional continuity. Educational exchanges generate their greatest sustainability value when relationships created by individual participants become embedded

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within continuing institutional structures. Programme evaluation should therefore extend beyond the number of students exchanged or activities conducted to consider subsequent institutional collaboration, joint research, repeat exchanges, active alumni relationships, and the longevity of partnerships generated through educational engagement.

4.1.8 Arts, Creative Industries and Cultural Entrepreneurship

The creative economy emerged as a major but underutilized opportunity. Music, film, dance, theatre, visual arts, literature, fashion, heritage, cultural festivals, and related creative activities were identified as channels capable of reaching audiences beyond conventional diplomatic programmes.

> "*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)

This finding corresponds with Nye (2004, 2011) understanding of culture as a potential source of attraction and soft power and with literature emphasizing culture's role within contemporary diplomacy. Creative industries can communicate cultural experiences to publics that may never participate in embassy programmes, academic exchanges, or foreign-policy forums.

However, the findings indicate that their diplomatic significance extends beyond cultural presentation. Joint music, film, theatre, exhibitions, artistic residencies, touring programmes, festivals, and other forms of co-production require participants from different societies to work together. Such collaboration can generate professional and interpersonal relationships alongside the cultural outputs themselves. Creative-industry diplomacy therefore provides an opportunity to shift cultural diplomacy from simply presenting one culture to another toward collaborative cultural production. This makes bilateral engagement potentially more participatory, reciprocal, and capable of reaching wider publics.

4.1.9 Digital Diplomacy, Diaspora and Alumni Networks

Digital platforms, diaspora communities, and exchange alumni emerged as important continuity mechanisms. Virtual exchanges, collaborative classrooms, podcasts, digital exhibitions, social-media engagement, online cultural events, and digital storytelling can broaden participation and facilitate continued interaction across geographical distance. Diaspora communities possess particular potential because they maintain social, professional, cultural, economic, and family relationships spanning Kenya and the United States. Their diplomatic significance does not necessarily depend on formal governmental appointment. Through cultural organizations, professional associations, entrepreneurship, religious institutions, mentorship, education, and everyday social interaction, diaspora actors can contribute continuously to bilateral cultural understanding.

> "*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)

These findings correspond with relational approaches to public diplomacy and with scholarship on diaspora diplomacy and transnational networks. They demonstrate that former exchange participants and diaspora actors possess accumulated intercultural knowledge, social capital, professional connections, and lived experience spanning both societies.

Digital technologies reinforce this continuity function by providing the communication infrastructure through which geographically dispersed networks can remain connected. The strategic value of digital diplomacy therefore extends beyond audience reach. It enables physical cultural encounters to acquire greater duration by allowing participants to continue communicating, collaborating, mentoring, researching, performing, and organizing after formal programmes have concluded. The evidence consequently supports hybrid cultural diplomacy. Physical exchange provides immersive intercultural experience, whereas digital connectivity enables those relationships to continue and potentially expand after participants return home.

4.1.10 Reciprocity as the Organizing Principle

Reciprocity emerged as a recurrent principle across the evidence. Participants indicated that cultural diplomacy is most credible and sustainable when it facilitates listening, mutual learning, co-creation, and shared participation rather than functioning primarily as one-way cultural promotion.

> "*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)

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This finding supports Melissen (2005) emphasis on dialogue and engagement and Zaharna (2010) relational approach to public diplomacy. It also qualifies a narrow application of Soft Power Theory. Attraction remains important, but sustainable bilateral relationships require mutual recognition and opportunities for both societies to participate actively in defining and producing cultural engagement.

Reciprocity connects several of the key findings. Accessible mobility broadens who can participate; diverse participation improves cultural representation; educational partnerships create opportunities for repeated institutional interaction; creative collaboration encourages co-production; and diaspora, alumni, and digital networks sustain two-way relationships over time. The findings therefore suggest that reciprocity should be treated not as a single programme activity but as a principle informing programme design, representation, participation, partnership, and evaluation.

4.1.11 Integrated Interpretation and Discussion

Taken together, the findings reveal a central interaction between the constraints and opportunities shaping Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy. Educational exchanges can generate meaningful relationships, yet financial and mobility barriers restrict who can participate. Cultural programmes can challenge stereotypes, yet narrow representation and mediated narratives may reproduce them. Digital technologies can expand access, yet technological inequalities may exclude underserved communities. Institutional partnerships can provide continuity, yet political transitions, fragmented coordination, and unstable financing may undermine sustainability.

These findings extend the explanatory reach of Soft Power Theory. Nye (2004, 2011) demonstrates how culture, political values, and policies can generate attraction. The evidence from Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy indicates, however, that attraction alone is insufficient to explain whether relationships created through cultural engagement endure. Cultural attraction requires an enabling institutional and relational environment if it is to develop into continuing forms of cooperation. Financial resources, accessible mobility, reciprocal representation, institutional continuity, and technological connectivity therefore influence whether the potential generated through cultural encounters develops into sustainable bilateral relationships. This does not negate the explanatory value of soft power; rather, it identifies the conditions through which cultural attraction can acquire relational durability. The findings similarly support the Liberal perspective represented by Keohane and Nye (1977). Kenya–United States cultural diplomacy operates through multiple channels involving governments, universities, cultural organizations, artists, media institutions, professional associations, diaspora communities, civil society, faith-based institutions, and individual participants. Such institutional diversity can strengthen resilience because bilateral cultural relations do not depend exclusively upon foreign ministries and embassies.

However, the evidence also demonstrates that multiple actors require coordination. Institutional plurality can generate fragmentation when programmes remain disconnected, duplicate activities, compete for limited resources, or lack mechanisms for accumulating relationships and institutional knowledge. The challenge is therefore to combine decentralized participation with effective institutional coordination. Another important implication concerns the social composition of cultural diplomacy. Resource and mobility limitations affect not merely programme size but who gains access to international cultural opportunities. Where participation requires substantial personal resources, institutional sponsorship, or international travel, better-resourced individuals and organizations possess greater opportunities to accumulate transnational experience. Cultural diplomacy can consequently reproduce inequalities even while seeking to broaden people-to-people relations.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the constraints affecting cultural diplomacy between Kenya and the United States and the opportunities for making bilateral engagement more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient. It identified five interconnected challenges: inadequate and unstable financing; visa, travel, and mobility barriers; cultural stereotypes and narrow representation; political and institutional discontinuity; and unequal technological access. These constraints limit participation, weaken programme continuity, and prevent valuable cultural encounters from developing into durable relationships.

The findings also identified practical opportunities through educational exchanges and university partnerships, collaborative arts and creative industries, digital engagement, diaspora and alumni networks, reciprocal programming, and greater community participation. These mechanisms can preserve intercultural connections beyond individual events and political cycles. Sustainable cultural diplomacy therefore requires accessible mobility, stable institutional and financial support, inclusive representation, effective coordination, and complementary physical and digital engagement.

The study extends Soft Power Theory by showing that cultural attraction alone does not ensure enduring diplomatic relationships. Consistent with Liberalism and complex interdependence, sustained cooperation depends on the

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institutions and multiple state and non-state actors that maintain relationships over time. Kenya and the United States should consequently evaluate cultural diplomacy not only by exchanges conducted or audiences reached, but also by the longevity, reciprocity, and quality of the partnerships and networks those exchanges generate.

5.2 Recommendations

First, the Governments of Kenya and the United States and their partner institutions should embed cultural diplomacy in multi-year bilateral strategies and agreements, supported by diversified financing from public institutions, universities, private-sector partners, philanthropy, and diaspora initiatives. This would reduce dependence on short funding cycles and political administrations while strengthening coordination and continuity.

Second, embassies, universities, and programme administrators should improve access to legitimate educational, artistic, and professional mobility through clearer visa guidance, documentation support, scholarships, and assistance with travel and participation costs. Recruitment should also prioritize socioeconomic and geographic inclusion, including rural communities, smaller institutions, emerging artists, and other underserved groups.

Third, universities and cultural organizations should develop durable partnerships through joint research, student and faculty exchanges, visiting-scholar programmes, artistic residencies, co-productions, festivals, and cultural entrepreneurship. Kenyan and American participants should have meaningful opportunities to collaborate, make decisions together, and represent the diversity of both societies rather than relying on one-directional cultural promotion.

Fourth, bilateral programmes should combine direct cultural encounters with accessible digital platforms for preparation, virtual participation, post-exchange communication, and continued collaboration. This hybrid approach should address internet affordability, infrastructure, equipment, and digital-literacy inequalities so that expanded digital participation does not deepen existing exclusions.

Fifth, governments and partner organizations should systematically support alumni and diaspora networks as long-term sources of mentorship, intercultural knowledge, professional collaboration, and diplomatic memory. Monitoring and evaluation should assess continuing relationships, repeat exchanges, joint research and artistic production, active networks, community partnerships, and the quality and longevity of cooperation—not simply counts of activities or participants.

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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