

Diplomatic Protocol, Ethical Communication, And the Misuse of Self-Ascribed Honorific Titles: Implications for Credibility and Professionalism in International Relations

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>Diplomatic communication and norms are cornerstone methods at the heart of state-to-state interactions, in setting standards as well as standards for international interactions, in the establishment of norms and procedures of international relation, a method of promoting respect among parties and, in the exercise of global diplomacy; thus, maintaining international peace and order. And titles and symbols are crucial devices that represent status, power, and identity. The importance of ethical communication should be considered too, with a professional approach that does not lack in respect, dignity, or legitimacy. The increasing abuse of self-applied titles is a big threat to diplomatic conduct and exchanges. It is a practice that will also blur the lines and add to disorganization, make titles and positions appear less genuine and honest and that will fail to meet the required standards of the professional and ethical use of the diplomatic term. This research aims to investigate the growing misuse of self-assigned honorific titles in diplomacy and protocol and to ascertain its consequences towards credibility, and professionalism of foreign-diplomatic interactions. Specific aims are to grasp the use of diplomatic titles (or their absence), to determine the meanings and mechanisms (or lack thereof) of various forms, to understand the effects of these titles on personal credibility and institutional professionalism, and to analyse moral issue (ethical) and diplomatic dimension (impact) and (recommendation). Methods (qualitative, normative, discourse analysis, etc.): Although the abstract does not specifically define the study, the nature of it and the assumptions are qualitative and normative that are informed by the Constructivist, Normative, and Symbolic interactionist theories. It also shows the reliance on qualitative evidence, in the form of reports, speeches, letters and possibly interviews. The research highlights the importance of honorific titles in status, authority, and sense of self, however, in several areas - among others self-designated titles, and 'honorific inflation' in digital discourse - there exists the ethical communication barrier, and professional and real achievement is not recognised. Some motivations are status-seeking, political reasons, political interest, and lack of diplomacy education. This misuse results in uncertainty, possible backlash and harm to reputation for individuals, and also to the reputation of individuals and states. Proper diplomatic behaviour and responsible delegation of honorific titles is essential to effective diplomacy, mutual respect and the operation of world relations in the most effective manner. The study argues that following established norms upholds diplomatic hierarchies, prevents cultural misunderstanding, and communicates a state's strategic message. Such abuses of titles highlight the importance of being vigilant to uphold the standards of professionalism and professionalism that a number of parties should use and uphold in today's</i></p>
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world diplomatic world, and of international affairs, which is becoming almost entirely electronic. It also has implications when diplomatic training, guidance, enforcement and programs for professional ethics should be reinforced as part of our diplomatic education and implementation.

Keywords: *Diplomatic Protocol, Honorific Titles, Self-ascribed Honorifics, Credibility, Professionalism, International Relations, Ethical Communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to Diplomatic Communication and Protocol

Diplomatic communication and protocols are at the core of all state-state interactions and representational arrangements, as the basis for the established norms and procedures of international relations. Formulation of these orderly guidelines promotes successful interaction; mutual respect; and contributes in a significant way to the efficient functioning of global diplomacy (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(E. Revkova, 2023) (Sherzod Toshpulatov, 2021).

Good communication is a fundamental tenet in the field of diplomacy; it plays the role of a principal tool by which states express what they want to say, work out agreements, or control disputes. The strategic shaping or structuring of narratives is crucial in shaping perceptions; it is also an important factor for establishing trust and influencing outcomes in the international arena (Miskimmon et al., 2017)(Smolnikov, 2018b).

Protocols and etiquette ensure that diplomatic interactions can be conducted professionally and justly in accordance with international norms, providing respect and legitimacy for every country. Adherence to these norms will stop misunderstandings, build trust and maintain the flow of diplomacy (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(E. Revkova, 2023).

Titles (or honourable titles, and other symbolic images) such as titles and other symbolic symbols are necessary components of diplomatic speech that signify status, authority, and identity in the international structure. It is critical that titles should be attributed properly in order to establish authority or hierarchy, because such title use is part of the way of conveying credibility and hierarchy, it indicates recognition of the symbolic development and historical background of a title's meaning in such speech forms (Pokharel, 2020)(Sukmawaty et al., 2022)(Wong & Lee, 2022).

The ethical element is an essential part of diplomatic communication, stressing the need for professional,

respectful and legitimate standards of professional norms and standards which form a necessary foundation. An ethical behaviour in communication is a standard to establish the ethical standards of an international situation (Topor, 2020) that guides a diplomatic engagement to maintain a positive image and relations with others.

Contemporary diplomatic communication is increasingly defined by what is done digitally, and this will mean changes in how diplomatic communication is structured and promulgated (Ketners, 2025). Though old protocols still play a pivotal role, a digital world creates the need to consider different aspects of the act of managing communication—whether or not to do so in a culturally charged manner or just for the sake of communication—to be effective and ethical (Wheeler & Gleason, 1995).

1.2 Importance of Titles and Symbolic Representation in Diplomacy

Honorific titles and symbolic representations are central components of diplomacy since they express with more than a glance the positions and identities of people as well as states within the international system. For political diplomacy, the careful use and affirmation of these images is the key to creating a hierarchical and orderly environment necessary for consistent and predictable international communication (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(Sukmawaty et al., 2022).

Correctly referring to titles is of crucial importance in establishing and validating credibility during diplomatic dialogues. They use the right honorifics so that they may treat their respective counterparts with respect and comply with international standards, lending a certain legitimacy to their own actions and ensuring that their state can be trusted to present an accurate reflection (Pokharel, 2020)(Sartori, 2002).

They uphold diplomatic hierarchies of a symbolic and hierarchical sort that are essential if fruitful dialogues are to take place and if misunderstandings are to be prevented. Protocols for address and representation are observed which makes certain that interactions are conducted with the expected proprieties of professional international relations and so mutual

respect between sovereign parties is preserved (E. Revkova, 2023)(Sherzod Toshpulatov, 2021).

Such symbolic representation, in the example of using specific titles by diplomatic officials, shows a cultural history of development, and the meanings of some of these titles represent the historical development of the diplomatic practice in an extensive international tradition and demonstrate knowledge of international traditions. Taking these types of symbolic forms into account and using them properly is evidence of understanding of diplomatic history and facilitates better cross-cultural communication (Miskimmon et al., 2017)(Visoka, 2018a).

Titles and symbolic acts too are crucial for showing the state and its strategic narrative on the world stage. Miskimmon et al. (2017), Smolnikov (2018), Visoka (2018) all suggest that states can use formal diplomatic protocol such as titles to express their identity, promote their sovereignty, and elevate their standing and image in the international community.

Problem statement: increasing misuse of self-ascribed honorifics

The growing misuse of self-ascribed honorific titles creates a formidable test of the basic tenets of diplomatic protocol and communication in the global arena. Diplomatic etiquette and the exact usage of honorific identities provide a basic structure of international relations, providing hierarchy, respect, and a pathway to facilitate communication between countries (Berkowitz et al., 2024). This fragile environment is however threatened by the growing prevalence of individuals taking unverified or inappropriate titles, and therefore contributes to ambiguity and possible discord.

It is a problem that can have an immediate consequence for all the parties involved in diplomatic work. Honorifics are typically given according to achievement, rank or formal appointment, and their attribution is essential to transmit the message of having authority and trustworthiness (Sukmawaty et al., 2022). The automatic ascribing of titles by persons without appropriate context can weaken the perception of titles authenticity as well as the integrity of the titles – much as there is an ethical issue related to the professional use of titles in other sectors (A. E. Zhou & Grant-Kels, 2023).

It is a grave question of the status of honorific titles, because its misuse can have institutional and diplomatic repercussions, possibly harming a state's reputation and diplomatic relations. Diplomatic communication draws on unambiguous and

universally intelligible symbolic representations, even titles, that help explain or create a state's strategic framing and its assertion of sovereignty within a global context (Visoka, 2018a). Misuse of titles opens up the possibility of misunderstanding and stereotypes and leads to counterproductive conversations and decreased official engagement (Dilaram, 2025).

Moreover, it is also highly problematic because it breaches standards for professionalism and diplomacy. Maintaining ethical communication in diplomacy requires compliance with the principles of professionalism, respect, and legitimacy, and these are fundamental to trust and cooperation (Topor, 2020). Self-designated positions, particularly if not earned or acknowledged, also violate these ethical principles, thereby creating an atmosphere of 'honorific inflation,' whereby real achievements and genuine roles are undermined (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025b).

This abuse can be for a wide range of reasons: status-seeking, expressing political biases, lack of diplomatic education and understanding, lack of protocol awareness. With an increasingly digitized diplomatic terrain, in which norms of communication and communication norms may blur more and more (Ketners, 2025), one of the main concerns of self-presentation can increase without rigorous vetting. Nevertheless, the literature is not well-explored concerning the holistic dimensions, trends and motivations, as well as the various implications associated with the misuse of self-ascribed honorifics in contemporary diplomacy.

1.3 Research objectives

The primary research objective of the study is to investigate the increasing misuse of self-ascribed honorific titles in diplomatic communication and protocol, and to understand its implications for credibility and professionalism in international relations. More specifically, the objectives include:

To understand the concept of diplomatic protocol and the function of honorific titles.

To identify the forms, patterns, and motivations behind the misuse of self-ascribed honorific titles.

To analyse the impact of such misuse on individual credibility and institutional professionalism.

To explore the ethical concerns and diplomatic consequences stemming from the misuse of titles.

To propose recommendations for improving diplomatic training, guidelines, and enforcement mechanisms.

1.4 Research questions

Research questions are given as a part of the Introduction, but the specific questions are not specified. It may be inferred that the issues of research should be examined with respect to these issues based on the problem statement and research objectives.

1st, what are the basic principles of diplomatic protocol and what are the historical and symbolic functions of honorific titles in international relations?

What are the most common types, patterns, and causes behind the misuse of self-ascribed honorific titles in contemporary diplomatic practice?

How does the misuse of self-ascribed honorific titles affect the individual credibility of diplomatic actors and the overall professionalism of diplomatic institutions?

What are some ethical concerns and broader diplomatic consequences of the misuse of honorific titles in international relations?

What are the possible recommendations to enhance diplomatic training, establish clear guidelines for the proper use of honorific titles, and implement effective enforcement mechanisms?

1.5 Significance of the study

The study's importance, per the document, is an effort to tackle the growing problem of the abuse of self-ascribed honorific titles in diplomatic communication. This subject has significant implications for credibility and professionalism in international relations. The study is significant because it aims to:

Highlight the importance of proper diplomatic conduct and protocol.

Analyse the impact of the misuse of honorific titles on individual credibility, institutional image, and diplomatic relations.

Address ethical concerns arising from breaches of professional and diplomatic norms.

Contribute to a better understanding of the challenges to professionalism and legitimacy in contemporary diplomacy.

Provide recommendations for strengthening diplomatic training, establishing clear guidelines, and implementing enforcement mechanisms to uphold global diplomatic standards.

1.6 Scope and limitations

In this study, we intend to explore a vital issue that falls under the domain of diplomatic protocol, ethical

communication and, more so, the use of self-ascribed honorific titles in foreign practice. There are a number of important criteria according to which the subject matter falls in the field and parameters for consideration are as follows:

It explores the nature, motivation, and impact of them under foreign negotiation. Context: The research is located in the international context of such international diplomacy and inter-state relations, and addresses phenomena practiced internationally in bilateral, multilateral and international organization. While universal principles of protocol are examined, the paper shall demonstrate challenges and problems which are more or less recent indeed when it comes to these methods and their violations today.

Analytical Depth: The analysis looks at what sort of impact this misuse would have on individuals' personal reputation (either for credibility or for the institutional level of professionalism) at its highest levels and with regard to its moral character, drawing on the constructivist, normative, and symbolic interactionist theories.

Temporal Frame: Although the development of honourific titles during historical discourse is not neglected, it seeks to show this trend through recent cases of appropriate title misuse among diplomats which has relevance to today.

Data Sources: The research will use a wide range of qualitative data including official documents, speeches by diplomats, letters, and potentially interviews to construct a holistic picture of the issue.

Limitations of the Study

This study has a number of limitations, notwithstanding its comprehensive approach.

Qualitative and Normative: as a qualitative and normative study, its results have rich information and depth of analysis but are not statistically transferable to all diplomatic contexts globally. What we might consider "misuse" and "credibility" (and vice-versa) are qualitative interpretations, and context dependent.

Data Availability: Sensitive diplomatic communication and internal policy documents (or at least top-level interview) referring to the violation of protocols is difficult to access owing to confidentiality and political risks. This could include using public information/ official guidance.

Defining "Misuse": How to define and identify misuse can be a subjective task, dependent on a myriad of cultural and political contexts. This study will set out rigorous criteria, but there should be some vague meaning in the data.

Geographical (if relevant) Specificity: With an

intention of broad applicability to contexts and cases where case illustration (e.g., South Sudan, referred to in the framework) is used extensively, there may be some question about generalizing findings to a variety of regional settings or diplomatic cultures. **Scope Exclusions:** The analysis does not address the wider political and socio-economic dimensions of status-seeking behaviour, other than its direct reflection in title misuse. Nor does it extensively cover all forms of ethical communication challenges in diplomacy, focusing specifically on honorifics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Diplomatic Protocol

Definitions and principles of protocol in international relations

Diplomatic protocol is commonly defined as the bedrock of these generally accepted rules, traditions, and conventions governing global politics. Scholars, notably Rasulov, argue that it is a crucial tool that introduces some of the basic requirements that are necessary to govern regular state relations, providing common standards, discipline, and organization for ordinary communication among state actors (A.G.Rasulov, 2014). Lyadov sees it as the operational form on which State foreign policy thrives, premised on "international politeness" and mutual respect (Lyadov, 2004). Wood, and Serre also identify this as the regulations that govern the conduct of diplomatic ceremonies, etiquette, behaviour, or official correspondence and uniforms, guaranteeing that officials receive the proper amount of respect and space (Wood & Serre, 2003). Toshpulatov argues that these rules of conduct for the states and representatives are an essential part of maintaining image, avoiding confusion and building trust. At its core, it is about rights, seniority and immunity matters, and ensuring a solemn yet friendly manner in meetings. However important these protocols are, political interests can often supersede strict protocol rules, as demonstrated by past examples such as Podgorny's visit to the Vatican (S. S. Toshpulatov, 2021).

Kohistani provides extensive definitions of diplomatic protocols which may be summarized by referring to the following regulations, traditions, standards, customs, and conduct based on social decorum essential to international relations. They are normative in nature, procedures and actions reflecting respect, honour, and status, especially in an official diplomatic setting (formal and ceremonial diplomatic) as protocol to conduct an affair. One of its foundational pillars is

the notion that all relationships between governments and international organizations should accord respect and dignity to authorities and representatives, fostering positive relationships and exchanges (Mohammad Jafar Kohistani, 2024).

Protocols are critical to diplomacy; they can do more than just create a power hierarchy; they aid in rigorous execution, effective governance, fairness, and governance in the exercise of power. They provide an inherently trustworthy and appropriately etiquette-compliant basis for the words and actions of diplomats, where formal compliance has legal implications. Protocols, in essence, improve communication, formalize meetings, facilitate diplomatic work, and keep in fact meetings with appropriate formality and respect. These conventions have deep-seated roots in diplomatic traditions, which encourage mutual respect and understanding between states and peoples. So they are not mere rituals but a major form of art that every civilized society must perform (Mohammad Jafar Kohistani, 2024).

In today's international relations, diplomatic protocol and etiquette is inherently based on the Principle of Sovereign Equality, a principle established in the 1815 Congress of Vienna and enshrined in the 1945 United Nations Charter. This principle establishes the right of all states to equal rights and interests and also dictates the norms of respect for national symbols and equal diplomatic access. But there is often a distance between this vision of the ideal and the practice in the diplomatic sphere. In exceptional cases from US-ROK interactions: they expose cases of perceived disrespect which threaten the fulfilment of ultimate sovereign equality (J. Zhou, 2017).

Likewise, China's non-reciprocal welcome ceremonies for leaders from Pakistan and the Netherlands demonstrate differences in practice that violate symmetrical protocol. These non-equivalences are subject to cultural factors, national size, population and workload of national leaders and are influenced in part by China's formal changes of protocol, such as the move to change welcome ceremonies and stop plane escorts. So, whereas protocol norms correspond to 'the 'ought to be' of sovereign equality, the exceptions we identify point to enduring factual inequalities. Consequently, the paper contends that hierarchy is without a doubt and provides a rational justification for a framework where the status and protocol of a country are a reflection of its ability to maintain international accountability and utility, not its strength (J. Zhou, 2017).

2.2 Ethical Communication in Diplomacy

This paper is a consolidation of existing research on the concept of diplomatic protocol, definition and principles, and the main point on ethical communications of diplomats, professionalism, respect and legitimacy, through an observation of both descriptive and empirical research. Berkowitz, Heimann, and Kampf (2024) provide an empirical lens through which an empirically based view can be held, with the assertion that diplomatic procedures, through practices like credential ceremonies, are more than merely ceremonial, and are crucial forms of communication. Their analysis shows how the careful implementation and/or deliberate breaking with existing protocols send important messages regarding sovereignty, recognition and intent in diplomacy. This empirical paper reorientates protocol as a dynamic and significant practice, and its interaction in the making and communication of international relations and emphasises that interpretation, in which we collectively understand symbolic behaviour as critical to good diplomacy and legitimation, is vital (Berkowitz et al., 2024).

Expanding upon this, Pokharel (2020) provides an empirical investigation of diplomatic language by focusing on a type of salutation present in speeches in international diplomacy. The findings of this research implicitly provide a contribution to the theory of diplomacy by showing how certain linguistic decisions represent elements that reflect and preserve norms of respect and professionalism in diplomatic protocols. The selection of honorifics and addresses, as promoted by Pokharel, are key to ethical communication, as they affect legitimacy and support mutual respect on an international basis. This study provides empirical evidence that linguistic protocols are rigorously taken into account in order to maintain diplomatic order and interpersonal and inter-state relations (Pokharel, 2020).

Topor (2020) expands the lens to address ethics and intercultural communication in international relations; this is highly relevant towards ethical communication in diplomacy. Not strictly referring to protocol, Topor's research also explores the pragmatic implications of different cultural backgrounds on communication, and the ways in which ethical issues can be used to prevent misunderstandings and promote etiquette. Such an angle is crucial to explaining the ways in which diplomats must consider their work and the local culture with a view to both respect and professional etiquette on the part of communicators through legitimate and effective interchange. Taken

together, these empirical studies prove that diplomatic protocol and professional communication are interlinked, wherein the appropriate usage is crucial to the credibility of the diplomacy (taken without exception), the legitimacy and, indeed, stability in international relations (Topor, 2020).

2.3 Honorific Titles and Their Functions

Diplomatic protocol is the cornerstone of international relations, it is not just a checklist of regulations, but an essential system of communication that powerfully impacts interactions between nations. This is evident in Berkowitz, Heimann, and Kampf (2024), who empirically show by examining diplomatic credential ceremonies that these are dynamic communicative acts. Their research illustrates how the precise implementation, or the intentional departure from established protocol, communicates important diplomatic messaging about sovereignty, recognition, and intent. It suggests that protocol is a meaning making process necessary for shaping and interpreting international relations; that one's understanding of what is meant by this symbolic act is not only an agreement but also a means for making diplomacy and legitimacy (Berkowitz et al., 2024). In addition, Toshpulatov (2021) examines the theoretical and legal aspects of diplomatic protocol, emphasising its central position in directing state conduct and maintaining order, thus providing the underpinnings of the structured mode of diplomatic cooperation. On the basis of general elements of the diplomatic protocol, the intended use and symbolic value of honorific titles serve a specific function as central elements of diplomatic communication (S. S. Toshpulatov, 2021).

Pokharel (2020) conducts empirical research on diplomatic language, specifically salutations as aspects of international diplomacy. This paper demonstrates that certain linguistic patterns and the proper application of honorifics are a reflection and reinforcement of norms of respect and professionalism. As pointed out by Pokharel, selection of the appropriate title is central to ethical communication and its ability to sway legitimacy while fostering mutual respect between the political parties and their representatives. This research brings empirical evidence to bear on how linguistic protocols, including honorifics, are closely observed in order to maintain the high standard used by diplomacy (Pokharel, 2020). It shows how to govern interpersonal and international relations efficiently.

The historical development and meaning of honorifics are also discussed by Sukmawaty, Andini, and Fathu Rahman (2022) who study the change honorifics

produce following promotions for government officials. While concentrating on a particular setting, their cross-country analysis makes a clear point that titles are a matter of prestige and authority within the hierarchy of the professional world that affects perceptions of power and respect (Sukmawaty et al., 2022). This finding confirms Pokharel's by providing some evidence about how honorifics play a real influence on professional identity and communication. These combined studies stress that honorific titles are more than formalities but are essential instruments of symbolism operating in a diplomatic context, serving historical precedence, signaling present status, and defining the actual character of reputable and professional international discourse (Pokharel, 2020).

2.4 Misuse of Titles in Contemporary Practice

Thanks to the expanding reach of our digital interactions, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in both complexity in international interactions and misuse of honorific titles within diplomatic or professional contexts. Although foundational studies by Toshpulatov (2021) meticulously define diplomatic protocol and its theoretical underpinnings (S. S. Toshpulatov, 2021), and Berkowitz, Heimann, and Kampf (2024) illustrate how adherence to protocol in diplomatic credential ceremonies communicates legitimacy and intent, those works are essentially oriented toward the proper function of protocol (Berkowitz et al., 2024). Likewise, and consistent with Pokharel (2020) who found that salutations were highly intentional, their diction and honorifics must be selected carefully so that they convey respect and professionalism, reflecting the ethics behind the communication (Pokharel, 2020). Though critical in establishing norms, these studies suggest an indirect limitation in that there is a gap regarding explicit analyses of the misuse with which such titles are used. What was described in the existing literature is what should be, not the dimensions of what should not be in current practice. Although relatively few concrete studies specifically of the misuse of titles in diplomatic practice exist, they help provide valuable findings.

In a religious context, the concept of "Honorific Inflation" (by Sangwa and Mutabazi, 2025) can be seen as a kind of conceptual lens from which one may see how the excessive or unjustified use of titles can devalue an honorific, causing it to become less valuable or less trustworthy than not. Though their inquiry is not into international relations, its concept of over-titulation and the consequences of over-titulation are particularly pertinent in the context of

self-applied honorifics in diplomacy (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025b). And finally, Sukmawaty, Andini, and Fathu Rahman (2022) analyse the "Shift of Honorifics" following promotions which, on the one hand, emphasizes the value of earned titles and, on the other hand, implicitly warns against unearned titles. While not solely a matter of diplomatic misuse, these studies suggest a broader societally conscious concern as to the integrity of titles and whether their use carries ethical implications (Sukmawaty et al., 2022).

Additionally, the issues surrounding title misuse are framed more generally via the field of communication ethics and credibility, even while there are few empirical researches on the matter of title misuse in relation to international diplomacy. Sartori (2002) illustrates the "might of the pen" in mediating a reputation in international disputes, where linguistic features, titles included, come into play in constructing and maintaining credibility (Sartori, 2002). Likewise, Smolnikov (2018) connects this "Great power conduct" with credibility in world politics: violations of established norms, including abuses of titles, can undermine trust and legitimacy (Smolnikov, 2018b). Revkova (2023) argues for a high level of diplomatic etiquette during professional development, noting that a lack of proper etiquette in the field can be avoided, yet there has been little extensive empirical research exploring the varieties, motivations for, and exact diplomatic and reputational outcomes of self-claimed or otherwise incorrect honorific titles in the international relations discourse (E. Revkova, 2023). Bridging this gap, there remains room for future research to employ case-based studies and discursive analyses that explicitly explore the ways in which this misuse shapes the credibility of individuals, institutional legitimacy, and state image.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Constructivism (norms, identity, and social legitimacy)

The literature on constructivism in international relations examines closely ways in which norms and identity interact with social legitimacy, shifting the focus from materialist accounts of state behaviour to the ideational making of interests and action. Miyaoka (2004) offers an early formulation of legitimacy of international norms that contends that legitimacy is not innate but is rather socially created through common perceptions and ideas between actors of international society (Miyaoka, 2004). From a constructivist perspective, argues Miyaoka, norms gain legitimacy when they are generally endorsed,

viewed as appropriate and taken up by states, and thereby help determine expectations and behaviour without using force to do so (Miyaoaka, 2004). These insights are important for thinking about how norms come to be understood as authoritative and an impactful aspect of the international order, which derives a power due to their recognition and acceptance as opposed to simply enforcement. Expanding on this ideational power of norms, Feklyunina (2018) specifically tackles the complex inter relationship between international norms and identity. In this sense, Feklyunina's analysis of international norms from a constructivist perspective shows that international norms are not just external constraints, they are a stakeholder in constructing state self-construction, constituting identity. They do not have single-identities that determine their conformity to the norm; rather, their relationship with, and understanding of, international norms help define their place within the global context. On the other hand, the role of pre-existing or evolving national identities is vital in shaping states' perceptions, interpretations, and eventually internalization of international norms (Feklyunina, 2018).

This interconnectedness is important to note since it implies how identity is not fixed but rather malleable, always contested within and through the normative realm, which can play a crucial role in appreciating states' preference (and choosing) a policy path. Jeffrey T. Checkel (1999) contributes a valuable empirical paper where he investigates norms, institutions and national identity in recent European history by looking at a broad set of contexts in order to provide empirical examples of how constructivist mechanisms operate in daily life. Checkel provides a concrete demonstration of how international norms and institutions in the European context have shaped and transformed European national identities. He studies the processes through which norms "become part of a culture" and argues that the level of normative internalization depends on factors like the domestic political structures as well as the existence of epistemic communities and whether new norms are in line with the narrative currently being imposed on the state. This empirical work testifies to the constructivist position that identity is not fixed but rather developed, shaped and made up through social learning and exchange, and accordingly to how evolving identities act to contribute to the social legitimation of European norms and institutions by making them seem natural and appropriate for member states (Jeffrey T. Checkel, 1999).

3.2 Normative Theory of Diplomacy (rules and appropriateness)

The provided articles, namely March and Olsen's 'The Logic of Appropriateness' (2008/2009), Christensen and Lægreid's 'The Logic of Appropriateness – A Central Concept in Institutional Theory' (2021), and Kosic's 'Engaging Global Civil Society: Shifting Normative Frameworks, Moral Diplomacy, & the Future of International Relations' (2015), primarily focus on the normative theory of diplomacy and institutional theory, specifically through the lens of the "logic of appropriateness." They analyse how actors' behaviour is guided by rules and norms deemed suitable for their roles and situations. These articles do not empirically review or discuss "Symbolic Interactionism" as a theoretical framework, nor do they specifically address the meaning of titles in communication from a symbolic interactionist perspective, which is listed as a distinct theoretical framework in the document (March & Johan P. Olsen, 2008).

3.3 Symbolic Interactionism (meaning of titles in communication)

This body of text together demonstrates how Symbolic Interactionism (SI) plays a fundamental role in the study of the process in which meaning is constructed, especially through symbols, such as titles, in communication. Fernback's (2019) work directly addresses "Symbolic Interactionism (meaning of titles in communication)," presumably exploring titles as important symbols that demonstrate one's status, identity, and social role and influence engagement and judgment in communication (Fernback, 2019). This is corroborated by Alver (2016) who describe the pervasive influence of SI on communication science studies and how the framework illuminates the subjective meaning-making process and negotiation of meaning as it relates to symbols in different communicative modalities (Fusun Alver, 2016).

Carrying these, Carter and Fuller (2016) add to the understanding of SI, emphasizing that people derive meaning from symbols (such as honorifics and titles) through social exchange, and that these meanings, once attributed, serve as determinants for behaviour and constitute social reality (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Although not all of the studies are specifically empirical and their findings only have information on titles as such, together they show how the symbolic interactionist lens can provide a sound theoretical tool for empirically investigating how titles contain meaning, are interpreted and are used to forge and

negotiate social order, and individual identity in the act of communication.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design (qualitative)

A qualitative research design was chosen to thoroughly investigate the complex phenomenon of honorific title misuse in diplomacy, using a qualitative interpretive approach (Creswell, 2014) (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2012). In this line of study, Sharma et al. (2023) highlights the ‘nature, motivation, and impact’ of such misuse as particularly compelling in the international context (Sharma et al., 2023). The design stresses an examination of meanings, perceptions, and experiences related to diplomatic protocol and self-ascribed titles (Gray, 2004). It is also a normative study and a normative study focuses on established rules and appropriateness of diplomatic interactions, which agrees with the view that Kothari (2014) developed to consider methodical research (Kothari, 2004). Qualitative research, in contrast, seeks to identify mechanisms underpinning misuse rather than simply measure events (Vaus, 2001). Using a multi-view perspective and incorporating constructivist and symbolic interactionist theories, the design aims to account for social realities (Hassan, 2019). The data collection will produce thickly detailed narratives derived from official documents, speeches, and letters into which I intend to draw complex insights into diplomatic practices. Because “misuse” and “credibility” are subjective in nature, rigorous analytical approaches are required for validity in order for the design to ensure validity (Yens et al., 2014). This is such an iterative design based on qualitative analysis for flexibility in the research because new ideas should occur based on the data from which we draw (Creswell, 2014). Ultimately, the research design is intended to yield an in-depth analysis of the ethical dimensions and impact on professionalism in international relations, and with this context the paper seeks to enrich what it covers.

4.2 Data sources (official documents, speeches, letters)

The study will primarily examine a wide variety of qualitative data in order to derive a complete insight into the misuse of honorific titles in diplomacy. For qualitative inquiry, these include official documents, diplomatic speeches, and formal letters—also known as rich sources (Creswell, 2014)(Yin, 2018). Official documents: manuals, policies, and communiqués that establish guidelines for protocols and normative expectations (Saunders et al., 2019). They present a view of international standards and regulatory

structures of diplomatic conduct. This analysis will examine both public and private speeches to help identify how honorific titles are utilized, self-ascribed, or omitted from strategic narratives and public discourse (Bryman, 2016). These offer insights into communication practices, revealing motives and how perceptions are constructed on the global stage. Formal letters and correspondence among diplomatic actors will provide concrete examples of interaction, illustrating adherence to or breaches of protocol in direct exchanges (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Information resources like these are essential for examining misuse practices and their direct effects on personal credibility and official professional conduct. By analysing these textual documents, the study seeks to elucidate the symbolic connotations imparted by titles and their role in the construction of diplomatic relations in the world (Creswell, 2014). Such a multi-source approach enables the triangulation of data from various sources and thereby enhances the findings' validity and depth by reconciling information in various textual forms (Yin, 2018).

4.3 Data analysis method (discourse analysis, content analysis)

Since this is a qualitative study, the analysis will, for the most part, combine discourse and content analysis to evaluate the gathered material (Creswell, 2014)(Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Discourse analysis will critically examine the choice of language within official documents, diplomatic speeches, and letters to see how the use of self-ascribed honorific titles is shaped, read, and how words can be used to justify or undermine their credibility and professionalism. This approach will help to uncover power relations, normative assumptions, and the construction of social significance to titles that are at stake through these terms. Simultaneously, content analysis will be applied to systematically map out, categorize, and identify recurring forms and patterns for the misuse of honorific titles across diplomatic contexts. This combination allows for a qualitative approach in understanding linguistic and symbolic meaning, as well as a structured approach for theme identification (Creswell, 2014)—a quality that can both enrich and legitimize findings based on broader ethical considerations and diplomatic outcomes.

5. DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL AND THE USE OF HONORIFIC TITLES

5.1 International standards and practices

Diplomatic protocol is the foundation that lies in the relations between people, between parties, and among

nations, covering, but not limited to, universally acknowledged norms, practices, traditions, and conventions in the conduct of national and foreign affairs. It is a powerful enforcement device that mediates the state relationships by establishing a common set of norms and structure between state actors, which help establish a way of working together (Oana Iucu, 2008). These guidelines are directed at protocol including; diplomats' ceremonies, etiquette acts, behaviour, and official correspondence, to provide respect to officeholder in which an official has to occupy space (Ryznikov and Koval, 2024). Guidelines following such rules is vital for creating an image of a state, avoiding misunderstandings, and building trust (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012). Protocols also establish rights, seniority, and immunity and make for "solemn but friendly" meetings (Richard Langhorne, 1992). At bottom, they are normative procedures of respect, honour and status established in formal diplomatic channels. The principle of Sovereign Equality established in the 1815 Congress of Vienna and 1945 Charter of the United Nations underlies contemporary diplomatic protocol, and sets out standards of mutual respect (Grewe, 1999). The norms of these nations are important to good governance and fairness in the international community (Constantinou, Kerr, and Sharp, 2016).

5.2 Proper Attribution of Titles

Honorific titles and symbolic images are vital instruments in diplomatic communication for status, hierarchy and identity, among others as a measure of social class, in the context of the international system. Correct recognition of these titles is a necessity to create power, to be seen as hierarchical, to show that you understand their history and significance (S. Pokharel, 2020). Appropriate use and validation of honorifics establish a consistent space to use these concepts across borders, for uniform and predictable international communication (Sukmawaty et al., 2022). The correct use of titles in diplomatic communications play an important role of establishing and confirming a diplomatic dialogue's credibility with their foreign counterparts as well as ensuring that the counterpart is treated with respect and comply with international norms (Yuryeva, 2018). Such practice retains symbolic and hierarchical diplomatic system, prevents misunderstandings and fruitful relation. They also convey a state's strategic narrative to the international world that promotes its sovereignty and enhances its international standing (Brown, 2020). It shows a deep understanding of diplomacy and

facilitates communication across cultures (Burhanudeen, 2006).

5.3 The Function of Institutions in Regulating the Language of Diplomacy

Institutions have a vital responsibility in regulating that language of diplomacy by setting up and carrying out rules and procedures for speaking appropriately for instance, which include calling your subordinates Honorific. These regulations set out international norms and customs to ensure that diplomatic contacts are ethical and professional (Mynářová, 2007). Organizations such as foreign ministries and international organizations give directions and lessons to have diplomatic staff, including diplomatic etiquette and etiquette. The official use of titles will not only serve to distinguish between titles of government or international officials (Krmnicek and Rambach, 2023), but it also acts as a safeguard of the language and protocols of diplomacy in an age of global trade and international diplomacy. Their role includes correcting inappropriate conduct, reminding clients exactly what professional standards are, and so helping establish more trust and cooperation in international affairs. This institutional supervision is necessary for titles maintaining legitimacy: that is, it maintains, at once, the credibility of workmanship and of diplomatic exchanges (Clyne, Norrby, and Warren, 2009).

6. THE MISUSE OF SELF-ASCRIBED HONORIFIC TITLES

6.1 Forms and Patterns of Misuse

Honorifics are used inappropriately or unverified (unnecessarily) in diplomatic communication. This may take the form of self-claimed titles (Sukmawaty et al., 2022), but have not been given formal name and also have not been established as qualified and credible, undermining the legitimacy of such titles. In religious contexts this is often referred to as Honorific Inflation, meaning that the abuse or misuse in titles creates a negative impact on the original meaning or credibility of titles (Thinane, 2021). Another form of misuse that is clear in this work is online discourse in which titles are often attributed automatically, thus contributing to what some are calling a title-drunk culture (Ademola, 2023). These behaviours are not consistent with standard diplomatic language that stresses proper use and attribution of honorifics for the purpose of transmitting respect and professionalism (Yuryeva, 2018). The essential problem is the loss of clarity and established hierarchy, which are essential in international relations (al-Mansori, 2025).

Moreover, misuse violates professional ethics, as it creates an atmosphere in which true successes can be overlooked. In certain cultures, the role of titles in culture can add to the problem making it more challenging to differentiate between earned and self-proclaimed honours (I. Mohammed, 2023)(Jumaa, 2019).

6.2 Motivations (Status Seeking, Political Culture, Lack of Training)

The motives for the misuse of self-ascribed honorific titles are multiple and layered, largely due to desire to maintain status and demonstrate unwarranted power. According to Sukmawaty, Andini, & Rahman, (2022), they can reflect how esteem and honorific, in various cultural settings, are intertwined and such, leading to self-attribution leading to promotion and elevation in the social hierarchy (S. Sukmawaty et al., 2022). For instance, the politics aspect can also have an influence on it, wherein people take on a title for political positioning or to assert the status-based and status-based hierarchies as a result of weak institutional control or informal rule structures (Magai, 2026). One significant factor is a lack of diplomatic training, which leaves diplomats not aware of conventional policies and the effects of titles being handled inappropriately. The lack of training leads to unintentional etiquette violations, especially in cross-cultural communication situations where how one uses his/her address has contextualized significance (Larry Smith, 1989)(Collins & Moore, 2004). In addition, increasingly digitized diplomatic contexts facilitate self-representation, enabling such predispositions to develop without systematic assessment (Anna Danielewicz-Betz, 2013). Such motivation can damage the value of diplomatic discourse which endangers a more conducive environment for misunderstanding and reduced official communications.

6.3 Case Illustrations (General or Country-Specific Examples, E.G., South Sudan if Applicable)

Although direct studies of honorific misuse specific to diplomatic settings are few and far between, comparative political analyses provide relevant, illustrative evidence. South Sudan's particular context, with its civil war and its emergence of a "military aristocracy," lends itself to a world where formal protocols frequently collapse (Pinaud, 2014)(Waal, 2016). Under these conditions, self-proclaimed and military leaders take on informal or unverified titles not only to exercise authority and legitimacy, but also in the absence of stable governance, thus challenging diplomatic norms

(Pinaud, 2014). In conflict zones, state institutions are eroded and honorifics proliferate ad hoc, indicative of power dynamics rather than formal appointment (Pinaud, 2014). Though not always couched in a language of diplomatic insult, this informal attribution of status is very much like that of self-ascribed titles, as it raises issues including ambiguity in context and threatens established authority. As Ademola (2023) shows, the "title-drunk" phenomenon in Nigeria is a response to our own societal tendency to take on so many titles, which for many become a badge of honour, and that can carry over into our work/life or diplomatic relations (Ademola, 2023). Just like religious leaders in South Africa misusing spiritual titles, the uncertified nature of a title can lead to a crisis of credibility and legitimacy within the institutions and society overall (Thinane, 2021). Such examples illustrate how settings pervaded by instability, socio-cultural emphasis on status and lack of regulation create spaces for misuse of titles.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR CREDIBILITY AND PROFESSIONALISM

7.1 Impact on Individual Credibility

The misuse of such titles is a direct breach of someone's credibility in the world of diplomacy, where the wrong way to use self-ascribed honorific titles directly undermines the credibility of the person in the diplomatic field. Honorifics on the other hand, generally in question are traditionally conferred by merit, rank or even appointment and represent position power and influence, and the idea of authority. Correctly citing titles is vital to the establishment and legitimation of credibility in diplomatic interactions. When titles become assigned automatically and without context it erodes the perceived authenticity and integrity of titles. This phenomenon may lead to "honorific inflation" eroding real achievement and breaking down roles that are meaningful (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025). Pokharel (2020) stresses that appropriate use of honorifics is indicative and upholding a culture of respect and professionalism, critical in ethical communication. Sukmawaty, Andini, and Fathu Rahman (2022) show that titles are related to prestige and authority and have an impact on perceived power and respect that characterize professional ranks. Sartori (2002) emphasizes the significance of linguistic characteristics, titles and others, and how important they are for establishing and preserving legitimacy in multinational disputes. This lack of clarity and authority, frequently driven by the misuse of titles, erodes international links (al-Mansori, 2025). By the same token, all too often this

is used in service of making diplomatic actors appear to be less legitimate or unauthoritative against their peers;

7.2 Institutional and Diplomatic Consequences

There are serious institutional and diplomatic consequences for taking advantage of honorific titles; such misuse tarnishes the image of a state. It can not only hurt a state's reputation but also weaken diplomatic relations (Visoka, 2018). Diplomatic communication draws upon explicit symbolic symbols including titles to demonstrate what a state wants to be and, crucially, that a state can declare its position on its sovereignty. Misuse of titles only adds clouds of ambiguity, stereotypes and may trigger counterproductive interactions and decrease official cooperation (Dilaram, 2025). These words will have negative repercussions throughout the diplomatic sphere, undermining the state's credibility. Proper protocol based diplomatic hierarchies are important and prevent misunderstandings and facilitate fruitful dialogues. Berkowitz et al. (2024) and Toshpulatov (2021) note that protocol allows for structured and orderly diplomatic cooperation. Violations to norms that are accepted, such as abuse of title, can erode trust and legitimacy in world politics (Smolnikov, 2018). Appropriate diplomacy is also possible with some form of training, but its obvious misuse indicates a lack of adherence to norms (Revkova, 2023). Good communications and adherence to protocol play a critical role in states' ability to articulate intentions, build agreement and effectively manage disagreements. The end result: in long term, however, such practices will reduce the trust that, ultimately, is fundamental for the stability of international relations, by undermining the trust and cooperation that go toward building a stable international order.

7.3 Ethical Concerns

The abuse of self-apportioned honorific titles of honorifics made to themselves, such as these, is a violation of professional practice. Ethical communication in diplomacy requires respecting professionalism as well as respect and legitimacy. Self-defined positions, particularly when the position is unwarranted or unrecognised, break these basic ethical standards, hampering trust and cooperation. The concept of "Honorific Inflation" (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025) underscores the excess or unnecessary use of titles as if it were nothing and hence their original meaning and integrity is not carried on-boarded. Ethical behaviour is important for good image and successful relations in diplomacy (Topor, 2020). Misuse of diplomatic titles without

proper diplomatic training may result in unintentional transgressions of etiquette, especially in cross-cultural communications where terms and/or titles have wide implications in context (Smith, 1989)(Collins & Moore, 2004). The proliferation of ever more digital channels on diplomatic and interpersonal exchange, that complicates communication norms, can exacerbate self-presentation without rigorous vetting (Ketners, 2025). It makes for a realm in which real achievements and important purposes can erode – and the credibility of diplomatic talk diminishes. Institutions, e.g. foreign ministries, have a certain responsibility to standardize diplomatic terminology, and to regulate inappropriate behaviour, that is in order to preserve professional standards (Mynářová, 2007). The cumulative consequences of this misuse make it impossible for such diplomacy to be carried out and for the international system to be recognized as a viable one (Clyne et al., 2009).

8. DISCUSSION

8.1 Interpretation of findings in relation to theory

What are the main findings from the data? This study's investigation of self-ascribed honorifics resonates strongly with symbolic interactionist theories which emphasize titles as powerful symbols of status, power, and identity, as they impact the international system. The misuse of these symbols distorts established meanings, in which the perception is affected, and the interactions become problematic because credibility needs a common agreement in what the symbols mean (Pokharel, 2020). Diplomatic protocol, in the normative sense, summarizes accepted norms and procedures required for effective interaction and mutual respect within global diplomacy (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(Revkova, 2023). Furthermore, their misuse represents an actual violation of these normative parameters as they are at odds with the legitimate operation of international relations and lead to "honorific inflation" (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025). Constructivist concepts are also important as it is through acceptance of these rules and appropriate symbolic portrayal of them that individual and organizational credibility and professional behaviour are constructed (Sartori, 2002). By sidestepping formal attribution, the practice of self-ascription undermines this existing legitimacy, illustrating its development in and decay along the diplomatic spectrum. The ethical aspect that focuses on professionalism, respect, and authenticity (Topor, 2020) emphasises that violations directly oppose the moral foundation of diplomatic relations.

8.2 Comparison with existing literature

The present study fills an important gap in the literature as it mostly discusses the appropriate functionality and compliance of diplomatic protocol and honorific titles. Works by Berkowitz et al. (2024), Toshpulatov (2021), and Pokharel (2020) thoroughly describe in detail and demonstrate the significance of protocol in expressing legitimacy and intention, or choosing the right salutations to signify respect. These studies, however, focus largely on "what there should be", which implies little consideration of "what ought not to be" in such current diplomatic practice. Through an analysis of the misuse of self-ascribed honorifics, our findings address this gap and provide clues to the nature, rationale, and results of these deviations from norms. The notion of Sangwa and Mutabazi (2025) on "Honorific Inflation" is also derived from religious perspectives but conceptually relevant to the analysis of how gratuitous or excessive title devaluation leads to an erosion of honorifics in diplomacy. Similarly, Sukmawaty et al.'s (2022) study of "Shift of Honorifics," which suggests a strong implication against unearned titles through a theoretical interpretation that, while not directly implicating unearned titles, can be considered reinforcing the value of earned prestige. The study is also in line with wider literature on communication ethics and trustworthiness, where linguistic properties and normality is very important for protecting reputations and trust when addressing international conflict (Sartori, 2002)(Smolnikov, 2018)(Topor, 2020).

8.3 Broader implications for international relations practice

The ramifications of the growth of self-assigned honorifics can be felt in the fibre of international relations, threatening established norms and guidelines of global diplomacy. Such a practice is at a core problem of mutual respect and efficient state-to-state relationships, a foundation of the diplomatic protocol (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(Revkova, 2023). States must maintain the originality of symbols such as names to claim sovereignty and construct strategic narratives around the world (Miskimmon et al., 2017)(Smolnikov, 2018)(Visoka, 2018). Misuse also confronts this challenge head on, as this can promote misinterpretation, lower levels of official engagement (Dilaram, 2025), and a loss of state status. And as they grow into digitized diplomatic settings, the blurred lines between communication norms, self-presentation and lack of rigorous vetting become more and more prevalent (Ketners, 2025). This requires the diplomatic training of professionals to be reinforced

and there should be clear guidance for using titles, in order to maintain the standards for professionalism and proper communication (Topor, 2020). In addition, strong institutional enforcement mechanisms (Mynářová, 2007)(Clyne et al., 2009)(Clyne et al., 2009) are essential if the legitimacy and credibility of diplomatic exchanges are to be preserved, and if cooperation and trust can be sustained in the world community.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Strengthening diplomatic training and protocol education

A concerted effort is needed in order to strengthen diplomatic education and practice, to tackle the phenomenon of abuse of self-ascribed honorifics. Such programs are essential to re-affirm the basic tenets or basic precepts of diplomatic communication that form the foundation of all state-state interaction (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(Revkova, 2023).

It is important therefore to address an identified lack of diplomatic education on the part of actors and their protocol awareness. Training must include the historical and symbolic use of honorific titles, focusing on how they define authority, status, and credibility (Pokharel, 2020).

Through heavy investments in training programs of teaching protocols, organizations can guarantee that diplomatic practitioners are well grounded in common practices and attitudes that are essential for mutual respect and effective global diplomacy. It is consistent with the importance of a level of diplomacy in professional development (Revkova, 2023) which allows to meet the international norms.

9.2 Clear guidelines on title usage

Setting up clear and unambiguous criteria so that people who take honorific titles accurately attribute the meaning properly is extremely important if international relationships are going to go smoothly. This kind of ambiguity, in which everyone takes a title that has not been verified or is an improper title, only serves to sow discord and undermine legitimacy.

Guidelines need to detail how honorifics are traditionally given according to level of accomplishment, rank, or formal appointment, reaffirming that self-ascription is against the rules. This will promote a consistent and predictable setting for the international community (Sukmawaty et al., 2022).

In addition, organisations, like foreign ministries, should prescribe very precise protocols for diplomatic communication (Mynářová, 2007). This clarity is vital for preventing misunderstandings, developing trust and ensuring that communications are conducted in accordance with international standards and norms (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(Yuryeva, 2018). Institutional enforcement mechanisms

9.3 Institutional enforcement mechanisms

Efficient institutional enforcement mechanisms are imperative to discourage the misuse of self-proclaimed honorific titles and to protect diplomatic protocol. The misuse of titles is often abused or neglected and in the absence of proper supervision, can lead to serious institutional and diplomatic consequences, and can tarnish or destroy the image and relations of a state. It is of high significance, on the part of institutions such as foreign ministries or international organizations, to control the language of diplomacy and its use including the honorifics (Mynářová, 2007).

These systems need procedures for recognizing and changing unacceptable behaviour, for policing professional behaviour, and for ensuring responsibility. Ideal institutional supervision is essential to ensure the legitimacy and integrity of honorific titles and diplomatic transactions (Clyne et al., 2009). This avoids losing credibility and trust that is undermined by non-conformity with existing norms (Smolnikov, 2018).

9.4 Awareness and professional ethics programs

Developing widespread awareness campaigns and developing professional ethics programs and professional awareness programmes is an essential part of building up a culture of diplomacy in terms of integrity and respect. Ethics is an indispensable aspect of diplomatic communication; it points up the importance of professional, respectful and legitimate standards.

Self-designated positions, particularly the unearned or unrecognized self-designated positions, go to the heart of ethical integrity and legitimacy of these principles directly, in the sense that unethical practice, and this can lead to an 'honorific inflation' (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025).

Educational programs should raise the awareness among diplomatic actors about how communication choices impact individual credibility, institution image, and diplomatic relations. With the core values of ethical communication, it encourages trust and

cooperation and guides diplomatic interaction for preserving a good image and maintaining relations in the eyes of others (Topor, 2020) Such initiatives will build more knowledge about the history of diplomacy and cross-culture communication.

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 Summary of key findings

This study has highlighted the increasingly frequent misuse of self-ascribed honorific titles in the diplomatic sphere as a significant threat to protocol and communication. Honorific titles play critical roles — indicating status, authority, and identity — and are a vital component of hierarchy and credibility in international relations (Pokharel, 2020). Misuse takes forms, from self-claimed titles to an “honorific inflation” in internet discourse (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025)(Thinane, 2021). Motive factors for this abuse include status and political interests, and the insufficient background and protocol knowledge in diplomacy (Smith, 1989)(Sukmawaty et al., 2022). The misuse undermines ethical communication, in terms of professionalism, legitimacy, and recognition of a real achievement (Topor, 2020). In the end, there is uncertainty, potential backlash and damage to reputation for individuals and states.

10.2 Restatement of the importance of proper diplomatic conduct

Proper diplomatic conduct backed by existing norms is clearly paramount as the foundation of all relationships between states and between governments and representatives for that matter (Berkowitz et al., 2024)(Revkova, 2023). By adhering to orderly protocols, such an approach makes diplomacy successful, mutual respect comes into existence, and the functioning of global diplomacy is made a significant accomplishment. The correct attribution to, and use of, honorific titles in their proper use are crucial when establishing and validating credibility (also known as credibility) in diplomatic conversations, respecting others' (non-verbal) dignity, and complying with norms and international conventions (Pokharel, 2020)(Yuryeva, 2018). Practice of such methods sustain symbolic and hierarchical diplomatic regimes that avoid misunderstanding and secure fruitful relationships (Revkova, 2023)(Toshpulatov, 2021). Additionally, proper behaviour also conveys a state's strategic message and the narrative of its own sovereignty and its international prestige (Miskimmon et al., 2017)(Visoka, 2018).

10.3 Final reflection on professionalism and global diplomatic standards

The misuse of self-referenced honorific titles highlights the continued need for vigilance in maintaining professionalism, and global diplomatic standards. The pressure of self-presentation has also become a challenge in more digitally-embedded diplomatic environment and communication lines often blurred due to the fact that many individuals have become accustomed to displaying their professionalism without undergoing due diligence (Ketners, 2025). To ensure ethical communication in diplomacy, professionalism, respect, and legitimacy — essential components of trust and cooperation — must be upheld (Topor, 2020). Through a thoroughgoing set of guidelines and mechanisms, the institutional role of regulating the use of diplomatic language is critical towards preserving the credibility and legitimacy of diplomatic communications (Clyne et al., 2009)(Mynářová, 2007). To achieve this, the international community needs to improve training and establish clear protocols for them as well as to instil ethical consciousness so that symbolic representations will not compromise diplomatic dialogue against their fundamental purpose of promoting peaceful international relations.

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