



Bilateral Aviation Partnerships and Diplomatic Enhancement in Rwanda

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Abstract: *The study intended to assess the role of bilateral aviation partnerships on diplomatic enhancement in Rwanda, with particular reference to the RwandAir-Qatar Airways Partnerships. A mixed-methods convergent parallel design was adopted, combining structured questionnaires administered to 127 respondents from RwandAir, Qatar Airways, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority, and Kigali International Airport, with 18 key informant interviews. Soft Power Theory and Network Theory provided the theoretical framework. Quantitative analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between bilateral aviation partnerships and diplomatic enhancement ($R = 0.882$; $R^2 = 0.778$; $\beta = 0.882$; $p < 0.001$), with the partnership explaining approximately 77.8% of the variation in Rwanda's diplomatic outcomes. Spearman correlation coefficients (0.74–0.81) confirmed consistently strong associations across all dimensions. Qualitative findings corroborated these results, highlighting improved participation in high-level forums, stronger institutional cooperation, and enhanced bilateral communication between Rwanda and Qatar. Bilateral aviation partnerships function as strategic diplomatic instruments that advance national visibility, foreign policy implementation, and alliance formation. The study recommends institutionalizing aviation diplomacy within Rwanda's foreign policy frameworks, strengthening partnership impact monitoring, and expanding strategic airline partnerships to broaden global connectivity and diplomatic reach.*

Keywords: *Bilateral aviation partnerships, diplomatic enhancement, RwandAir, Qatar Airways, Rwanda*

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1. Introduction

Aviation partnerships have become increasingly instrumental in enhancing international diplomacy, regional integration, and sustainable economic development. Through improved air connectivity, such partnerships promote cross-border trade, tourism growth, and stronger diplomatic ties between nations (Abate, 2020). The collaboration between RwandAir and Qatar Airways exemplifies how strategic aviation alliances can advance national development priorities, strengthen foreign policy, and bolster regional and global influence (Button, 2020).

Globally, aviation diplomacy has gained momentum. According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (Aviation Benefits Report 2022, 2022), international airline partnerships increased passenger mobility by 40% and cargo movement by 33% between 2018 and 2022. The World Economic Forum (2023) notes that alliances such as oneworld, SkyTeam, and Star Alliance have enabled state-owned carriers to tap into global markets, enhance soft power, and support diplomatic outreach. A World Bank report (2021) also links aviation partnerships to increased bilateral investments and trade volumes, especially when national airlines collaborate with global carriers (Gwilliam, 2019).

In Africa, aviation partnerships are key instruments in achieving Agenda 2063. The African Union's Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), adopted by 36 member states, seeks to liberalize the skies and reduce travel barriers (African Civil Aviation Commission, 2024). In East Africa, Rwanda has emerged as a regional hub. Through RwandAir, Rwanda has pursued strategic alliances to improve market access, diplomacy, and logistics. Notably, the RwandAir-Qatar Airways partnership includes a codeshare agreement, cargo collaboration, and Qatar's 49% stake in RwandAir and the Bugesera International Airport project (Financial Times, 2024) (Qatar Airways, 2021), positioning Rwanda as a logistical and diplomatic node in Africa.

Several Rwandan studies affirm aviation's contribution to diplomacy and development. According to the Rwanda Development Board, RwandAir contributed to a 27% increase in the country's tourism revenue between 2019 and 2022, underscoring the airline's role as both an economic and diplomatic asset (Nsengiyumva & Uwitonze, 2022). Uwitonze further emphasized that Qatar Airways' equity investment in RwandAir significantly improved Rwanda's bilateral relations with Gulf States, positioning the partnership as a foreign policy instrument rather than a purely commercial arrangement (Ngarambe & Kayitesi, 2021). Similarly, Ngarambe and Kayitesi revealed that improved air connectivity positively influenced Rwanda's participation in international conferences and regional blocs, reinforcing the link between aviation infrastructure and diplomatic engagement (Rwanda Development Board, 2022). More recently, the launch of the Kigali Cargo Hub in 2023 is projected to increase cargo traffic in East Africa by 35%, signalling Rwanda's growing ambition as a regional aviation hub (Uwitonze, 2023).

1.1 Problem Statement

Strategic aviation partnerships play a crucial role in enhancing regional connectivity, promoting economic development, and strengthening diplomatic relations (Gwilliam, 2019). Rwanda's partnership with Qatar Airways through a codeshare agreement and Qatar Airways' 49% acquisition of RwandAir illustrates this growing trend (RwandAir, 2021). The alliance is intended to expand route networks, improve connectivity between Kigali and Doha, and stimulate Rwanda's economic growth and integration within the African continent (International Air Transport Association, 2021). However, despite anticipated benefits, concerns have emerged regarding the potential implications of this partnership for Rwanda's national sovereignty and control over its aviation sector. The considerable equity stake held by Qatar Airways in RwandAir raises concerns about the extent to which foreign ownership may influence the airline's strategic decisions, potentially compromising Rwanda's autonomy in shaping its aviation and broader economic policies

(Goyal & Mishra, 2020; Zhang & Chen, 2022). Such tensions between foreign capital participation and national policy independence have been well documented, with significant foreign ownership shown to constrain host nations' capacity to align aviation strategy with domestic developmental priorities (Goyal & Mishra, 2020; Zhang & Chen, 2022). Furthermore, the diplomatic dimensions of the partnership require critical examination. The growing involvement of Gulf carriers like Qatar Airways in African aviation could alter regional power dynamics and reshape trade and diplomatic relations (Akpan & Ekpenyong, 2021). There is therefore a need to empirically assess how the RwandAir-Qatar Airways bilateral aviation partnership specifically influences Rwanda's diplomatic standing and international alliances.

1.2 Research Objective

This study aimed to assess the extent to which bilateral aviation partnerships contribute to diplomatic enhancement in Rwanda, with reference to the RwandAir-Qatar Airways collaboration.

1.3 Research Hypothesis

H₀: Bilateral aviation partnerships have no significant effect on diplomatic enhancement in Rwanda, with reference to the RwandAir-Qatar Airways collaboration.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Bilateral Aviation Partnerships and Diplomatic Relations

Bilateral aviation partnerships are formal agreements between two countries or their designated national carriers, designed to facilitate mutual cooperation in the aviation sector through arrangements such as code-sharing, joint ventures, and the liberalization of air transport markets. The primary purpose of bilateral aviation partnerships extends beyond operational connectivity to encompass the expansion of network access and the fostering of closer economic and diplomatic relations between participating nations (Musa & Alotaibi, 2021). Such partnerships serve as catalysts for economic integration by facilitating trade, stimulating tourism, and promoting cultural exchange. Moreover, they function as potent instruments of soft power diplomacy, enabling states to leverage aviation as a strategic vehicle for strengthening bilateral ties and advancing broader geopolitical interests (Musa & Alotaibi, 2021).

Several empirical studies have examined the contribution of bilateral aviation partnerships to diplomatic cooperation. Button's cross-country analysis of 40 Bilateral Air Service Agreements (ASAs) in Europe demonstrated that nations with liberalized agreements experienced a 25% increase in

diplomatic missions and trade volume, underscoring the tangible diplomatic dividends of open aviation frameworks (Button, 2020). In the Asian context, Zhang and Zhang's examination of data from 20 countries confirmed a positive correlation between air connectivity and both diplomatic engagement and bilateral investment flows, highlighting aviation's role as a conduit for broader interstate relations (Zhang & Chen, 2022). Within the African setting, Abate's panel data analysis across 15 Sub-Saharan African states further established that the negotiation of aviation partnerships enhanced diplomatic alignment, particularly among countries with convergent economic interests (Abate, 2020).

Tchouamou Njoya and Niemeier established that bilateral codeshare agreements function as instruments of soft power, enabling participating nations to strengthen diplomatic ties through enhanced people-to-people exchanges and improved regional accessibility (Tchouamou Njoya & Niemeier, 2022a). Complementing this view, Lee and Mo argue that aviation partnerships cultivate political trust and mutual understanding by facilitating business, tourism, and governmental exchanges across borders (Lee & Mo, 2023). Within the African context, Mwangi and Abdi observed that codeshare arrangements between African carriers and global airlines substantially elevate a country's diplomatic visibility and influence within regional blocs, affirming aviation's strategic value beyond its commercial function (Mwangi & Abdi, 2022). Notwithstanding these contributions, a notable gap persists in the extant literature, as the majority of empirical studies remain concentrated on large aviation markets and developed economies, with insufficient scholarly attention directed toward small, landlocked states such as Rwanda, where the interplay between aviation partnerships and diplomatic outcomes may exhibit distinct and context-specific dynamics (Mwangi & Abdi, 2022; Tchouamou Njoya & Niemeier, 2022b).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in Soft Power Theory and Network Theory, both of which provide complementary lenses for examining the diplomatic dimensions of bilateral aviation partnerships.

Soft Power Theory, prominently articulated by Nye, posits that states exert influence over others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or material inducement (Nye, 2004). Within the aviation context, this framework illuminates how air transport functions as a soft power instrument by fostering cultural exchanges, stimulating tourism, facilitating business linkages, and elevating a nation's global visibility (Rosi & Lihua, 2022). Codeshare agreements and strategic airline alliances extend a country's international appeal and institutional credibility, thereby enhancing its diplomatic leverage. In this regard, RwandAir's strategic positioning as a regional aviation hub

is consistent with Rwanda's broader foreign policy objectives, encompassing regional integration and the cultivation of global partnerships (Nyakairu & Murenzi, 2023).

Network Theory, as advanced by Castells, underscores the centrality of strategic connections in enabling the transboundary flow of people, goods, influence, and knowledge (Castells, 2000). The RwandAir–Qatar Airways alliance exemplifies how embedding a small nation within a global aviation network can substantially expand its access to markets, investment opportunities, and collaborative platforms. As Keohane and Nye assert, networks facilitate cooperation, information exchange, and the diffusion of norms, generating both diplomatic and economic value for interconnected actors (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Accordingly, bilateral aviation partnerships transcend their commercial function, serving simultaneously as diplomatic instruments that deepen interconnectivity and promote people-to-people exchanges.

2.3 Research Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights into aviation diplomacy at the global level, critical gaps persist with respect to small, emerging nations such as Rwanda. The preponderance of empirical studies remains concentrated on large aviation markets and developed economies, leaving the experiences of smaller, landlocked states comparatively underexplored (Lee & Mo, 2023; Zhang & Huang, 2025). There is a notable absence of rigorous empirical analysis examining how bilateral aviation partnerships specifically the RwandAir–Qatar Airways codeshare agreement contribute to Rwanda's diplomatic outcomes. The degree to which Rwanda's aviation collaborations translate into measurable and sustainable diplomatic benefits remains insufficiently investigated in the scholarly literature (Mwangi & Abdi, 2022; Tchouamou Njoya & Niemeier, 2022b). This study directly addresses these gaps by employing the RwandAir–Qatar Airways partnership as a focused case study, generating context-specific empirical evidence that advances understanding of aviation diplomacy within small, emerging economy settings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the role of bilateral aviation partnerships in strengthening diplomatic relations between Rwanda and Qatar, with specific reference to RwandAir and Qatar Airways. This design was selected because it allows for the simultaneous collection and

separate analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, followed by merging of results for comparison and interpretation (Saunders et al., 2023). The quantitative component provided measurable patterns of perception, while the qualitative component offered deeper explanations of diplomatic and strategic dynamics.

3.2 Study Location and Target Population

The study was conducted in Rwanda, with a specific focus on RwandAir and its partnership with Qatar Airways. Kigali, the capital city and operational headquarters of RwandAir, served as the primary site for data collection. The target population comprised 200 individuals and institutions directly involved in aviation operations, regulation, and diplomatic cooperation between Rwanda and Qatar, including senior and mid-level management staff from RwandAir, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, regulatory officers from the Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority

(RCAA), Qatar Airways representatives in Rwanda, airport operational staff from Kigali International Airport (KIA), and independent aviation experts and policy analysts.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula, applied to a target population of 200 with a 5% margin of error, yielding a required sample of 133 respondents (Yamane, 1970). The study employed a stratified purposive sampling strategy, whereby the population was first divided into distinct institutional strata and knowledgeable individuals were subsequently selected within each stratum based on their professional roles, domain expertise, and direct involvement in the Rwanda-Qatar aviation collaboration. This approach ensured that only respondents with relevant and substantive knowledge of the subject matter were included, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Table 1: Population and Sample Size Distribution

Population Category	Population Size	Sample Size
RwandAir senior and middle management	40	26
Qatar Airways staff operating in Rwanda	30	20
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation	35	23
Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority	25	17
Experts in diplomacy and aviation policy	70	47
Total	200	133

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was used to collect quantitative data from the sample population on aspects of bilateral aviation partnerships including awareness of the partnership, global visibility, diplomatic communication support, alliance formation, and strategic use of aviation as a diplomatic tool. Additionally, 18 semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with senior management officials, policy experts, and diplomatic officers to gather rich qualitative insights into the partnership's diplomatic implications.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Reliability was ensured through Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, with a threshold of 0.70 considered acceptable (Field, 2020). A pilot study was conducted at Kenya Airways to test and refine the instruments. Validity was established through expert content review, construct validity by alignment with theoretical frameworks, and triangulation across questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis to cross-verify findings (Taherdoost, 2016, 2020).

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, standard

deviations) summarized respondent perceptions. Spearman's rank correlation assessed the strength and direction of relationships between bilateral aviation partnerships and diplomatic enhancement. Regression analysis was employed following the model: $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$, where Y = diplomatic enhancement (dependent variable) and X_1 = bilateral aviation partnerships (independent variable). ANOVA was used to test the overall significance of the regression model. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo software (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided this study to ensure compliance with institutional and international research standards, particularly given the research's focus on diplomacy and strategic partnerships between RwandAir and Qatar Airways. Official permission letters were obtained from relevant institutions and government agencies before data collection to ensure transparency and minimize disruption. Participants received clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and written informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality and privacy were maintained by encrypting sensitive data, while anonymity was ensured through the use of codes and pseudonyms instead of participants' names or affiliations. Academic integrity was upheld through proper citation and plagiarism checks below the university's acceptable threshold. Participation was voluntary and free of coercion, allowing respondents to withdraw at any time. Data were securely stored for 5 years before disposal, and professional conduct consistent with cultural and institutional norms was maintained throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics

Of the 133 questionnaires distributed, 127 were fully completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 95.5%. All 18 targeted key informants participated in the in-depth interviews, representing a 100% qualitative response rate. These high response rates are consistent with standards considered sufficient for ensuring the credibility and reliability of research findings (Creswell, n.d.).

The demographic profile of respondents revealed a predominantly male sample (70.1%), with females constituting 29.9%, reflecting the prevailing gender composition within Rwanda's aviation and diplomatic sectors (Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority, 2022). The majority of respondents fell within the 25-44 age bracket, with 38.6% aged 35-44 and 32.3% aged 25-34, indicating a mid-career professional cohort with direct engagement in aviation and diplomatic functions. Educationally, the sample was highly qualified, with 48.8% holding a Bachelor's degree and 36.2% a Master's degree, affirming the academic competence of the participant pool. Regarding professional experience, 55.9% of respondents reported between 4 and 10 years of service in aviation and diplomatic environments, further reinforcing the depth, relevance, and credibility of their contributions to the study (Creswell, n.d.; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

4.2 Descriptive Statistics: Bilateral Aviation Partnerships and Diplomacy Enhancement

Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement on key aspects of the RwandAir–Qatar Airways bilateral aviation partnership. The descriptive statistics indicate a strong consensus on the positive impact of the partnership on Rwanda's diplomatic relations.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Bilateral Aviation Partnerships (N=127)

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
I am aware of the RwandAir–Qatar Airways aviation partnership	4.21	0.78
The partnership has made Rwanda more visible in global diplomacy	4.11	0.82
Aviation partnerships help build Rwanda's image internationally	4.09	0.81
The partnership supports diplomatic communication between countries	4.04	0.83
Aviation partnerships create opportunities for Rwanda in international politics	4.08	0.82
Rwanda's leaders use aviation partnerships to strengthen international relations	4.09	0.80
The partnership increases Rwanda's chances of forming new international alliances	4.05	0.82
Rwanda's participation in international aviation agreements boosts diplomatic status	4.04	0.83
Aviation partnerships act as a tool for Rwanda's diplomatic strategy	4.08	0.81
Bilateral aviation partnerships open more diplomatic missions for Rwanda	4.09	0.82

Descriptive analysis of the quantitative data revealed mean scores ranging from 4.04 to 4.21 across all measured dimensions, consistently falling within the 'agree' to 'strongly agree' range on the Likert scale, thereby indicating strong affirmative perceptions among respondents. The consistently low standard deviations recorded (0.78–0.83) reflect a high degree of consensus within the sample, suggesting minimal dispersion of opinion and reinforcing the reliability of the findings (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The highest mean score (4.21) was recorded for respondents' awareness of the RwandAir–Qatar Airways partnership, underscoring its salience among professionals in the aviation and diplomatic sectors. Notably, diplomatic strategy utilization (M = 4.08) and international alliance formation (M = 4.05) also attracted high mean scores, collectively affirming

strong respondent perceptions of the partnership's strategic diplomatic value (Hair et al., 2019).

These findings are consistent with scholarship demonstrating that aviation partnerships function as visible and credible instruments of state engagement, wherein stakeholder awareness and strategic intentionality are key determinants of diplomatic effectiveness (Field, 2020; Gibbons & Chakraborti, 2011). The high degree of consensus further corroborates qualitative evidence gathered from key informant interviews, in which a senior RwandAir official affirmed that the partnership with Qatar Airways has enabled Rwanda to participate in high-level aviation and diplomatic forums, thereby strengthening the country's global credibility and profile (Field, 2020).

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Spearman Correlation between Bilateral Aviation Partnerships and Diplomacy Enhancement

Predictor (Bilateral Aviation Partnership Dimension)	Spearman's r_s
Awareness of partnership	0.80 (Strong Positive)
Global visibility	0.78 (Strong Positive)
Building international image	0.75 (Moderate Positive)
Support diplomatic communication	0.79 (Strong Positive)
Opportunities in international politics	0.74 (Moderate Positive)
Use in international relations	0.76 (Moderate Positive)
Forming new alliances	0.77 (Strong Positive)
Boosting diplomatic status	0.79 (Strong Positive)
Diplomatic strategy tool	0.81 (Strong Positive)
Opening diplomatic missions	0.78 (Strong Positive)
Overall Mean Association	0.78 (Strong Positive)

The Spearman correlation analysis revealed a consistently strong positive association between bilateral aviation partnerships and Rwanda's diplomatic relations across all measured dimensions. The overall correlation coefficient ($r_s = 0.78$) indicates that as the engagement and effectiveness of aviation partnerships increase, Rwanda's diplomatic influence, international visibility, and capacity for alliance formation correspondingly improve, consistent with theoretical expectations drawn from soft power and network frameworks (Awotayo et al., 2023). The strongest correlation was observed for aviation partnerships functioning as a diplomatic strategy tool ($r_s = 0.81$), followed closely by awareness of the partnership ($r_s = 0.80$), suggesting that strategic intentionality and stakeholder cognizance are particularly salient drivers of diplomatic outcomes. Notably, even the lowest recorded correlation ($r_s = 0.74$) remains substantively significant, confirming a meaningful, robust, and consistent relationship between aviation partnership effectiveness and

diplomatic enhancement across all dimensions examined (Hair et al., 2019).

These findings align with Zhang and Zhang's analysis of 20 Asian countries, which reported a positive correlation between air connectivity and both diplomatic engagement and bilateral investment flows (Zhang & Huang, 2025), and with Button's cross-country analysis of 40 Bilateral Air Service Agreements in Europe, which demonstrated that liberalized aviation frameworks are associated with measurable improvements in diplomatic missions and trade volumes (Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority, 2022). In the African context, these results are further reinforced by Mwangi and Abdi, who found that codeshare partnerships substantially elevate a country's diplomatic visibility within regional blocs (Mwangi & Abdi, 2022).

4.4 Regression Analysis

Table 4: Model Summary for Bilateral Aviation Partnerships and Diplomacy Enhancement

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	Durbin-Watson
1	0.882	0.778	0.775	0.512	1.947

Table 5: ANOVA for Bilateral Aviation Partnerships and Diplomacy Enhancement

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	122.473	1	122.473	466.731	0.000
Residual	34.655	136	0.255		
Total	157.128	137			

Table 6: Regression Coefficients for Bilateral Aviation Partnerships and Diplomacy Enhancement

Variable	Unstandardized B	Std. Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	0.995		4.622	0.000
Aviation Partnerships	0.413	0.882	21.610	0.000

The regression analysis demonstrated a very strong positive relationship between bilateral aviation partnerships and diplomatic enhancement, as evidenced by a multiple correlation coefficient of $R = 0.882$ (Hair et al., 2019). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.778$) indicates that approximately 77.8% of the total variation in Rwanda's diplomatic relations is attributable to the effectiveness of bilateral aviation partnerships, reflecting substantial explanatory power. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.775 further confirms the robustness and parsimony of the model, accounting for the number of predictors included (Graham, 2021).

The derived regression equation ($Y = 0.995 + 0.413X$) reveals that for every one-unit increase in the effectiveness of aviation partnerships, Rwanda's diplomatic relations are predicted to improve by 0.413 units, holding all other factors constant. The standardized Beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.882$) corroborates this finding, indicating a very strong effect size and affirming the substantive influence of aviation partnerships on diplomatic outcomes (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, the ANOVA results ($F = 466.731, p < 0.001$) confirm the overall statistical significance of the regression model, establishing that the predictive relationship observed is unlikely to be attributable to chance (Field, 2020; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

These quantitative results are consistent with Tchouamou Njoya and Niemeier, who established that bilateral codeshare agreements function as instruments of soft power, enabling participating nations to strengthen diplomatic ties through enhanced people-to-people exchanges and improved regional accessibility (Tchouamou Njoya & Niemeier, 2022b). Similarly, Lee and Mo argue that aviation partnerships cultivate political trust and mutual understanding by facilitating business, tourism, and governmental exchanges across borders (Lee & Mo, 2023). Importantly, this study advances the existing literature by providing robust empirical evidence that in the Rwandan context, bilateral aviation partnerships function as strategic diplomatic

instruments that directly and measurably influence state visibility, bilateral cooperation, and alliance formation extending beyond the primarily economic and operational benefits argued by Button (Button, 2020).

4.5 Hypothesis Testing

The null hypothesis (H_{01}) stated that bilateral aviation partnerships have no significant effect on Rwanda's diplomatic relations, whereas the alternative hypothesis (H_{a1}) posited a significant positive effect. Based on the Spearman correlation ($r_s = 0.78$), regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.882, p < 0.001$), and ANOVA results ($F = 466.731, p = 0.000$), there is strong statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis. It is therefore concluded that bilateral aviation partnerships significantly and positively contribute to Rwanda's diplomatic relations, enhancing its global visibility, strategic positioning, and ability to form international alliances.

This conclusion reflects a broader conceptual shift from viewing aviation as a purely economic sector toward a more integrated understanding of aviation as a foreign policy instrument and soft power tool (Nye, 2004). Graham further contends that aviation networks function as channels of influence through which states expand their diplomatic reach beyond the confines of traditional political institutions (Graham, 2021), a position strongly supported by the empirical evidence generated in this study. Qualitative corroboration was equally compelling: a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation noted that aviation partnerships have evolved into strategic diplomatic instruments, enabling Rwanda to establish new negotiation channels, consolidate international alliances, and effectively project soft power beyond its borders (Karangwa & Niyonzima, 2022).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that bilateral aviation partnerships, particularly the RwandAir-Qatar Airways collaboration, significantly enhance Rwanda's diplomatic visibility and international recognition. The evidence shows that such partnerships are not merely operational arrangements between airlines, but strategic diplomatic tools that enable Rwanda to project its presence in global aviation and political spaces. Through improved connectivity, joint operations, and institutional cooperation, Rwanda is able to engage more effectively with international stakeholders and expand its access to global diplomatic forums. The statistical evidence ($R = 0.882$; $R^2 = 0.778$; $\beta = 0.882$; $p < 0.001$) confirms that bilateral aviation partnerships are a major determinant of Rwanda's diplomatic enhancement, with 77.8% of the variation in diplomatic outcomes explained by partnership effectiveness. The findings further indicate that both the awareness of the partnership and its strategic use as a diplomatic tool are the most strongly correlated dimensions with diplomatic outcomes ($r_s = 0.80$ – 0.81), underscoring the importance of deliberate, strategically framed aviation diplomacy.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made.

- i. **Strengthen alignment between aviation partnerships and Rwanda's diplomatic objectives:** The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, RwandAir, and Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority should integrate aviation agreements into the foreign policy framework. This will support state visits, bilateral negotiations, and participation in international aviation forums, enhancing diplomatic cooperation and international relations.
- ii. **Enhance monitoring and evaluation systems:** Institutions should establish effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms with clear performance indicators. These should measure operational efficiency and diplomatic outcomes of aviation agreements, such as bilateral meetings facilitated, global forums attended, and alliances created through aviation cooperation.
- iii. **Expand strategic airline partnerships and connectivity:** Rwanda should continue to expand airline partnerships to improve global connectivity and diplomatic outreach. Enhanced air transport networks will also support tourism stakeholders, private sector actors, and business communities by increasing market access,

attracting international visitors, and promoting cross-border trade and investment.

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