

Strengthening Nigeria–Saudi Arabia Bilateral Relations Through Pilgrims’ Welfare and Accountability Frameworks Under Vision 2030

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Abstract

The Hajj pilgrimage is central to Nigeria–Saudi Arabia relations, extending beyond its religious obligations to encompass diplomacy, governance, and economic dimensions. Despite efforts by the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON), recurring challenges in pilgrims’ welfare, weak accountability, and governance lapses have undermined Nigeria’s diplomatic credibility. By contrast, Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 emphasizes digitization, efficiency, and transparency in Hajj administration, setting a benchmark that Nigeria must adapt to remain credible and strengthen bilateral ties. This study aims to analyze how pilgrims’ welfare and accountability mechanisms influence Nigeria–Saudi relations and to propose a Vision 2030–aligned framework for NAHCON. The specific objectives were to assess the state of welfare and accountability in Nigeria’s Hajj administration, evaluate their impact on bilateral relations, and identify reforms necessary for alignment with Saudi standards. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study combined survey data from 400 pilgrims with qualitative evidence from documents and media reports. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses were employed alongside thematic analysis for explanatory depth. Findings show that welfare services were rated moderately (means ≈ 3.4 – 3.5), while accountability mechanisms received weaker ratings (means ≈ 3.1). Regression results revealed accountability ($\beta = 0.520$) had a stronger impact than welfare ($\beta = 0.387$) on perceptions of Nigeria–Saudi relations, highlighting governance credibility as central to diplomatic outcomes. The study contributes by providing empirical evidence that links Hajj administration with foreign policy outcomes, advancing a Vision 2030–aligned framework for NAHCON that integrates welfare, transparency, digital transformation, and diplomacy, thereby positioning Hajj as a tool of Nigeria’s soft power and bilateral engagement.

Keywords: Hajj pilgrimage, Pilgrim’s welfare, Accountability, Nahcon, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, bilateral relations, Soft Power Theory, framework.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Hajj pilgrimage remains a critical dimension of Nigeria–Saudi Arabia relations, involving not only religious obligations but also diplomatic, economic, and governance considerations (Al-Qaradawi, 2019; Suleiman, 2021). The National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON), established under the NAHCON (Establishment) Act 2006, is responsible for coordinating and regulating Hajj operations, including supervising state pilgrims’ welfare boards, licensing tour operators, and ensuring compliance with Saudi regulations (NAHCON Act, 2006). Over the years, challenges relating to pilgrims’ welfare, inadequate accountability mechanisms, logistical inefficiencies, and weak service delivery have undermined Nigeria’s image

in the management of Hajj operations (Abubakar & Yahaya, 2020; Bello, 2022). These shortcomings have, at times, strained diplomatic engagements with Saudi authorities and reduced the confidence of Nigerian pilgrims in the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) (Akinola, 2023).

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 outlines ambitious reforms to modernize and digitize Hajj management, improve pilgrims’ experience, and ensure efficiency, transparency, and global competitiveness (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Alghamdi, 2022). For Nigeria to sustain and strengthen its bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, NAHCON must align its governance structures, accountability

mechanisms, and welfare provisions with these emerging standards (Usman & Abdullahi, 2023).

However, there is limited research examining how Nigeria can strategically position NAHCON to meet the expectations of Vision 2030 while simultaneously improving pilgrims' welfare and promoting accountability (Oladipo, 2021). Without a clear framework, Nigeria risks lagging behind in adapting to Saudi reforms, thereby weakening its diplomatic leverage and undermining the credibility of its Hajj administration (Ahmed, 2022).

This study therefore seeks to address this gap by proposing a framework that enhances NAHCON's accountability systems and pilgrims' welfare mechanisms, in alignment with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, with the broader goal of consolidating Nigeria–Saudi bilateral relations.

This study aims to analyze how pilgrims' welfare and accountability mechanisms influence Nigeria–Saudi Arabia bilateral relations and to propose a framework for strengthening the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) in alignment with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms.

- To assess the current state of pilgrims' welfare and accountability mechanisms in Nigeria's Hajj administration.
- To evaluate the impact of NAHCON's governance practices on Nigeria–Saudi Arabia bilateral relations.
- To analyze the implications of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms for Nigerian Hajj management.
- To identify the gaps and challenges in NAHCON's existing welfare and accountability frameworks.
- To propose a strategic framework for enhancing NAHCON's capacity to improve pilgrims' welfare, strengthen accountability, and align with Vision 2030, thereby consolidating Nigeria–Saudi bilateral relations. The research questions are developed from the objectives.

This study draws on Soft Power Theory, Public Diplomacy Theory, and Accountability Theory to explain how Hajj administration shapes both pilgrim welfare and Nigeria–Saudi relations. Together, these frameworks highlight that effective service delivery and transparent governance enhance Nigeria's credibility abroad, while failures weaken its diplomatic standing.

Joseph Nye (2004, 2017) defines soft power as the ability of states to shape others' preferences through attraction rather than coercion. In the Hajj context, Nigeria's treatment of pilgrims becomes a form of cultural diplomacy: well-managed welfare services—accommodation, transport, and healthcare—project

competence and hospitality, enhancing Nigeria's soft power in the Muslim world. Conversely, welfare failures diminish Nigeria's attractiveness. While soft power is difficult to quantify, the theory underscores that pilgrim welfare is not just a domestic obligation but a foreign policy tool (Nye, 2017; Alharbi, 2017).

Public Diplomacy Theory emphasizes how states communicate with foreign publics to build trust and advance national interests (Cull, 2009; Zaharna, 2010). In Hajj operations, NAHCON's engagement with Saudi authorities, international Muslim media, and civil society functions as public diplomacy. For example, transparent communication of reforms such as e-Hajj portals or digital wristbands signals Nigeria's competence. This strengthens goodwill and may support negotiations over quotas or welfare improvements. However, the theory also warns that messaging alone is insufficient if not backed by substantive service delivery (Cull, 2019).

Accountability Theory stresses that institutions must justify their decisions and be answerable to oversight bodies (Bovens, 2007). Applied to NAHCON, this includes transparent fare setting, audited financial reports, refund policies, and grievance redress systems. Strong accountability builds trust among pilgrims, domestic stakeholders, and Saudi partners, reinforcing Nigeria's credibility in bilateral relations (Gabadeen, 2025). Yet, accountability can be symbolic if procedures exist without consistent enforcement. Thus, while accountability mechanisms strengthen institutional reliability, they must be paired with genuine governance reforms.

RELATED LITERATURE

Existing studies have examined Nigeria–Saudi Arabia Hajj relations from different perspectives, including diplomacy, operations, policy adaptation, and accountability. Jimoh (2016) highlighted the absence of a formal trade agreement, limiting Nigeria's economic leverage in its Hajj diplomacy, while Muhammed (2018) traced NAHCON's institutional role in centralizing and improving operations despite lingering bureaucratic and infrastructural challenges. Service delivery gaps have also been noted, such as catering failures during the 2011 Hajj (Modern Ghana, 2011) and compliance challenges with new Saudi policies (Salau & Opoola, 2018). More recent scholarship by Tijjani and Onapajo (2023) emphasized the diplomatic potential of Hajj but noted Nigeria's weak coordination in engaging Saudi authorities, which has limited economic benefits. Usman and Wilson (2025), in their assessment of pilgrim welfare and accountability on Nigeria–Saudi relations, employed a mixed-methods approach. They found accountability exerted greater influence than welfare; however, the study lacked a Vision 2030–aligned framework for welfare provision and financial transparency.

Significant gaps remain in the literature. Most studies rely on qualitative or descriptive methods, often focusing narrowly on single issues such as catering, media engagement, or financial irregularities, without integrating them into a comprehensive governance and diplomacy framework. Few works systematically analyze how pilgrim welfare and accountability jointly influence Nigeria's soft power and diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. Usman and Wilson (2025) begin to bridge this gap by providing empirical evidence through correlation and regression analysis, but further research is needed to strengthen Nigeria–Saudi bilateral relations through welfare and accountability frameworks aligned with emerging reforms under Saudi Vision 2030.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design to assess the effect of pilgrims' welfare and accountability on Nigeria–Saudi bilateral relations using NAHCON's activities between 2014 and 2025. The design was appropriate because it combined quantitative data on pilgrims' perceptions of welfare and accountability with qualitative insights from documentary and media evidence, thereby enabling both measurement and explanation of the issues. The descriptive research design facilitated a systematic assessment of how NAHCON's welfare programs and accountability influenced Nigeria's diplomatic standing, while triangulation enhanced the study's validity by linking statistical patterns to contextual explanations.

The population included Nigerian Hajj pilgrims who travelled under NAHCON, State Pilgrims Welfare Boards (SPWBs), and private tour operators, as well as institutional actors such as NAHCON officials, SPWB representatives, and civil society monitors. Using multistage sampling, a total of 400 pilgrims were surveyed, surpassing Cochran's (1977) threshold of 384 for representativeness. Respondents were stratified by gender, state, and type of pilgrimage arrangement, ensuring inclusion across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. For the qualitative component, purposive and snowball sampling identified 12–15 informants, while official documents, press releases, investigative reports, and media sources were systematically reviewed to provide additional context on accountability and welfare issues.

Data collection instruments included a structured questionnaire and a media/document review checklist. The questionnaire covered demographics,

pilgrim welfare (e.g., accommodation, transport, healthcare), accountability and transparency (fare disclosure, fund management, refunds, grievance handling), and perceived diplomatic outcomes, with items measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Content and face validity were ensured through expert reviews and pilot testing, while internal consistency was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7 (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Reliability in the qualitative phase was maintained through consistent coding, use of verbatim excerpts, and creation of an audit trail.

For data analysis, quantitative data were processed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression models, with significance tested at the 0.05 level. This identified the relationships between welfare, accountability, and diplomatic outcomes. The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, with open coding used to identify recurring concepts, which were then grouped into broader themes of welfare, accountability, and diplomatic impact. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where quantitative findings were contextualised with qualitative evidence to provide explanatory depth. Ethical clearance was secured and informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were strictly upheld.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents and analyses the research findings derived from the survey and documentary sources. It provides descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses, integrating quantitative results with qualitative insights to address the study's objectives.

3.1 Quantitative Findings

3.1.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 3.1 summarizes the characteristics of the 400 surveyed Nigerian Hajj pilgrims. 53.0% of respondents were male and 47.0% female. The largest age group was 31–40 years (30.8%), followed by 41–50 years (23.0%); only about 10.3% were over 60. A majority (61.5%) traveled via State Pilgrims Welfare Boards, while 13.8% were NAHCON stakeholders and 24.8% used private operators. These demographics indicate a broadly representative sample of returning pilgrims across Nigeria.

Table 3.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	212	53.0%
	Female	188	47.0%
Age Group (years)	Below 30	80	20.0%
	31–40	123	30.8%
	41–50	92	23.0%

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Type of Arrangement	51–60	64	16.0%
	Above 60	41	10.3%
	State Pilgrims Board	246	61.5%
	NAHCON Stakeholder	55	13.8%
	Private Tour Operator	99	24.8%

Source: Field Survey (2025)

3.2.2 Pilgrim Welfare Services

Respondents rated their satisfaction with key welfare services on a 5-point scale (1 = Very Dissatisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied). Mean scores (Table 4.2) show moderately positive evaluations: accommodation (mean=3.41, SD=0.91), transport (3.51, SD=0.91), feeding (3.46, SD=0.95), medical care (3.43, SD=0.94), support staff availability (3.44, SD=0.97) and pre-departure orientation (3.46, SD=0.93). In each category, roughly half of pilgrims indicated satisfaction or very satisfaction. For instance, about 45.5% reported

being satisfied with accommodation and over half (51.3%) were satisfied with transport arrangements. Nevertheless, a significant proportion remained neutral or dissatisfied, suggesting lingering gaps in service quality. Overall, the findings suggest that while NAHCON has made efforts, welfare services are viewed as only moderately adequate by pilgrims. The table 4.2 represents respondents rated their satisfaction with key welfare services. Table 3.2 presents the respondents' ratings of their satisfaction with key welfare services.

Table 3.2: Pilgrims welfare satisfaction

Welfare Service	Mean Score (SD)
Accommodation arrangements	3.41 (0.91)
Transportation (within Saudi)	3.51 (0.91)
Feeding/Meals	3.46 (0.95)
Medical/Healthcare services	3.43 (0.94)
Support staff availability	3.44 (0.97)
Orientation/Training before Hajj	3.46 (0.93)

Source: Field Survey (2025)

3.2.3 Accountability Mechanisms

Pilgrims also rated NAHCON's accountability measures. Mean satisfaction scores were lower, indicating weaker perceptions of transparency. Only about one-third of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that NAHCON was transparent about costs (32.8%) or that Hajj funds were well accounted (33.8%). Mean scores (SD) were 3.11 (1.00) for transparency of costs, 3.13 (1.01) for fund accounting, 3.06 (0.94) for fair

processing of refunds, 3.38 (1.07) for functional complaint resolution, and 3.22 (1.02) for pilgrim feedback involvement. These middling scores reveal dissatisfaction: most pilgrims felt that accountability mechanisms were not very robust. The standard deviations indicate high variability in responses, reflecting inconsistent experiences. In summary, while some accountability practices exist, respondents perceived them as weak or inconsistently applied.

Table 3.3: Pilgrims' Ratings of NAHCON's Accountability Measures

Accountability Measure	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Transparency of Costs	3.11	1.00
Fund Accounting	3.13	1.01
Fair Processing of Refunds	3.06	0.94
Functional Complaint Resolution	3.38	1.07
Pilgrim Feedback Involvement	3.22	1.02

Source: Field Survey (2025)

3.2.4 Perceived Impact on Bilateral Relations

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that welfare and transparency influence Nigeria's standing with Saudi authorities. Mean scores (≈ 2.79 – 2.83) were below the neutral point, indicating general uncertainty or disagreement. Only about 20–23% of pilgrims "agree/strongly agree" that improved welfare boosted Nigeria's image, that transparency builds diplomatic trust, that Hajj performance affects Saudi

cooperation (e.g., quota negotiations), or that better services strengthen ties. The majority were neutral or disagreed, signaling that most pilgrims do not strongly see a direct impact on diplomacy. In sum, perceptions of bilateral effects were modest: many pilgrims were skeptical that welfare lapses were influencing Nigeria–Saudi relations, despite some acknowledgement of a link.

3.2.5 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation results indicate that welfare satisfaction was positively associated with perceived bilateral relations ($r = 0.379$, $p < 0.001$), as was accountability ($r = 0.514$, $p < 0.001$). The relationship between welfare and accountability was low and non-significant, suggesting they capture distinct dimensions of Hajj administration. These findings address Objective 3, demonstrating that both service delivery and governance credibility are linked to favourable perceptions of Nigeria–Saudi relations, with accountability showing the stronger bivariate association.

3.2.5 Regression Analysis

A multiple regression assessed the predictive effects of welfare and accountability on perceived bilateral relations. The model was significant, $F(2, 397)$

$= 140.40$, $p < 0.001$, with $R^2 = 0.414$, indicating that the two predictors explained 41.4% of the variance in diplomatic perceptions. Both were significant predictors (see Table 4.3): a one-point increase in welfare satisfaction increased the bilateral-relations score by 0.381 ($p < 0.001$), while a one-point increase in accountability raised it by 0.460 ($p < 0.001$). Standardized coefficients ($\beta = 0.387$ for welfare; $\beta = 0.520$ for accountability) show that accountability exerts a moderately stronger effect. Consistent with Soft Power Theory — which posits that credible governance enhances international influence — the findings suggest that improvements in both service delivery and transparency during Hajj can strengthen Nigeria’s image in Saudi interactions. This addresses Objectives 2 and 3 by quantifying the relative contributions of governance credibility and welfare quality to diplomatic outcomes.

Table 3.4: Regression of Perceived Bilateral Relations on Welfare and Accountability (N=400).

Predictor	B (Unstd.)	SE	Standardized β	p-value
(Constant)	0.040	0.172	–	0.818
Welfare Services (avg.)	0.381	0.038	0.387	< 0.001
Accountability (avg.)	0.460	0.034	0.520	< 0.001

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Overall, the data reveal that Nigerian pilgrims’ experiences with NAHCON’s services are moderately positive on welfare but less positive on accountability. Importantly, improved welfare and transparency are both associated with stronger perceived bilateral ties. These findings address the research questions: respondents generally find NAHCON’s welfare services only somewhat adequate, and accountability measures lacking, which helps explain why many do not feel Nigeria’s Hajj management fully enhances its diplomatic leverage. The significant regression results, however, confirm that when pilgrims do perceive high welfare and accountability, they also perceive better Nigeria–Saudi relations. This supports the thesis that effective pilgrimage management contributes to Nigeria’s soft power and public diplomacy in the Muslim world.

3.3 Qualitative Findings (Document and Media Review)

The qualitative evidence from documents and media reports provides nuanced insights into pilgrims’ welfare experiences, institutional accountability, and external perceptions of Hajj operations. Pilgrim welfare narratives were highly mixed: while some 2025 accounts praised NAHCON for decent food, proximity to holy sites, and effective medical deployment (Peoples Gazette, 2025), others, particularly in 2024, lamented poor-quality meals, overcrowded lodgings, and inadequate sanitation (Tribune Online Nigeria, 2024). Health services also drew divergent assessments. Although some pilgrims reported prompt care, civil society monitors highlighted failures, including undetected high-risk cases and under-resourced clinics,

exposing gaps between official provisions and lived realities (TVC News Nigeria, 2025; Dawn Herald, 2025). These findings illustrate how welfare and healthcare directly affect morale, satisfaction, and trust in pilgrimage administration.

NAHCON leadership reflections corroborate many of these concerns. Senior officials, including the chairman, acknowledged systemic governance and financing challenges, calling for reforms to strengthen fiscal integrity and transparency (Premium Times, 2025; The Guardian Nigeria, 2025). Leadership responses to accountability issues, such as clarifying EFCC investigations or attributing service lapses to Saudi mutawwif contractors, demonstrate both defensive and reformist stances (Premium Times, 2024; New Telegraph Nigeria, 2023). Such admissions align with survey findings on institutional trust deficits and reinforce accountability as a central theme in the Nigeria–Saudi Hajj relationship.

Saudi authorities, by contrast, offered generally positive assessments. Official statements emphasized that Hajj 2025 was “incident-free” and well managed under Saudi leadership, without explicitly evaluating Nigeria’s contingent (The Guardian Nigeria, 2025; Nigerian Observer, 2025). While not country-specific, these declarations set high benchmarks of safety, orderliness, and compliance that indirectly frame expectations for Nigeria’s participation. Nigeria’s performance is thus judged against Saudi standards of operational excellence, underscoring the diplomatic

stakes of effective welfare and accountability management.

Civil society and religious observers provided critical counterpoints. Independent Hajj Reporters (IHR) acknowledged improvements in food quality and logistics in 2025 but simultaneously flagged persistent gaps, including medical oversights, inadequate security vetting, and logistical inefficiencies (TVC News Nigeria, 2025). Religious leaders added a moral and symbolic dimension, reminding pilgrims that their conduct abroad directly shapes Nigeria’s global image (Vanguard Nigeria, 2025). These perspectives reinforce the study’s broader argument: beyond logistics, welfare and accountability in Hajj operations serve as instruments of soft diplomacy, with implications for Nigeria’s reputation and bilateral engagement with Saudi Arabia.

3.4 Discussion of Findings

The study shows that Nigerian pilgrims expressed moderate satisfaction with welfare services, with mean ratings of 3.4–3.5 across accommodation, feeding, transportation, medical care, and orientation. While improvements such as timely transport and the introduction of digital wristbands were acknowledged, recurring challenges—including poor food quality, overcrowding, and gaps in medical support—remain significant. These mixed outcomes suggest that sustained improvements in welfare provision are essential for strengthening Nigeria’s reputation and credibility in its Hajj engagements with Saudi Arabia.

In contrast, accountability mechanisms received weaker ratings (mean ≈ 3.1), particularly in cost transparency, fund management, and grievance redress. Statistical analysis demonstrated that accountability ($\beta = 0.520$) exerted a stronger effect on Nigeria’s perceived diplomatic standing than welfare ($\beta = 0.387$). This finding underscores that governance credibility and financial integrity are more critical than welfare outcomes alone in shaping bilateral trust. Supporting

qualitative evidence from media and civil society reports reinforced this point, highlighting how controversies such as mismanaged subsidies undermine NAHCON’s institutional image.

The correlation analysis further confirmed that both welfare ($r = 0.379$) and accountability ($r = 0.514$) are positively associated with stronger Nigeria–Saudi relations. Operational reforms, including the deployment of the e-Hajj portal and successful negotiations for quota restoration in 2023, demonstrate how improved governance and service delivery can enhance diplomatic outcomes. However, incidents such as the ₦90 billion subsidy controversy illustrate the fragility of these gains, as governance lapses quickly erode diplomatic goodwill despite welfare improvements.

Overall, the findings highlight that welfare and accountability are mutually reinforcing dimensions of Hajj management. Welfare improvements, if not backed by transparency and credible oversight, cannot secure sustainable diplomatic leverage. The evidence therefore supports a dual-track approach, where service quality and governance accountability are pursued simultaneously as the most effective strategy for NAHCON to enhance Nigeria’s bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia.

3.5 Proposed Framework for Strengthening Nigeria–Saudi Bilateral Relations through Pilgrims’ Welfare and Accountability under Vision 2030

This study proposes a framework that positions the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) to enhance pilgrims’ welfare and accountability mechanisms while aligning with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 reforms. The framework is designed to bridge identified gaps in governance, transparency, and diplomatic leverage, ensuring that Nigeria not only manages pilgrimage logistics but also deploys Hajj as a tool of soft power and foreign policy engagement.

Strategic intent	Vision 2030 frames Hajj/Umrah as drivers of economic diversification, soft power, and religious tourism.	NAHCON seen mainly as a logistics/welfare body. Diplomacy role underutilized; bilateral leverage weakened by governance gaps.	Reframe Hajj as part of Nigeria’s religious diplomacy & soft power strategy; integrate Hajj into foreign policy and tourism planning.
Pilgrim welfare (service quality)	“Guests of Allah” program → seamless transport, upgraded housing, strong health care. KPI-driven service monitoring.	Pilgrims rated welfare services moderately (means ≈ 3.4 – 3.5). Strengths: transport, orientation. Weaknesses: food, accommodation, healthcare overcrowding.	Adopt minimum quality standards for feeding, accommodation, and healthcare. Benchmark NAHCON KPIs against Vision 2030 “guest experience” indicators.
Accountability & transparency	High transparency in financing; Vision 2030 pushes digitization and governance reforms.	Weakest area: mean ≈ 3.1 across cost transparency, refunds, fund accounting. Scandals (e.g., ₦90bn subsidy mismanagement) eroded trust. Accountability had strongest	Enforce annual independent audits + real-time disclosure of fares, refunds, fund flows. Institutionalize grievance redress with clear SLAs.

		link to bilateral credibility ($\beta = 0.520$).	
Digital transformation	Nusuk unified platform, biometric visas, smart passes, AI crowd management.	NAHCON has e-Hajj portal & wristbands, but usage is inconsistent; many processes remain manual; pilgrims rated digitization efforts as uneven.	Fully digitize pilgrim journey: payments, orientation, complaints, health alerts—integrated with Nusuk and Nigerian biometric systems.
Diplomatic leverage	Vision 2030 uses Hajj as soft power, strengthening Saudi global influence.	Study shows welfare ($\beta=0.387$) and accountability ($\beta=0.520$) improve Nigeria's perceived standing, but pilgrims remain skeptical of impact.	NAHCON should treat pilgrim experience as a diplomatic resource—use annual satisfaction surveys as negotiation tools in quota & service talks.
Financial sustainability	Saudi invests via PPPs and sovereign funds to expand Hajj infrastructure.	Nigeria relies on pilgrim payments + occasional subsidies; fragmented financial governance	Partner with Nigerian banks, airlines, and hospitality providers to co-finance key logistics (accommodation, transport, catering), reducing overreliance on pilgrim payments and government subsidies.
Continuous improvement	Annual public Hajj review reports tied to Vision 2030 KPIs.	NAHCON conducts reviews, but mostly internal; weak follow-up and low transparency.	Publish annual Hajj performance scorecard (welfare, accountability, finance, diplomacy) to Presidency, Parliament, and public.

Sources: Arab News (2023); Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016); Ministry of Hajj & Umrah (2025); Punch (2024); Premium Times (2024); Usman, Okwoli, & Abdullahi (2025); Vision 2030 Pilgrim Experience Program (2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the critical role of pilgrim welfare and accountability in shaping Nigeria–Saudi Arabia bilateral relations within the context of Hajj administration. Drawing on international relations theories such as Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Accountability, the research demonstrated that Hajj management extends beyond logistics and is a vital instrument of foreign policy and diplomacy. Evidence from survey data, documentary analysis, and literature confirmed that accountability mechanisms exert a stronger influence than welfare on Nigeria's credibility with Saudi Arabia and the wider Muslim community. This finding highlights the centrality of transparent financial practices, independent audits, and responsive grievance systems in strengthening Nigeria's diplomatic standing.

The study makes several contributions to knowledge. First, it provides empirical evidence linking pilgrim welfare and accountability to Nigeria's diplomatic influence in Saudi Arabia, an area previously dominated by descriptive or anecdotal accounts. Second, it advances a Vision 2030–aligned governance framework for NAHCON, integrating welfare, financial transparency, digitalization, and diplomacy into a single model. This offers both scholars and policymakers a structured approach for evaluating Hajj administration as an instrument of international relations.

Like all research, this study has limitations. Data collection was confined to Nigerian pilgrims and

NAHCON stakeholders, which may not fully capture Saudi perspectives or regional variations among other Hajj-sending countries. In addition, while statistical analysis identified significant correlations, the study did not quantify the long-term economic implications of improved welfare and accountability. Future research should expand beyond Nigeria by conducting comparative studies with other Hajj missions (e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan) to identify transferable best practices.

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