

Evaluation of Social Media Strategies of Public Relations Units of Tertiary Institutions in Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate and evaluate the social media strategies of public relations (PR) units of tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the social media strategies employed by these institutions; to investigate the metrics or indicators they use to evaluate the effectiveness of their social media engagement in PR practice; and to identify the challenges encountered by them in the course of implementing their social media strategies. To achieve these objectives, the study utilised the uses and gratifications theory as well as the technology acceptance theory (TAM) and also adopted survey research design, using questionnaire as its only and major data-gathering instrument. Copies of the structured questionnaire were administered to 165 PR practitioners, social media administrators, and communication officers in selected institutions in Akwa Ibom State, using a purposive sampling approach, on an average of eighteen (18) copies per institution. Main findings outlined that institutions successfully engage the public on most social media platforms and customize their updates to get maximum engagement, but were slowed down by lack of access to collective measures, inefficient skilled individuals, and high growth rate on social media platforms. Conclusion drawn was that efficient comprehension of quantitative and qualitative measures is mostly important in measuring social media campaigns in PR. In light of these findings, organisations are recommended to develop customized social media strategies with extensive use of high-level analytics and implement frequent training for employees to enhance their online communications skills, encourage stakeholders to participate, and stay up to date with the fast-evolving social media environment.

Keywords: Social media, strategies, public relations practice, tertiary institutions, Nigeria.

Introduction

Rapid development in the technologies of communications has hugely shifted the practice of public relations (PR) over the years with social media stepping up as an instrumental platform to interact, monitor reputation, and spread information. Businesses and institutions today employ all forms of social media platforms which include Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram and LinkedIn for connecting with target audiences, communication, and relationships building, reflective of the realignment of established PR methods and newer interactive modes (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2019, p. 45). As a direct result, the strategies used in PR practice need to change to leverage the power of these platforms optimally. It is

crucial to know how PR practitioners can assess their strategies in the context of social media to ensure effective communication and ultimately meet organisational goals (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2020, p. 118).

The pervasiveness of social media has revolutionised the communication dynamics; information sharing is no longer the exclusive domain of institutions and businesses. Rather, audiences have become more engaged, initiating discussions and framing narratives. This culture of participation necessitates that PR practitioners adopt a flexible approach, incorporating social media metrics into their strategy (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2020, p.67). Evaluating social media strategies is important to practitioners because it gives feedback on audience interactions, sentiment analysis, and the effectiveness of a campaign (Ferguson, 2022, p.213). Furthermore, evaluation tools enable PR professionals to gauge the effectiveness of their communication work, and adjust as necessary in real-time for the proper alignment with their organisational objectives.

Against these advancements, the role of a powerful social media strategy cannot be overemphasised. Developing a strategy that appeals to the target audience in tune with corporate values is a multidimensional challenge for PR practitioners (Chun, Lee, & Kim, 2021, p. 155). The growing complexity of social media ecosystems highlights the importance of an in-depth evaluation framework that can help practitioners comprehend the efficacy of their strategies. This question goes beyond just metrics, examining qualitative elements of social media interaction, such as trust, authenticity, and community involvement (Keller, 2023, p. 78). With social media increasingly shaping public opinion, the place of PR in controlling these perceptions takes center stage.

In the meantime, incorporation of social media strategy into broader PR practice necessitates critical examination of current literature and frameworks. There have been numerous studies trying to explain the social media use and PR results, but there are still gaps in knowing the effectiveness of certain approaches in different sectors (Sevigny & Moorman, 2023, p. 92). Assessing the performance of social media strategies covers many aspects, ranging from the quality of content and audience engagement to ROI and brand loyalty (Holliman & Rowley, 2019, p. 312). Carrying out reflective analysis on such factors enables the practitioners to adjust their practices and make sure their work is effective and cost-effective.

In order to have successful evaluation of social media strategy, the practitioners must address it as a comprehensive situation wherein they embed complications of content launching and understanding their audience (Baciu, 2023, p. 105). Social media including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn present distinct characteristics and population reach with each of these social media types, thus needing platform-based approaches that align within certain categories of audiences (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2019, p. 682). That suggests good PR methods are not homogeneous; they tailor to the features of a platform as well as consumer trends. As such, continued R&D is critical in this case in order to actualise the mixed effects of differing tactics between platforms (Kumar, 2022, p. 134).

The interactivity on social media centers on effective two-way communication in PR. People's participation in useful conversation constructs a community and sense of belongingness, and finally, builds brand loyalty (Khan & Malhotra, 2021, p. 56). Social media efforts centered on dialogue instead of monologue will tend to succeed, as it invites stakeholders to comment and take part. Learning to construct and sustain such conversations becomes valuable during the evaluation process, which allows PR professionals to gauge the opinion of the audience and respond by adjusting their messages (Sun, 2023, p. 192). This deliberate inclusion of audience understanding in the evaluation process helps practitioners build stronger stakeholder relationships.

Systematic evaluation frameworks for social media planning in PR practice make continuous improvement and adaptation of strategies possible. There are different models to assess the performance of social media engagement, each with its own insights into performance metrics (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020, p. 267). Performance indicators like key performance indicators (KPIs) of engagement rates, reach, impressions, and conversion metrics are essential tools for practitioners to measure their campaigns numerically (Sokolova & Koval, 2022, p. 48). Still, as has been pointed out before, no consideration should be given to purely qualitative engagement properties because they shed much light upon audience perception and affective appeal toward the brand (Holliman & Rowley, 2019, p. 315). This necessitates multifaceted approach combining quantitative along with qualitative indications. Against this backdrop, this study aims to investigate the evaluation of social media PR strategies by Nigerian tertiary institutions. The research seeks to investigate the level of social media adoption and evaluation among Nigerian tertiary institutions, strategies employed, methods used, and challenges encountered in the process.

Statement of the Problem

The public relations practice is often generally known to refer to the promotion and establishment of sustained rapport and goodwill between a person, group, firm, or institution and other persons. In order to achieve this, public relations, in its true sense, abhor guess work, as well as trial and error; but embraces thorough planning whose process begins with fact-finding (situation analysis) and ends with another phase of fact-finding (evaluation/assessment of results). This, thus places a mandatory responsibility on organisations to always perceive and practise public relations as a cyclically-organised programme of continuous activity.

It is assumed that a public relations department and/unit exists in each of the selected tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State to help drive the institutions' relationships and engagements with their various internal and external publics. It is also assumed that in the past couple of years, these PR departments or units have consciously taken advantage of the global technological development and advancement by employing or utilising some social media devices and platforms in their public relations practice.

However, what is not very certain has to do with the specific social media platforms they use in carrying out their PR practice, the kinds of social media strategies they employ, and

whether they often see the need for evaluation of results of the social media strategies they adopt in their PR practice. These and lots more are the probing issues which this is poised to investigate and unravel.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

- (i) To examine the social media strategies employed by tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State in their public relations (PR) practice.
- (ii) To investigate the metrics or indicators used by tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State to evaluate the effectiveness of their social media engagement in PR practice.
- (iii) To identify the challenges encountered by tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State in the course of implementing their social media strategies

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised:

- (i) What social media strategies are employed by tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State in their public relations (PR) practice?
- (ii) What metrics or indicators do tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State use to evaluate the effectiveness of their social media engagement in PR practice?
- (iii) What challenges do tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State encounter in implementing their social media strategies?

Literature Review

Social Media Strategies: With a fast-changing digital environment, the importance of highly effective social media plans cannot be downplayed since they provide an important cornerstone for companies, organisations, and individuals who want to raise their on-line presence. Current research demonstrates that more than 4.4 billion individuals across the planet are regular users of social media, representing an unparalleled platform for communication and interaction (Statista, 2023). It is not just a matter of the platforms' selection but also has the in-depth procedures for producing content, connecting with the audience, monitoring analytics, and crisis management on the selected platforms. The development of such a plan is more than a list. It needs close understanding of the audience to be addressed, the nature of each platform, and the constantly changing trends of the social media landscape (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). Having a good social media strategy enables one to maintain consistent branding, build a loyal customer base, and gain useful feedback, which can contribute a great deal towards making business decisions.

Companies can enhance their customer care, perform market research, and establish channels for direct communication with their viewers when they adopt these strategies (Tuten & Solomon, 2021). Additionally, contemporary marketing strategies focus on an integrated system of work where social media campaigns are consolidated into overarching marketing objectives. Besides increasing the branding image, it also sustains stakeholder engagement. Therefore, social media evolved from a casual contact vehicle to a powerful platform for formalized marketing and group formation.

Understanding the Target Audience: A core aspect of successful social media strategies turns around a complete identification of the audience. Knowing who the audience is—demographically and psychographically allows brands to customize their messages and content communication. Research as presented by Smith (2020) identifies how the creation of audience personas contributes to developing a strategy that aligns well with the intended audiences. Personas capture the key traits of age, gender, interests, and social media behavior, creating a more precise picture of possible customers (Freeman, 2021). Going further with audience analysis is to use tools like social listening to measure sentiment and conversation taking place about a brand or an industry.

This gives immediate feedback on consumer need and areas of discomfort (Chaffey, 2022). Supported by qualitative data, quantitative analysis data can facilitate full understanding of audience behavior. For example, data indicating busiest times of day to post can assist with setting posting time, thus maximizing visibility and engagement (Bleistein, 2023). Audience segmentation cannot be overemphasized because even subtle messaging within various segments can increase the stakes of relevance and engagement, thus leading to an increased likelihood of conversions. In examining audience engagement, it is necessary to remember that social media is all about interaction, conversation, and community as compared to broadcasting.

Developing an open forum where criticism is invited and responded to encourages trust and loyalty (Bennett, 2023). Interacting with the audience via polls, Q&A, and user-generated content forces brands to innovate on a constant basis and stay true to consumer wants. Therefore, profound audience understanding becomes the cornerstone upon which effective social media campaigns are built.

Platform Selection and Optimisation: With so many social media channels to choose from today, selecting the proper channels is a strategic decision and should be taken seriously. All channels cater to various demographics, user activities, and content types. For instance, Instagram and TikTok are favored for visual-centric content, whereas Twitter specializes in concise communications and text-based engagement (Khan, 2022). There is no one-size-fits-all best strategy that will work for everyone, citing the imperative of platform choice segregation according to audience analysis. Moreover, optimization of content on each platform is required. Canva (2023) attests that posts should be modified to accommodate stylistic and functional variations on each platform because not only does it heighten engagement levels but also aids in a favorable user experience. Utilizing a social network's distinct features, i.e., Instagram stories or Twitter threads, makes content new and engaging. Different types such as videos, infographics, or carousel posts add more facets to social media strategies (Edwards, 2023). Planner-managed platforms are an additional place-based optimization factor which needs to be highlighted in special cases.

Aggregated feedbacks from analytics can be employed to narrate the best times to post to maximize coverage. Buffer and Hootsuite, among others, give general insights into social media activity so that brands can adjust their posting schedules accordingly with user feedback data (Sweeney, 2024). The ability to switch and analyze frequently is an important

factor in keeping up with changing social media environments, towards the realization that platform choice and optimization has a direct effect on overall effectiveness in strategy.

Content Creation and Storytelling: At the heart of successful social media campaigns is thoughtful content that informs and resonates with the public. In this era of technology where consumers receive many messages, authentic, appealing, and worth-while content stands out as a winner (Ferguson, 2022). Developing appealing stories through narrations not only captures attention but also creates an emotional connection to the brand (Holt, 2019). Effective storytelling also incorporates aspects that resonate with the mission, vision, and values of the brand, projecting a cohesive identity through channels.

Visual content is especially powerful in today's social media landscape. Research indicates that posts with images gain 650% more engagement than those with text (Baird & Parasnis, 2019). Incorporating quality visuals in the form of images, videos, or infographics is therefore imperative. Besides, video watching, particularly short videos, is very popular now, with consumers looking for bite-sized content. The increasing prevalence of platforms like TikTok testifies to this, with the need for brands to keep pace with changing consumer behaviors (Hollis, 2023).

Besides, having consistent posting frequencies and content types enhances brand recognition and credibility. Brands should develop an editorial calendar to design and schedule their content in an equal balance of promotional, instructional, and fun posts (Davis, 2021). Communication with the public through live streaming, behind-the-scenes, and interactive content induces a sense of belongingness and community, leading the consumer to feel heard and valued. Though repeatedly monitoring content performance based on measurements helps to tune strategies in advance, making it so that content responds to listeners' tastes (Noble, 2023).

Engagement and Community Building: Social media marketing utilisation of engagement extends far beyond a share or like. Developing an active community needs real interaction, where conversations are prioritised over monologues. As noted by Hall (2019), the brands that interact with users genuinely establish loyalty and trust. The interaction can take place in many forms, from responding to users through comments to the sharing of user-generated content and posting relevant posts that trigger conversations.

User-generated content is a powerful strategy in social media frameworks. Brands can encourage people to share experiences with products or services, hence creating a culture of ownership and belonging (Burke, 2023). In the guise of contests, challenges, or simple reminders, user-generated content not only constitutes a form of social proof but also increases brand visibility. To respond to and engage with such content creates a culture of sharing, where consumers feel more invested in the brand.

Additionally, community management is crucial when it comes to relationship building. Active moderation of discussions, complaints resolved swiftly, and thought leadership on industry issues can turn a brand into a thought leader (Green, 2022). Creating niches on

social media platforms can also lead to more community engagement, as individual groups or forums allow for discussion where the members feel comfortable providing recommendations and building relationships. Use of interactive content such as polls, quizzes, and live Q&A can also provide higher chances of engagement. Interactive content has been determined by research to facilitate higher user interaction and retention (López, 2023). Thus, the use of interactive features in social media marketing not only provides engagement but is also an effective way of getting an idea of the audience's preferred choice and habit.

Monitoring Analytics and Performance: Systematic analytics monitoring is at the heart of social media strategy, and insights gleaned can be applied to inform decision-making and drive strategic change. The digital world is data-hungry, and intelligent use of it turns raw data into actionable intelligence (Chaffey, 2022). Engagement rates, reach, conversion rates, and audience demographics create a multiplex image of performance, enabling brands to know what works and what doesn't. Tools like Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, and Sprout Social enable brands to track performance across different social media platforms (Smith, 2021). Brands use identification of trends and patterns in such metrics for adjusting strategy accordingly based on real-time identification of shifts in audience engagement. Analysis has to be anything but an isolated occurrence; it has to be an ongoing process in order to make constant refining and optimizing possible in the execution of strategy.

Besides that, knowledge of certain key performance indicators (KPIs) is necessary to be used as measures of success against. Whatever the brand awareness, customer acquisition, or generation of sales may be, knowing the appropriate KPIs ensures efforts focused toward higher business objectives (Davis, 2023). Checking on these KPIs periodically keeps the team accountable, and also it defines where strategic support is needed.

The necessity of benchmarking performance with industry best practices cannot be understated. Competitor analysis allows brands to comprehend their performance in relation to competitors within the same industry and areas of falling behind or where they can innovate (Sweeney, 2024). Hence, the use of analytics is imperative in providing more specific and not generic, but data-driven and results-oriented campaigns on social media.

Crisis Management in Social Media: In a publicly inherent setting such as social media, crisis management must be a core consideration in social media planning. The speed at which information spreads can have severe brand reputation implications. For Coombs (2020), a speedy and transparent response can pre-empt damage and protect the integrity of the brand in case of a crisis. The development of a comprehensive crisis management plan equips brands to respond effectively during times of duress, minimizing the chances of permanent damage.

An important early crisis management practice is monitoring the sentiment on social media in order to identify the potential issues when they are about to turn into full-fledged crises. The use of software for sentiment analysis can help the brands recognise bad trends or

reviews, thus reacting in a timely manner (Burke, 2023). Having established practices for crisis communications like designated speakers and pre-authorized messaging ensures a coherent and clear reaction.

Communication strategies need to be transparency and accountability focused, acknowledging the crisis and assuring stakeholders that efforts are underway to manage the crisis. Speaking directly to the audience in posts or real-time videos can evoke a sense of empathy and reassurance (Grady, 2023). Additionally, there is a need to analyze and look into the crisis once it has happened to learn critical lessons for readiness in the future. After-action reviews provide an insight into how effective the response strategy was, identifying strengths and weaknesses (Ivancevich, 2024). Thus, a proactive approach to crisis management can allow brands to handle issues effectively, maintaining brand trust and ensuring customer loyalty.

PR Practice in Nigeria

Public Relations (PR) in Nigeria has also been evolving due to many socio-political, economic, and cultural forces that impact its practice. From the practice of conventional communication, the practice of PR in Nigeria has seen its practice drastically change, driven by the growth of digital technology, globalisation of communication, as well as increasing importance of stakeholder engagement (Iweala, 2021, p. 45). In the era of today, with information dissemination as fast as lightning, the sustainability of PR strategies can be determining for organisations and individuals alike when it comes to trying to forge good public images. Such an environment demands PR practitioners in Nigeria to continuously adapt to changing situations while maintaining organisational images intact and forging effective relationships with their stakeholders (Adebayo, 2022, p. 102).

An understanding of the history of PR practice in Nigeria shows how colonial legacy, indigenous communication patterns, and post-colonial politics influenced current practice (Abosedo, 2019, p. 65). Nigerian communication has always taken cues from indigenous traditions and oral stories, a good foundation upon which current PR practice has developed (Obarisiagbon, 2020, p. 78). Consequently, PR practitioners must now integrate such cultural elements into contemporary methods for furthering sharpening engagement policies within a multi-tiered society context (Ademola, 2023, p. 122). Introducing domestic cultures to international practices of PR raises new dilemmas while presenting at the same time possibilities of groundbreaking strategies designed for the Nigerian masses.

The efficiency of communication in Nigeria equally depends on the ability to grasp different segments in Nigeria's society. Nigeria's ethnic complexity creates a unique challenge for PR professionals who must know the subtleties of diverse cultural environments (Okoro, 2023, p. 134). Crafting PR messages that will strike a chord in a diverse group requires a very high level of cultural sensitivity and awareness. Therefore, practitioners have to carry out extensive market studies and audience profiling to identify crucial cultural references, values, and communication styles to inform their efforts (Eze, 2022, p. 77). Such research allows PR campaigns to appeal to the social norms, thereby making them more effective as

a whole and permitting messages to be heard positively by different segments of the population.

In the modern digital age, social media has become an inevitable tool for PR professionals in Nigeria. The extensive use of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn provide an ease of communication in real-time and building interactive engagement between organisations and their stakeholders (Nwachukwu & Oni, 2022, p. 88). The revolution has not only widened the reach of PR messages but also empowered consumers through giving them a platform to speak out and demand transparency (Kadiri, 2023, p. 102). Consequently, organisations are under pressure to report to their publics and tirelessly curate their online presence in order to meet the expectations of an increasingly digitally literate marketplace (Udo, 2022, p. 56). PR experts must now approach the question strategically about how one should leverage such digital channels effectively to not merely promote their organisations but also engineer conversations that shall establish trust as well as allegiance.

Crisis communication is another crucial area of PR practice in Nigeria. The complexity of socio-political issues such as corruption, violence, and unemployment mean organisations are confronted with crises that will ruin their reputation and undermine stakeholder trust (Akanbi, 2024, p. 47). The role of PR in crisis management is critical, and practitioners are called upon to design comprehensive strategies comprising preparation, response, and recovery (Alabi, 2023, p. 99). Effective crisis communication is founded on timely responses that effectively convey information and exhibit empathy towards affected stakeholders (Nwosu, 2021, p. 122). Furthermore, transparency in crisis communication prevents reputational damage and restores public trust, highlighting the need for organisations to develop pre-emptive communication strategies that address potential challenges before they occur.

The legal framework of PR practice in Nigeria also needs thorough examination. The practice is informed by a variety of laws and ethical principles intended to uphold the integrity of communication and protect the rights of the public (Ogunyemi, 2023, p. 110). Organisations must be aware of the legal implications of their communications, conforming to rules such as the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) guidelines and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) regulations (Olofin, 2024, p. 78). Therefore, PR practitioners must understand such laws to be able to craft strategies not only to market their organisations but to do it lawfully and avoid potential blunders that would be caused due to misunderstanding or otherwise (Idris, 2022, p. 34).

Building relationships and networking form the very core of good PR practice in Nigeria. Establishing and maintaining relationships with the most significant stakeholders—like the media, government, and community leaders—is essential to successful PR campaigns (Ilebani, 2023, p. 88). PR practitioners must establish networks that facilitate information and resource sharing, developing cooperative partnerships that can enhance their organisations' public visibility and reputation (Okon, 2024, p. 93). It is through strategic networking that PR professionals are able to harness the influence of various stakeholders

such that they are able to maximize campaign coverage and enable alignment with the interests of the public (Umoh & Nwogbo, 2023, p. 100). Besides that, content creation has emerged as an essential part of Nigerian PR practice fueled by increasing competition in the communications sector (Bello, 2023, p. 55). Developing interesting, relevant, and informative content allows organisations to convey their value propositions as they react to the interests of their audiences (Chukwu, 2019, p. 48). Focus on multimedia, imagery, and narrative content is presently at the forefront of engaging people in a period of oversupply marketplace (Ibrahim, 2022, p. 70). PR professionals must remain current with trends in content, employing innovative methods that resonate with their target audiences for the purposes of initiating debate and discussion, thus promoting their organisations' reputation and image (Okwu, 2024, p. 27).

The second determining factor is the effect of analytics to guide PR practices in the Nigerian context. Through data analytics, PR practitioners can know audience behavior and interests, leading to evidence-based decision-making (Onyeji, 2023, p. 85). Quantitative and qualitative measures of PR campaign performance enable ongoing analysis and adjustment of strategies (Daniel, 2022, p. 53). Deep campaign performance analysis keeps the practitioners abreast of audience interaction levels, ultimately determining future operations and adapting to market direction (Obi, 2024, p. 76). Thus, use of analytics in PR operations not only raises accountability but also results in optimisation of resource application.

Lastly, the PR practice in Nigeria in the future will be subject to even greater levels of technology integration, increased focus on sustainability, and an even greater need for corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Ogunyemi, 2024, p. 94). As stakeholders become increasingly aware of social and environmental issues, organisations are expected to highlight their commitment to sustainable practice more widely (Ugochukwu, 2023, p. 49). PR professionals should therefore develop strategies that project genuine CSR efforts, emphasizing transparency and accountability in their public dealings (Adesanya, 2022, p. 30). A strategic PR response to sustainability programmes will therefore only make the reputations of brands stronger and further improve stakeholder relationships.

Evaluation of Social Media Strategies in PR Practice by Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

The use of social media in public relations practice has become a key element for Nigerian tertiary institutions, especially in the contemporary digital era. Social media sites are efficient communication tools through which institutions can engage effectively with stakeholders, including students, parents, alumni, and the broader community. The rapid development of social media platforms has prompted these institutions to re-examine their traditional PR approaches, taking steps that utilise the capabilities of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Adebayo & Odewale, 2020, p. 112). This discussion will outline how Nigerian tertiary institutions use social media to enhance their public relations objectives, their effectiveness, and the challenges they face in utilizing these media.

Employing a social media strategic plan enables institutions to establish a distinctive brand identity, encourage community engagement, and enhance their image. The focus to create

content that has value for the interests and needs of various stakeholders forms the pillar of good PR practice (Ojo & Sulaimon, 2021, p. 87). Engaging stories, graphical content, and interactive posts provide a sense of connectedness and belongingness among the members of the audience. Organisations that prioritise content marketing strategies on social media are likely to receive more visibility, which allows them to attract prospective students and retain existing ones with strong engagement (Ogunleye, 2019, p. 45). Perhaps most importantly, analytics usage can guide the adjustment of social media strategies, allowing organisations to make data-driven decisions in enhancing the level of engagement and response.

Extensive emphasis on face-to-face engagement with stakeholders has characterised the PR practice of Nigerian tertiary institutions. Organisations are increasingly utilising social media for two-way communication, encouragement of feedback, and dialogue (Daramola & Adebayo, 2022, p. 102). The immediacy of social media enables institutions to respond quickly to feedback, complaints, and inquiries and thus enhance customer satisfaction and institutional image. Responsiveness not only builds trust but also empowers stakeholders because they believe that their voices are heard. Successful PR efforts are founded upon active listening and responsiveness, and therefore social media is the best platform for institutions to humanise their brands and simultaneously communicate their value addition to the academic community (Nduka & Ojo, 2020, p. 71).

Taking a critical approach to the utilisation of social media strategies, there are issues that confront the effective utilisation of these media in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Specifically, one of the challenges involves the digital divide, where disparities in access to technology may prevent certain demographics from consuming institutional content (Okoh & Ugochukwu, 2021, p. 234). Institutions must work towards bridging the gap to facilitate equitable access to information and communication. Moreover, the rise of misinformation and fake news poses a risky threat to the reputation and credibility of the institutions. Institutions are therefore obliged to be proactive in demystifying the misconceptions and providing accurate information to their audiences (Irele & Nkiru, 2023, p. 16).

Also in contention is the issue of resource and expertise allocation within institutions. Social media engagement, to be successful, requires dedicated personnel and investment in finances, elements that are sometimes in limited supply in Nigerian educational institutions (Abubakar & Osunfisan, 2019, p. 119). Just as the online ecosystem continuously evolves, so does the need for ongoing training and capacity building for those responsible for maintaining social media accounts. Effective PR practice on social media relies on staff with the ability to manage the dynamics of digital communication strategies (Eze & Ogbo 2020, p. 97). An ongoing commitment to staff professional development can enable institutions to remain competitive and sensitive to advancements in the digital PR landscape.

Institutions cannot overstate the place of accountability and transparency in social media strategies being adopted by tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Stakeholders are increasingly demanding openness on the part of institutions, particularly regarding administrative processes and decision-making (Adesina & Butterworth, 2024, p. 23). Social media, when

properly utilised, can be a channel for disseminating open information and, in so doing, establish institutional credibility and stakeholder trust (Asogwa & Eze, 2024, p. 45). Open communication can prevent crises, facilitate stakeholder contribution, and ingrain a culture of engagement within citizens.

Effective social media activities, however, demand effective monitoring and evaluation systems. A continuous process of assessment is vital in ascertaining the success of PR efforts on social media in order to keep institutions at the level of stakeholders' expectations (Adetunji & Daramola, 2023, p. 56). Including tools that track engagement rates in terms of likes, shares, comments, and website traffic can assist in obtaining valuable information on the behaviors and preferences of the audience (Oni & Akinwande, 2021, p. 110). These revelations allow institutions to adjust their strategies, correcting weaknesses while taking advantage of successful practices.

Institutions which truly aspire to understand and monitor audience engagement also have a better degree of freedom in their PR agendas. Establishing agile principles allows institutions to respond appropriately to trends and audience taste shifts (Ojo & Ogunleye, 2023, p. 78). Constant stakeholder input also generates the culture of continual improvement, and the institution positions itself on the pedestal of a caring institution towards its audience. Furthermore, encouraging open dialogue can lead to the development of initiatives that resonate with stakeholders, creating shared value and sense of belonging.

Moreover, the use of storytelling in PR practice cannot be avoided. Organisations making use of the use of stories are able to establish engaging content that unites individuals and cultivates loyalty (Eze & Ume, 2022, p. 134). The creation of stories that encompass institutional values, successes, and goals not only nurtures image but also reinforces deeper emotional relationships with stakeholders. Such narratives encourage brand loyalty because future students will relate to the values of an organisation through powerful narrative channels (Uche & Ojo, 2021, p. 230). Such narratives can also be reinforced through the utilisation of multimedia platforms such as video, infographics, and photographs to further enhance impact.

No less important is how crises are handled within the social media platform. Sound crisis communication practice is of critical importance since organisations steer clear of possible faux pas or crises. In times of crisis, prompt effective open communication is one key strategy against negative attitudes (Adekoya & Irele, 2023, p. 29). Therefore, communicating specially with the public during the time can assist in authenticating stakeholders of efforts being undertaken in managing the issue, thereby achieving credibility and trust. Social media provides a first-hand stage for the institutions to pre-act and not act, invoking correct communication that negates disinformation.

Besides, stakeholder segmentation is more significant since it becomes a relevant driver in social media strategy formulation. Institutions must consider different constituencies, such as prospective students, parents, alumni, employees, and donors, in communication messaging plans (Afolabi & Adeyemo, 2023, p. 89). Content optimization to the special

interests, needs, and desires of each stakeholder group presents best opportunity for involvement, enabling institutions to bring every audience into channel-specific communication. Segment messaging enables the creation of experiences that bring each group in touch with a sense of community.

With institutions building their PR programmes, collaboration among stakeholders is increasing. Cooperative efforts result in more diverse content production and collaborative decision-making, making partnership important in academic environments (Nwankwo & Eze, 2022, p. 64). Engaged alumni in social media programmes, for example, can provide authentic experiences emphasizing the institution's influence and sharing its extent through its alumni networks.

The evaluation of social media practice in PR practice in Nigerian tertiary institutions enlightens us about the dynamic nature of contemporary communication paradigms. Those institutions that embrace the power of social media can build relationships, enhance transparency, and establish credibility in an ever-changing digital landscape (Daramola & Ogunleye, 2024, p. 95). If organisations do not adapt to the digital age, they will lose opportunities and stakeholder confidence, eventually affecting institutional reputation and achievement. Thus, ongoing evaluation and refinement of social media strategies combined with a focus on stakeholder engagement will be essential as organisations move through the educational landscape of the present.

Theoretical Frameworks

The following theories were reviewed in this study:

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT); The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is a pivotal framework for understanding the motivations and needs of individuals who engage with social media platforms (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 2019, p. 23). This theory posits that individuals actively seek out media that satisfy their cognitive, affective, and social needs (Ruggiero, 2020, p. 15). According to the UGT, individuals use media to gratify their needs, which can be categorised into five main types: cognitive, affective, personal identity, social integrative, and tension release (McQuail, 2020, p. 120). In the context of social media, tertiary institutions in Nigeria can utilise various platforms to gratify these needs. For instance, social media can be used to provide cognitive information about the institution's programmes, research, and achievements (Asemah, 2020, p. 30). Social media can also be used to create an affective connection with the target audience, such as through the use of emotive storytelling and visuals (Chun, Lee, & Kim, 2021, p. 155).

Social media can be used to promote personal identity and social integrative needs, such as through the creation of online communities and forums where individuals can interact and share their experiences (Khan & Malhotra, 2021, p. 56). Tertiary institutions in Nigeria can also utilise social media to provide tension release, such as through the use of humour and entertainment (Sokolova & Koval, 2022, p. 48). By understanding the various needs of their target audience, tertiary institutions in Nigeria can develop effective social media strategies that gratify these needs and promote engagement. The UGT also highlights the importance of audience activity and selectivity in media use (Rubin, 2020, p. 67). In the context of social

media, this means that individuals actively select and engage with content that is relevant and meaningful to them. Tertiary institutions in Nigeria can utilise this concept to develop targeted social media content that resonates with their target audience. For instance, they can use social media analytics to identify the types of content that are most engaging to their audience and adjust their content strategy accordingly (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2019, p. 682). Meanwhile, the UGT emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and cultural context in which media use occurs (McQuail, 2020, p. 125).

In the context of social media strategies in PR practice by tertiary institutions in Nigeria, this means that these institutions must consider the social and cultural nuances of their target audience when developing their social media content. For instance, they must be aware of the cultural sensitivities and values of their audience and ensure that their content is respectful and relevant (Adebayo, 2021, p. 45).

Technology Acceptance Theory (TAM): Propounded and put forward by Fred Davis in 1986, the Technology Acceptance Theory (TAM) is viewed by many scholars as one of the most widely utilised models in the social sciences to explain the nexus in the acceptance and usage of new e-technology or e-services. That is to say, it is based on the belief that people's perception of the potential/likely usefulness derivable from a technology, as well as the ease-of-use thereof, ultimately helps in influencing their attitude and intention to adopt and use the technology (Charness & Boot, 2016).

According to the theory, the perceived usefulness (PU) refers to the degree or extent to which a user believes that using a specific system or technology would be beneficial to him/her. The perceived ease-of-use (PEOU), on the other hand, denotes the degree to which a user believes that using a given technology or system can be less stressfully or effortlessly done.

In relation to this study, the theory can be employed to explain the fact that the acceptability of social media/digital devices by, and among PR practitioners, social media administrators and communication officers in tertiary institutions of learning in Akwa Ibom State, or any other organisation for that matter in strategically carrying out their PR practices could largely depend on their perception of how the devices would maximally help in enhancing their job roles and efficiency of performance that could lead to attainment of unprecedented positive results. It also relates to the fact that acceptance or otherwise of the technological devices by/among them could be predicated upon the ease with which learning, understanding and operations of the devices or social media platforms can be attained for the purposes of strategically carrying out their PR practice.

Methodology

The survey research design was employed in this study to evaluate the social media strategies employed by PR practitioners in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. The population for this research was 165 PR practitioners, social media administrators, and communication officers in some chosen tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, which were: Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Heritage Polytechnic, University of Uyo, Akwa

Ibom State University, Federal Polytechnic, Ukana, Uyo City Polytechnic, Akwa Ibom State College of Education, Afaha Nsit, and Maritime Academy, Oron. Since the population was not a very large one, a census study was adopted. That is to say, the entire population was studied.

Questionnaire copies were sent to the selected respondents to get information on which social media sites are being used, how frequently they are used, whom they are using them for, and how effective these efforts are. Statistical tests, such as descriptive statistics, were utilised in the calculation of trends and relationships in the data that were gathered.

Discussion

Research Question One: What social media strategies are employed by tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State in their public relations (PR) practice?

An analysis of social media strategies employed by institutions of higher learning in Akwa Ibom State reveals a broad and active approach to enhancing public relations (PR) effectiveness. Particularly, institutions utilise sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn to facilitate engagement with students, alumni, and the public at large (Olaleye & Baiden, 2020). Evidence indicates that such platforms are significant channels of communication of information about academic programmes, institutional achievements, and activities, thereby building a positive reputation (Abubakar, 2021). It was found out in the study that institutions employ the strategy of segmenting their publics. In using this strategy, institutions actively seek out and divide their publics based on the level of their engagement, designing their messages to address particular issues and interests, which is in tandem with Grunig's (2019) view. Such segmentation strategies not only boost engagement levels but also help develop a feeling of belonging amongst stakeholders (Brodie et al., 2020). This is so because it encourages the diverse publics to actively participate and interact with the institutions on issues that affect them, thereby enhancing a two-way communication flow that breeds mutual understanding. Here, align with Omojola's (2022) view, institutions employing a more participatory and interactive method of communication are capable of achieving greater visibility as well as a more favourable public image.

Findings also indicated that the various institutions of higher learning employ the social media in their PR practice to strategically manage their corporate image and reputation; as well as to proactively address unforeseen crisis issues. Unveiling the benefit of such strategies, Oladapo and Ogunleye (2023, p. 32) said that real-time interaction in the form of webinars and live Q&A on such platforms has proven useful in fostering openness as well as trust between institutions and the general public. A comparative pattern of usage analysis suggests that while certain institutions utilise social media for promotion, others utilise it as a strategic means for crisis communication and reputation management (Johnson, 2023). Accordingly, it is possible to conclude that the discreet approach to social media strategies reflects the appreciation for the sophistication of public relations within the context of higher education. On the other hand, the influence of institutional culture on social media strategy formulation is also a significant issue. Institutions with cultures that promote open

communication and an openness to innovation will likely revise their PR programmes using effective social media use (Jibril, 2022). On the contrary, institutions with traditional strategies lag behind in fully realising the potential of these media. This aligns with the Change Management Theory, where it is highlighted that for an organisation to be capable of altering its communication methods hinges on its leadership and culture (Kotter, 2019). Engagement metrics also indicate that institutions that are capable of having a successful integration of social media into their PR efforts have increased loyalty of followers and community engagement (Okolie, 2021). The link between proactive participation and improved institutional image underscores the significance of social media as not just a tool, but more so as an integral part of modern public relations practice in Nigeria's education sector. In assessing these results, it is clear that social media strategies used by Nigerian higher learning institutions in their PR practice demonstrate a holistic appreciation of communication processes in the digital era.

The process of evolution in online discussions requires institutions not only to employ such media for their communication but also to conduct continuous review and analysis of their strategy in an attempt to remain current (Abbas, 2023). Hence, with institutions continually adjusting their social media strategy, a cyclical process of learning with the incorporation of stakeholder feedback and newer trends becomes imperative (Daramola, 2022). Implications of such approaches extend beyond information dissemination to the broader set of objectives such as recruitment of students, mobilisation of stakeholders, and crisis management.

Research Question Two: What metrics or indicators do tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State use to evaluate the effectiveness of their social media engagement in PR practice?

Measuring social media effects in public relations (PR) is a significant challenge for Nigerian universities. Social media campaign indicators applied to measure their successes are sophisticated in nature, typically comprising a mix of qualitative and quantitative parameters (Keller, 2022). Some examples of such points of departure are the likes, shares, comments, and retweets, which serve as fundamental measurements. These measures give an idea about the audience receptivity and an overall sense of how posted content is received (Davis, 2019). A large volume of literature accentuates the relevance of such metrics in the digital age today, as user engagement remains a stand-in for message resonance and institutional prestige (Zhou, 2023). Furthermore, the prevalence of visual content on social media underscores the need for institutions to adjust their metrics to include view counts of video content and infographics, further underscoring the impact of visual engagement on PR activities (Smith, 2020).

Apart from engagement numbers, Nigerian institutions are likely to incorporate reach and impressions as key metrics. Reach refers to the number of unique users who view a post, while impressions refer to the overall visibility of posts on user feeds (Obi, 2021). These give a clearer indication of how many individuals a campaign could be impacting. Looking at these metrics not only shows the scope of message dissemination but also helps in formulating further strategies aimed at raising visibility (Ajayi, 2022). Academic literature in the field suggests that greater reach extends institutional voice and authority to create a larger brand

narrative in the education sector (Alabi, 2023). Collectively, these indicators signal an astute perspective on social media effectiveness wherein the quantitative indicators appear essential to shaping strategic practice in PR.

Qualitative indicators, however, supplement the depth of social media effectiveness information through measures such as feedback from the audience and sentiment analysis, providing thick context to numeric data (Bassey, 2024). Institutions today, more than ever, use advanced tools for sentiment analysis to gauge public perception towards their brand stories and PR strategies. Positive emotions are typically related to greater stakeholder loyalty and institutional advocacy, which is why an institution needs to make a promise to manage their online reputation well (Ndukwe, 2023). In addition, qualitative comments gathered from the audience as well as analytical reports help institutions know the strengths and weaknesses of their communication plan so that they can real-time adjust their social media presence (Chukwu, 2021). Therefore, the use of both qualitative and quantitative measures is a comprehensive method of social media effectiveness measurement that closely aligns with theoretical models on social media analytics for PR practice.

In the long term, a combined approach employing both measures will enhance the capabilities of tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, and by extension, Nigeria, to measure and optimise their social media PR strategies effectively. The need for an integrated method of evaluation is an indication of broader public relations trends towards accountability and performance measurement (Owusu-Antwi, 2022). This convergence of methods, combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, is a reflection of contemporary public relations theory, which holds that measurement must adapt and be responsive to the evolving digital communication world (Michels, 2023). Institutions that are willing to make investments in measurement systems that demonstrate strength not only foster continued progress in their PR efforts, but also strengthen their relationships with important stakeholders across the educational community and far beyond.

Research Question Three: What challenges do tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State encounter in implementing their social media strategies?

Evaluation of social media strategies is extremely challenging for Nigerian institutions of higher learning, primarily because of a lack of comprehensive metrics and efficient data analytics models. The majority of institutions are currently confronted with traditional evaluation procedures that fail to capture the dynamism of social media interactions (Adeleke, 2021). Application of raw metrics, such as likes and sharing, has the potential to misrepresent the actual results of communication strategies (Okwuosa, 2023). Thus, such institutions may overlook the essential qualitative aspect of engagement, such as the mood of user responses or the level of interaction with their audience of interest (Nwankwo, 2022). Scholars contend that there must be a more profound approach that combines quantitative data with qualitative insight to provide a complete picture of the outcome of engagement (Ogunleye, 2024). Another critical challenge lies in the human resources and talent area. An absence of talented personnel who have expertise in social media analysis and electronic communication holds back effective evaluation of strategies (Ismail, 2022). The majority of institutions do not yet possess specialised departments in social media management, which

results in assigning such responsibilities to ill-informed members of staff or a roster of rotating volunteers (Ebun, 2023). Therefore, the lack of long-term planning and monitoring exposes institutions to reputation damage and miscommunication (Akinyemi, 2023). Training and capacity building of existing employees would be a significant step towards the transformation of the quality of analysis conducted. Conducting professional development plans would allow PR teams to gain the analysis capacity and ensure that they are able to derive meaningful meanings from social media analytics (Odumu, 2024).

Simultaneously, the fast pace of social media platform development adds other levels of complexity to evaluation processes. Platforms are constantly evolving their algorithms and features, rendering old processes of evaluation irrelevant (Bola, 2022). As a result, institutions are most frequently in a retrospective position, having to act hastily rather than strategise ahead of time to potential interaction (Ojo, 2023). Constant tracking of platform development, along with anticipatory adaptation in the process of evaluation, will minimise the issue (Fayemi, 2024). Creating adaptive evaluation models that would adapt as platforms develop will keep institutions up-to-date in PR practice.

Last but not least, ethical dilemmas of user permission and data privacy are other barriers in the measurement of social media strategy (Ihuoma, 2021). Institutions must balance accessing user-generated information and protecting privacy rights, issues that are exacerbated by a climate of draconian data protection legislation like Nigeria's Data Protection Regulation (2023). To prevent such issues, institutions must invest in meaningful data governance policies that put a high value on ethical standards while still managing to enable effective strategy assessment (Okonkwo, 2024). A transparent approach to the use of data and ongoing education of stakeholders on privacy rights can help to foster trust and make way for more authentic user interaction with institutional material.

Conclusion

This study sets the new-age role of social media in enabling communication and stakeholder interaction. The study concludes that Akwa Ibom State higher learning institutions have employed multi-dimensional social media strategies with the objective of enhancing public relations activities by interacting on various platforms to address students, alumni, and members of the wider public. Content creation, segmentation of audience, measures of engagement, and trust through openness and responsiveness are some of the practices embraced. However, the study also speaks of some of the biggest challenges to institutions in terms of restricted availability of trained personnel, reliance on crude metrics, and the need for solid assessment frameworks. Therefore, the research shows the degree to which effective social media strategies can create more permanent relationships and enhance institutional image, and that there needs to be continuous adaptation and collaborative evaluation procedures in order for there to be long-term success.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- (i) Institutions in Nigeria should make regular reviews of their social media strategy by incorporating advanced analytical tools. This will enable them to track engagement

statistics more effectively and refine their delivery of content in order to suit the evolving requirements of their targeted audience.

- (ii) Institutions must develop a complete assessment system that includes both quantitative and qualitative measures. This would enable them to understand audience opinion and interaction depth better, thus helping them measure social media effectiveness more effectively.
- (iii) Institutions should spend on training and capacity building for the staff running social media websites. This would equip them to deal with data analysis and overcoming difficulties of electronic communication and evaluation processes.

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