Public Relations and Organisational Responses to Public Criticism on Social Media: A Study of Select Organisations in Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of public relations (PR) strategies in managing social media criticism, focusing on organisations in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Using a sample size of 97 respondents, including PR officers, social media managers, and communication assistants, the research examines how organisations respond to public criticism on digital platforms. The study explores the frequency of criticism, the types of response strategies used, and the effectiveness of these strategies. The findings reveal that most organisations receive social media criticism occasionally, with common responses including public statements and private engagements. However, a significant portion also resorts to ignoring or deleting comments. While many respondents consider their PR strategies effective, a notable number find them insufficient. The study applies the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which posits that organisations should tailor their response strategies to the type of crisis and public perception. The results suggest that while organisations are aware of the need for strategic communication, there is room for improvement in aligning practices with best crisis management strategies. Based on these findings, the study recommends enhanced PR training, proactive communication, standardised crisis management plans, and continuous social media monitoring to better manage online reputation and mitigate the impact of criticism. The study provides valuable insights for organisations looking to refine their approach to managing social media crises and strengthen their overall PR strategies.

Keywords: Public relations, organisation, criticism, social media.

Introduction

In today's digital era, social media platforms have become pivotal arenas for public engagement, expression, and scrutiny. The open and participatory nature of these platforms has not only transformed how individuals communicate but has also redefined the relationship between organisations and their publics. One of the most significant shifts brought about by this evolution is the visibility and virality of public criticism. Criticisms—whether prompted by organisational missteps, customer dissatisfaction, ethical concerns, or social justice movements—now emerge in real-time and are amplified within minutes, creating both challenges and opportunities for public relations (PR) practitioners (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Public relations, traditionally associated with managing a favorable image through controlled channels, has evolved into a dynamic practice that must navigate the unpredictable terrains of digital discourse. The prevalence of social media platforms such as

Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have turned the public into active participants in shaping organisational narratives. A single tweet or post can trigger widespread backlash, affect corporate reputation, and demand swift responses from affected organisations (Effiong, Ekpe, & Austin, 2014). Consequently, the role of PR has expanded to include crisis management, real-time engagement, and reputation repair in the face of public criticism online.

The contemporary trend reveals that organisations cannot afford to ignore or delay responses to public criticism on social media. Several high-profile incidents have demonstrated how silence or poorly managed responses can exacerbate backlash. For instance, brands like United Airlines, Nestlé, and PepsiCo have faced massive online criticism that escalated into mainstream media coverage and significant reputational damage, largely due to inadequate or ill-timed PR responses (Sanderson, Barnes, Williamson, & Kian, 2016). These cases underscore the need for strategic communication approaches that are proactive, transparent, and sensitive to public sentiments.

In contrast, organisations that employ effective PR strategies—rooted in empathy, accountability, and engagement—often manage to rebuild trust and even turn crises into opportunities for strengthened public relations. This growing trend places social media crisis communication at the heart of organisational survival and credibility. Scholars argue that organisational responses to criticism on digital platforms must align with evolving public expectations, where authenticity and immediacy are valued over polished but impersonal corporate statements (Kent & Taylor, 2016).

Despite its importance, there remains a gap in understanding the nuanced dynamics between public criticism and organisational responses on social media, particularly in diverse socio-political and economic contexts. Much of the existing literature is centered on Western case studies, with limited focus on how organisations in developing regions, including Africa, navigate this digital PR landscape. This gap justifies the need for a broader, more contextual analysis that considers varying cultural, institutional, and technological influences.

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the role of public relations in managing organisational responses to public criticism on social media, particularly in Akwa Ibom State. It aims to examine the strategies employed by organisations, the effectiveness of these approaches, and the implications for corporate reputation and stakeholder engagement.

The study focuses on five purposively selected organisations known for their active social media presence and public engagement. These include two private firms, two public institutions, and one non-governmental organisation (NGO), providing a balanced representation across different sectors. The research is premised on the understanding that public criticism on social media is not merely a challenge but a critical site for relationship building, image negotiation, and organisational accountability.

Statement of the Problem

The rise of social media has revolutionised the communication landscape, enabling instantaneous public feedback, criticism, and even outrage directed at organisations. While this digital environment offers opportunities for engagement, it has also exposed organisations to greater scrutiny and reputational risks. Negative public sentiment shared online can escalate rapidly, often demanding immediate and strategic responses from public relations units. In several instances, organisations have either ignored public criticism or responded in ways that further aggravated the situation, leading to loss of trust, customer loyalty, and public goodwill.

The organisations under this study include: Otwist Events, Chessy Fabrics (private organisations), Human Rights Advocacy Network (NGO), Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic and Akwa Ibom State University (Public organisations). Despite the increasing relevance of social media in public relations, many organisations still struggle with the best strategies for addressing criticism, maintaining credibility, and protecting their reputation in the face of online backlash. This challenge is particularly evident in contexts where digital PR practices are still developing, and where organisations may lack the expertise or resources to effectively manage social media crises. This study is therefore necessary to understand how public relations strategies are employed to respond to public criticism on social media, what works, what does not, and what can be improved.

Research Objectives

(i)   To examine the strategies organisations use to respond to public criticism on social media.
(ii)   To identify common challenges and errors in organisational responses to online criticism.
(iii)   To assess the impact of public criticism on the image and credibility of organisations.
(iv)   To evaluate how response timing and messaging style affect public reactions to criticism.

Research Questions

(i)   How do organisations typically respond to public criticism on social media platforms?
(ii)   What are the common mistakes organisations make when managing online public backlash?
(iii)   How does public criticism on social media affect organisational image and credibility?
(iv)   In what ways does the speed and tone of an organisation's response influence public perception?

Literature Review

Public Relations

Public relations (PR) is a strategic communication process that builds and manages mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. Over the years, PR has evolved from simple publicity and press agentry into a complex discipline that encompasses image management, reputation repair, stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication

(Daniel & Nweke, 2019). At its core, public relations is concerned with influencing public perception, maintaining trust, and ensuring transparency, especially during moments of organisational vulnerability.

The traditional understanding of PR focused on controlled messaging through mass media, where information was disseminated from organisations to the public in a largely one-way communication model. This model, often referred to as the press agentry or public information model, prioritised organisational interest and placed limited value on feedback from the public (Daniel & Daniel, 2022). However, the emergence of the two-way symmetrical model of communication marked a significant shift in PR practice. This approach encourages dialogue, understanding, and adjustment between organisations and their stakeholders, thus fostering trust and legitimacy (Dozier, Daniel, & Daniel, 2021).

In the digital era, PR has been further transformed by the rise of social media. These platforms have decentralised communication, giving power to individuals and communities to shape organisational narratives in real time. As a result, PR is no longer just about telling a story; it is about listening, responding, and adapting to a continuously evolving digital discourse (Macnamara, 2010). The interactive nature of social media has placed greater pressure on organisations to maintain openness, honesty, and consistency in their communications, particularly when facing criticism or crises.

Public relations now require professionals to possess digital literacy, emotional intelligence, and strategic foresight. The ability to respond promptly and empathetically to public criticism has become a key component of effective PR. In particular, the public expects organisations to demonstrate accountability and transparency, especially during crises. Failing to meet these expectations can result in intensified criticism, loss of credibility, and long-term damage to organisational reputation (Coombs, 2017).

Furthermore, scholars have emphasised the role of PR in relationship management, arguing that maintaining healthy relationships with stakeholders can serve as a buffer during crises (Ledingham & Bruning, 2020). When stakeholders feel valued and heard, they are more likely to support the organisation even when it is under public scrutiny. This underscores the preventive role of PR, which involves building goodwill long before any criticism arises.

The growing complexity of the PR function has also led to the development of integrated communication strategies. These strategies combine public relations with marketing, advertising, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts to create a cohesive and authentic brand image (Cornelissen, 2021). In doing so, organisations aim to align their communication across all platforms, including social media, to ensure consistency and strengthen stakeholder trust.

In sum, public relations is no longer confined to press releases and media relations; it is a dynamic, strategic function that plays a critical role in shaping organisational reputation, especially in an age where public criticism can arise and go viral within minutes. The shift from reactive to proactive and dialogic communication underscores the importance of PR in managing the organisation–public relationship in a complex digital environment.

Organisational Public Relations

Organisational public relations (PR) is a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort by organisations to establish and maintain mutual understanding and positive relationships with their publics. It is an essential management function that supports the achievement of institutional goals by building credibility, enhancing reputation, and maintaining stakeholder trust (Daniel & Nweke, 2019). In today's increasingly connected and transparent world, organisations are no longer judged solely by their products or services but also by their values, behaviours, and how they respond to public concerns—making public relations more relevant than ever.

The need for organisational PR stems from the growing complexity of the business and social environment. Organisations operate in a landscape characterised by intense competition, a hyperactive media environment, and a highly informed public. In such a setting, effective PR helps organisations to communicate their mission, clarify their position on emerging issues, and respond to stakeholder concerns in ways that foster trust and loyalty (Cornelissen, 2021). Furthermore, organisational PR provides a framework for continuous engagement with internal and external stakeholders, thereby shaping the narrative around the brand and influencing public opinion in a strategic manner.

A significant aspect of organisational PR lies in its function as a crisis management tool. When an organisation faces a crisis—whether it be a product failure, leadership scandal, customer backlash, or social media criticism—public relations plays a central role in managing the fallout and restoring public trust. PR strategies such as crisis communication, reputation repair, and stakeholder engagement are instrumental in mitigating damage and repositioning the organisation positively in the public eye (Coombs, 2017). The importance of this role cannot be overstated, especially in a digital era where crises unfold rapidly and public reactions are immediate.

There are notable examples where organisational PR has demonstrated its strength in crisis management. One such instance is the 2018 crisis faced by Starbucks, following the arrest of two African American men in one of its stores. The incident sparked widespread criticism and calls for a boycott. However, Starbucks' swift and strategic PR response—which included a public apology, the closure of thousands of stores for racial bias training, and continued dialogue with civil rights groups—was widely commended and helped to stabilise its brand image (Kim, 2019). This case highlights how effective PR can serve not only to douse public anger but also to turn a potentially destructive event into an opportunity for organisational learning and image enhancement.

Another illustrative case is Johnson & Johnson's handling of the 1982 Tylenol cyanide crisis, often cited as a textbook example of excellent crisis communication. The company's decision to recall 31 million bottles, offer replacements, and communicate transparently with the public, despite the financial cost, showcased the power of proactive and ethical PR. The company's reputation was not only preserved but eventually strengthened, demonstrating the long-term benefits of prioritising public trust over short-term gains (Benoit, 2021).

Organisational PR also plays a critical role in anticipating crises. Through environmental scanning, media monitoring, and stakeholder analysis, PR professionals are often able to detect early warning signs of potential crises and advise leadership on pre-emptive actions. This proactive dimension of PR aligns with modern risk management practices and contributes to organisational resilience (Regester & Larkin, 2018). By preparing crisis communication plans, conducting simulation exercises, and maintaining an active presence on digital platforms, organisations can position themselves to respond effectively when challenges arise.

Moreover, the importance of internal communication as a subset of organisational PR cannot be overlooked. Employees are critical stakeholders who often serve as brand ambassadors, particularly during times of crisis. Effective internal PR ensures that staff are informed, aligned with the organisation's values, and equipped to communicate consistently with external publics. This alignment helps to maintain morale, reduce misinformation, and strengthen the credibility of the organisation's outward communication (Welch & Jackson, 2017).

Social Media

Social media has transformed the communication landscape, offering platforms that facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of information within virtual communities and networks. Defined broadly, social media comprises websites and applications that enable users to create content, interact, and network in real time (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn have not only changed how individuals communicate but also how organisations engage with their audiences. Unlike traditional media, which is largely one-directional, social media supports interactive, participatory communication that gives users significant control over the content and the conversation.

The rise of social media has had profound implications for organisations, particularly in the areas of branding, marketing, customer relations, and public communication. Through social media, organisations can directly engage with their stakeholders without the mediation of traditional gatekeepers such as journalists or editors. This has enabled a shift towards more personalised and real-time communication, which, if managed effectively, can foster loyalty, transparency, and a stronger organisational identity (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). However, it also means that organisations are more exposed to public scrutiny, criticism, and reputational risk.

One of the defining features of social media is its immediacy and virality. Information—whether positive or negative—can spread rapidly, reaching millions of users within hours. This has created new dynamics in crisis communication, where delayed or poorly worded responses can exacerbate public backlash and fuel misinformation. In this context, social media serves not just as a tool for information dissemination, but also as a public space where corporate accountability is demanded and reputations are constantly contested (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Organisations must therefore monitor social media conversations actively and develop the capacity to respond promptly and strategically.

Social media also empowers users to generate content that can influence organisational image. User-generated content (UGC), including reviews, comments, hashtags, and memes, can significantly impact how an organisation is perceived. Negative posts or viral campaigns criticising a company can quickly spiral into a reputational crisis if not addressed appropriately. Scholars argue that this participatory nature of social media marks a shift in power from organisations to the public, thus requiring new communication strategies that are more dialogic and less hierarchical (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012).

Moreover, social media has redefined the relationship between organisations and their publics by encouraging a culture of transparency and immediacy. Stakeholders now expect real-time updates, authentic messaging, and direct engagement with brands. This expectation can be both a challenge and an opportunity for public relations professionals. While it increases pressure on organisations to be responsive and authentic, it also allows them to demonstrate values, humanise their brands, and build stronger emotional connections with audiences (Kietzmann *et al*, 2021).

In recent years, social media has become an essential component of integrated communication strategies. It is used not only for marketing and engagement but also for research, monitoring, and crisis prediction. Tools such as sentiment analysis, social listening, and influencer tracking help organisations to anticipate public concerns, understand audience behaviour, and craft more targeted responses. As such, social media has become both a mirror and a magnifier of public opinion, amplifying voices that were previously marginalised and providing insights that traditional feedback mechanisms may overlook (Kent & Taylor, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), propounded by W. Timothy Coombs in 2017, provides a relevant theoretical framework for this study. SCCT assumes that an organisation's communication during a crisis should be guided by the nature of the crisis and the level of responsibility attributed to the organisation by the public. The theory categorises crises into different types—victim, accidental, and preventable—and suggests matching response strategies such as denial, apology, or corrective action accordingly. The goal is to protect or repair organisational reputation by selecting the most appropriate communication strategy based on public perception and situational analysis.

In the context of this study on public relations and organisational responses to social media criticism, SCCT is particularly relevant. It helps explain how organisations can effectively manage online backlash by tailoring their PR responses to the perceived severity and cause of the criticism. For example, if the public holds the organisation responsible, a more accommodative response (like an apology or corrective measure) is recommended. On the other hand, if the criticism arises from misinformation or external causes, a defensive strategy may be more appropriate. Recent studies support SCCT's continued relevance in social media-driven crises, highlighting its value in guiding digital reputation management (Ekpe, Austin, & Effiong, 2021).

Review of Studies

Surin Chung & Suman Lee (2016). Crisis Communication Strategy on Social Media and the Public's Cognitive and Affective Responses: A Case of Foster Farms Salmonella Outbreak.
This study examined an organisation's crisis communication strategy (i.e., crisis response strategy and technical translation strategy) on social media and the public's cognitive and affective responses. Twenty crisis communication messages posted by Foster Farms regarding a salmonella outbreak and 349 public responses were analyzed. The results showed that a technical translation strategy generated more public acceptance of the message and more positive emotions than a crisis response strategy. A crisis response strategy generated more public rejections of the message and more negative emotions than a technical translation strategy.

Bassey, E. (2020). Exploring Crisis Communication and Information Dissemination on Social Media: Social Network Analysis of Hurricane Irma Tweets.
This study utilised social network analysis to identify the top 10 Twitter influentials during the Hurricane Irma crisis period and examined the relationship between social media attributes and the bridge influence of controlling information flow. The number of a user's followers and tweets significantly predicted one's control of information. Crisis information tended to be shared in scattered subgroups. Social network boundaries impeded information diffusion, and the communication pattern was largely one-way. The findings partially supported the opinion leader argument while indicating that influentials can directly generate information, which is consistent with the social-mediated crisis communication model. Such findings will contribute to crisis literature and help emergency management professionals advance social media usage to disseminate crisis information, build effective communication, and provide immediate disaster relief responses.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design using a survey method to examine how selected organisations in Akwa Ibom State respond to public criticism on social media through public relations strategies. The study focuses on five purposively selected organisations known for their active social media presence and public engagement. These include two private firms, two public institutions, and one non-governmental organisation (NGO), providing a balanced representation across different sectors.

To gather data, the snowball sampling technique will be employed. This method is particularly appropriate as it enables the researcher to identify initial participants within each organisation—typically communication officers, PR personnel, or social media managers—who will then refer other relevant individuals with insights into the organisation's social media response strategies. This approach ensures access to key informants who have practical knowledge and experience related to the research problem.
A structured questionnaire will be used as the Instrument for data collection. The questionnaire will consist of closed-ended questions designed to assess respondents' views on the role, effectiveness, and challenges of using public relations to manage social media criticism. Questions will also explore the frequency of online public criticism, the

organisation's communication style, and the impact of such criticisms on organisational reputation and public trust.

Considering the scale and scope of the study, a sample size of 100 respondents will be drawn—20 from each of the five selected organisations. This size is considered adequate to provide a range of insights while remaining manageable for in-depth analysis. Data collected will be analysed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and patterns in organisational public relations responses to social media criticism. Overall, this methodology provides a practical and focused approach to understanding the intersection of social media, public criticism, and organisational public relations practices within the local context of Akwa Ibom State.

Data Presentation and Analysis
Below is a presentation of data collected from 97 valid responses out of 100 surveys.

Table 1: What is your role in your organisation's communication or public relations activities?

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Public Relations Officer	28	29%
Social Media Manager	24	25%
Communication Assistant	19	20%
Other	26	27%
Total	**97**	**100%**

Table 1 showed that the majority of respondents identified as either Public Relations Officers (29%) or Social Media Managers (25%), indicating strong representation from those directly involved in managing external communication. A significant number (27%) chose "Other", suggesting diverse roles that also contribute to PR functions within organisations.

Table 2: How often does your organisation receive public criticism on social media?

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very often	14	14%
Often	20	21%
Occasionally	32	33%
Rarely	21	22%
Never	10	10%
Total	**97**	**100%**

Table 2 shows that about 33% of respondents said criticism is received occasionally, while 21% reported it happens often. Only 14% face criticism very frequently, indicating that while criticism is a concern, it's not overwhelming. The relatively low figure (10%) for "Never" shows that most organisations experience some form of public feedback or scrutiny online.

Table 3: Response on how organisation typically respond to public criticism on social media.

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Immediate public statement	30	31%
Private engagement	27	28%
Ignoring the comment	22	23%
Deleting/blocking comment	18	19%
Total	**97**	**100%**

Table 3 shows that the most common response strategy is issuing an immediate public statement (31%), followed by private engagement (28%). A combined 42% of respondents admitted to either ignoring or deleting/blocking criticism, which may reflect defensive communication approaches that could affect long-term credibility.

Table 4: How effective organisation's public relations strategies helped in managing social media criticism?

Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very effective	12	12%
Effective	36	37%
Neutral	25	26%
Ineffective	16	16%
Very ineffective	8	8%
Total	**97**	**100%**

Table 4 shows a combined 49% view their PR strategies as either effective or very effective, suggesting moderate confidence in their communication systems. However, 24% rated them as ineffective or very ineffective, indicating the need for improvement in engagement practices and training.

Table 5: Whether public criticism on social media ever led your organisation to make changes in communication or operations

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	68	70%
No	29	30%
Total	**97**	**100%**

Table 5 above shown a strong majority (70%) acknowledged that criticism led to operational or communication changes. This highlights the powerful influence of social media feedback on organisational decision-making and the growing importance of responsive public relations practices.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the role of PR and communication officers in handling social media criticism?

The data shows that a majority of respondents are either PR officers or social media managers, indicating that these roles are central to managing online criticism. This aligns with Obasi (2024), who found that experienced PR professionals play a crucial role in crafting responses during crises. SCCT supports this by emphasising the need for well-trained communicators to assess crisis types and implement fitting strategies to protect reputational assets.

Research Question 2: How frequently do organisations receive social media criticism?

About one-third of respondents indicated that criticism occurs occasionally, while a significant portion said it happens often or very often. This is consistent with Jin (2020), who highlighted the constant presence of public scrutiny on digital platforms, especially during crises. SCCT reinforces that the frequency of such criticisms necessitates preparedness and context-specific communication strategies to mitigate damage and restore trust.

Research Questions 3: What strategies do organisations use in responding to criticism on social media?

Most organisations use either public statements or private engagement, while others ignore or delete comments. Chung & Lee (2016) revealed that transparent responses foster more positive public reactions, whereas ignoring or deleting comments can escalate negativity. SCCT supports the need for accommodative or defensive responses based on the perceived cause of the crisis, showing that proactive engagement is generally more effective.

Research Question 4: How effective are current PR strategies in managing criticism on social media?

While nearly half of respondents consider their strategies effective, a considerable number remain neutral or find them ineffective. This mixed result supports Obasi's (2024) call for more proactive, transparent approaches and ongoing training for communication teams. SCCT underlines the importance of selecting appropriate response types—such as corrective action or apology—based on the attribution of blame, to improve strategic outcomes.

Summary of Findings

(i) **Role of PR in Managing Social Media Criticism**: The majority of respondents (29%) are Public Relations Officers, with a significant number (25%) being Social Media Managers. This highlights that these roles are pivotal in handling public criticism on social media.

(ii) **Frequency of Criticism**: Over 50% of respondents indicated that their organisations receive criticism either occasionally or often, with a smaller portion facing frequent criticism. This underscores the constant challenge organisations face in managing their online reputation.

(iii) **Response Strategies**: The most common strategies include issuing public statements (31%) and engaging privately with critics (28%). However, a significant

portion of respondents also resort to ignoring or deleting comments, reflecting varied approaches to managing online criticism.

(iv) **Effectiveness of PR Strategies**: While a large portion of respondents (49%) consider their strategies effective or very effective, 24% find them ineffective, indicating a need for improvement in handling public criticism on social media platforms.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that while organisations in Akwa Ibom State are actively engaging with public criticism on social media, their responses vary in effectiveness. The reliance on reactive strategies, such as issuing public statements and private engagement, indicates that many organisations are still evolving in their social media crisis communication practices. The study highlights the need for organisations to enhance their PR capabilities to more effectively handle social media criticism, especially in a highly connected digital environment.

Recommendations

(i) **Enhance PR Training**: Organisations should invest in continuous training for PR professionals to develop more effective communication strategies in response to social media criticism, focusing on real-time engagement and damage control.

(ii) **Adopt Proactive Communication**: Organisations should focus on proactive strategies, such as regular updates and transparency, to prevent negative criticism from escalating into a full-blown crisis, in line with SCCT's recommendations for preventive communication.

(iii) **Implement a Standardised Crisis Management Plan**: Organisations should develop and implement a clear social media crisis management plan that outlines procedures for responding to different types of criticism, following SCCT's guidelines on matching crisis type with the appropriate communication strategy.

(iv) **Monitor and Analyse Social Media Feedback**: Organisations should use tools to monitor social media feedback continuously and analyse public sentiment. This will enable them to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging issues before they escalate.

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