

Review

Use of Social Media Tools for Effective Public Relations Practice in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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Accepted 28 October 2023

This study, "Use of Social Media Tools for Effective Public Relations (PR) Practice in Tertiary Institutions in Edo State" investigates the use and effectiveness of social media for PR practice in some selected tertiary institutions in Edo State: University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State Polytechnic, Usen; Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma; Edo State University, Uzairue and Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi using survey design and questionnaire as instrument for data collection. The staff (32) of the PR departments/units of the five schools formed the population of the study while the sample size was the entire staff. The study revealed that PR practitioners in the selected tertiary institutions use social media and found them effective and efficient particularly in PR crisis communication. The findings also showed that despite the PR practitioners' embrace of social media, the traditional media (radio, television, newspaper, and magazine) are still potent in PR news and information dissemination thus, both are synergistic in PR communication. It was also revealed that social media are more cost-effective and easy to use. The study recommends amongst others, that the PR practitioners in tertiary institutions in Edo State should perpetually exploit the potentiality and benefits of the social media in an era of economic downturn in Nigeria.

Keywords: Social media usage, Public Relations, Tertiary Institutions

Cite This Article As: Odaro-Ekhaguebor, K., Nasamu, J.A., Ayegbo, O.J (2023). Use of Social Media Tools for Effective Public Relations Practice in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria. *Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult.* 11(4): 79-86

INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) is an age-long profession in the world. According to Nwanne (2015,p.6), Great Britain is one of the countries of the world, where modern public relations was first practiced. PR seeks to maintain favourable public image by an organization or company or an individual. It is a state of the relationship between an organization or company or a renowned person and the public thus, Public relations is about relationship building and management (Nwanne 2015 p.1). The British Institute of Public Relations (B.I.P.R) defined public relations as "The deliberate planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (Gambo &

Momoh 2012 p.1). It is a discipline studied in higher education to train people in establishing and sustaining cordiality between an organization or individual and the public to engender a robust relationship that promotes peaceful co-existence between the former and the latter.

Public relations, implies the communication with media or press, management of reputation, organizing press conferences and writing releases as well as doing crisis communication. Jefkins (1998) cited in Nwanne (2015, p.6) said the British government in 1912, through its Chancellor of Exchequer organized a team of lecturers to explain the first old-age pension scheme to the public. PR is all about proactiveness and a gap in communication could generate crisis and to avert the crisis, communication is vital, hence, communication was essential to explain certain fundamental issues and create an understanding so as to avert impending catastrophe in Britain. Here, the mass media become handy as channels through which PR news and information are communicated to desired publics. No doubt, traditional or conventional media have been harnessed for public relations operation but the advent of the Internet enabled technologies that birthed the social media further enhances effective PR practice. The Internet has given public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics on a variety of issues (McAllister & Taylor cited in Ahmad, 2014).

The new media engender smooth communication flow globally, breaking barriers and encumbrances (geographically) with efficiency. Schibinski & Dabrowski cited in Ahmad (2014) defined the word “social media” (new media) as an on-demand access to content at anytime, anywhere, on any digital device and it includes interactive user feedback and participating. The social media have become an instant communication tool. They are interpersonal conversational media and are easily accessible by the public relations practitioners for use. The most commonly used new media platforms by PR officers include: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and others, enhancing social interaction in public sphere (Mekky, 2021). Indeed, PR thrives on communication. According to Ogbu (2019), PR practitioners in Nigeria should be prepared to manage the fluidity of communication in this social space with the challenge of getting their messages across to a target audience that is more influenced by social relationships and experiences than the asymmetrical press release.

Statement of the problem

It is indubitably true that social media have taken centre stage in our daily activities in the 21st century with the emergence and consolidation of the different social networking sites (SNS) with their intrinsic characteristics. It is obvious that the various social media platforms have been effectively adopted in PR practice in different parts of the world (Mekky, 2021), for promotion of business activities. Public Relations succeed on communication and it is an avenue to connect with audiences (publics). It is about establishing relations and sustaining them, via careful and deliberately crafted communication to further bond the cordiality that exists between an organization, institution or individual and the publics. In achieving the aim of reaching out to stakeholders in business environment, social media are deployed in various situations. No doubt, organisations are exploiting the benefits for diverse activities including creating brand awareness, customer relationship management, and market research as well as promoting brand recognition (PR Professionals, 2021).

As an offshoot of Information Communication Technology, social media with their inherent characteristics of allowing easy, simple and instant messaging, content sharing and virality, have since become a veritable tool PR. Being an ‘owned media’, PR practitioners have complete control over social media and can be exploited at will (Deshpande, 2022, Planells, 2023). Their ubiquitous nature is a profound advantage resulting in effective spread of messages. Have educational institutions in Edo State also joined the bandwagon of the beneficiaries of these all important technologies, the social media? Considering the nature of an academic environment dealing with huge student population with diverse demographic and psychographic attributes, managing communication in an environment that is prone to crisis can be challenging. Are PR officers in tertiary institutions in Edo State taking advantage of the benefits that abound in social media for crisis communication? This is the crux of the study, to ascertain the use of social media as a tool for effective PR practice in tertiary institutions of Edo State.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- i. To ascertain the social media platform use by PR practitioners in tertiary institutions in Edo State for communication to the publics.
- ii. To determine the extent to which PR practitioners in the tertiary institutions in Edo State Exploit the social media.
- iii. To ascertain the effectiveness of the social media in PR communication in tertiary institutions in Edo State.

- iv. To ascertain the cost-effectiveness of social media in PR communication.
- v. To ascertain whether the traditional media still enjoy so much patronage by PR practitioners with social media presence.

Research Questions

- i. What is the social media platform use by PR practitioners in tertiary institutions in Edo State for communication to the publics?
- ii. To what extent do PR practitioners in tertiary institutions in Edo State use social media for communication?
- iii. How effective are social media in PR communication in tertiary institutions in Edo State?
- iv. Are social media cost-effective?
- v. Are the traditional media still enjoying so much patronage by PR officers in Edo tertiary institutions?

Literature Review

This research is quantitative and it is imperative to review some scholars' literature related to the study. Contextually, using the social media for effective PR practice in tertiary institutions may not be a focus by researchers but it is on record, that scholars study social media usage in PR practice in business organizations, marketing etc.

Though there has been a controversy as to the right nomenclature for what is referred to as "new media" (social media) as scholars argued that technologies change so fast that what is "new" today will shortly become commonplace and then, "old" (Peters, 2009 cited in Ogbu, (2019). Providing a more acceptable definition, Scolari (2009) proposed the use of the term, "digital communication" while Valentini & Krukeberg (2011) opted for "digital media". Be that as it may, the nomenclature, whether new media or digital media or social media does not preclude the attributes or characteristics of the social media in offering, a wide range of services to all and sundry who use the internet –enabled devices (computer, Android phone, tablet).

The new media are a dialogic transmission model, implying that communication is not centrally controlled by a source (as the case of traditional or conventional media where communication is monologic in nature - one to many audience) but from many sources to many recipients of the message (Anikwe & Ogbiti, 2018). In other words the new media operation is horizontal and decentralized allowing conversational communication that creates a harmony between the PR practitioners and the publics. As a conversational media, the social media are a potent tool in news and information dissemination, allowing users to create their content. Supporting the above, Kaplan & Haelein (2010) said that social media are a group of internet-based application that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and allows for creation and exchange of user-generated contents.

Social Networking Sites (SNS) - Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and others have become handy in promoting goods, services and ideals, globally. With their unique characteristics, these platforms are effective and efficient in communication. Alluding to the above, Bates (n.d) said, that PR and new media are based on communication but new media with their real-time messaging, allows PR to be stronger and more impactful. The scholar added that this should not be construed to mean, that the conventional media are obsolete or ineffectual, as a tool for PR communication. It is important to note, that the fundamental of traditional media and PR remain untouched and are still well exploited and truly the crux of a successful communications campaign (Welman, 2017). It added that the key for PR professionals is to inject the new media into a campaign so that it works in unison with the traditional realm. Other than corporate organizations, individuals, particularly politicians also use the new media to gratify their needs. Barack Obama's team successfully used data gathered through Facebook, which allowed the delivery of targeted messages to mobilize votes (Chadwick, 2021).

Social media are so germane to public relations as a tool for effective communication. While PR teams often relied on press releases and other media outlets to reach their target audiences, social media integration into people's daily lives has made the public more accessible than ever before (Chowdhury, 2021). Redzia (2022) opined that PR practitioners can use social media to monitor situation and make more informed decisions on next line of action to take. This action in fact, is applicable to tertiary institutions when there is crisis as social media can be used to spot a crisis in its early stages and can be nipped on the bud by taking swift action. Timeliness is a key element in making an announcement newsworthy. Suffice to mention that social media possess this quality as news and information can be swiftly disseminated to students by PR department or units during crisis within institutions. Regular engagement with influencers especially journalists can help spread press releases that form the basis of news emanating from PR departments in tertiary institutions.

Lending credence to aforesaid, Mekky (2022) explained that Twitter is an excellent tool to exploit for reaching out to journalists because they are always online scouting for news and information. In line with the above, a freelance content writer in an educational online magazine, Paul Bates asserted that PR and social media are based on communication. Content published via news releases, emails and other PR channels can live longer, spread faster and reach further with the help of social media. Further extolling the benefits and effectiveness of social media in PR, Planells (2023) and Meyer (2019) described social media as 'owned' and 'paid' media. The content for the former can be controlled by the PR practitioners and the traditional media (radio, television, newspaper, and magazine) are 'paid media' that are centrally controlled. The import of this is that the social media are decentralized, enabling conversational communication to occur. The beauty of these technologies is that the PR officers can generate their contents and decide when to disseminate news and information to the publics unlike the traditional media that operate regimentally.

Applying this quality to educational environment, PR practitioners in tertiary institutions can decide when and how to send important information to staff and students without any encumbrances. In the case of traditional media, they are regimented and have schedules and patterns of operation particularly the electronic media (radio and television) except in some cases when news and information are 'breaking'. With the emergence of social media platforms, news and information are relayed before the traditional media do a comprehensive or detailed report on issues, thus complementing the social media. PR officers in educational institutions, can also use social in situation management and success can be achieved in this area by leveraging on the characteristics of social media as an instant, ubiquitous technologies (Afam & Ogbiti, 2018) that can arrest a precarious situation like student unrests and other impending crisis.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Uses and Gratification Theory, Media Richness Theory as well as Social Presence Theory. The uses and gratification theory states that people's needs influence what media and what benefits (gratifications) the media give them (Ebeze & Ukwueze, 2015). It is more concerned with "what people do with the media" rather than what the media do to the people" (Katz, 1959 cited in Ebeze & Ukwueze 2015). This theory emphasizes PR practitioners' choice by assessing their motive for exploiting certain media (new media) to complement the mainstream media based on the PR officer's needs. Severin & Tankard (1997) emphasized that audiences' choice by assessing their reason for using certain media to the disregard of others, as well as the various gratifications obtained from the media based on individual social and psychological requirements. What gratifies the PR practitioners is the frequent and instant dissemination of information to publics via the various social media platforms.

The Media Richness Theory is also germane to this study and it emphasizes how computer could enhance communications within an organizational environment (Asemah et al., 2015). The trio added that media richness theory is also known as information richness theory and it is a framework to describe a communication medium by its ability to produce the information sent over it. Developed by Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel in 1980, it is used to rank and evaluate the richness of certain communication media. The applicability of the theory to this study is that it is useful when assessing effect of the different communication media types potentially have on the content (message).

Also adopted for this study is the Social Presence Theory. It was developed by John Short, Ederyn Williams and Bruce Christie in 1976. The scholars opined that communication media differ in their level of social presence and that these dissimilarities play significant role in how individuals interact. In their view, people recognize some media as having a lofty degree of social presence (e.g audio). The foregoing therefore explains why PR practitioners will always harness the new media that are characterized by both video and audio features to complement the text necessary for communication with the target audience. The suggestions for PR practitioners by these theories are not far from the intent of this study which is to ascertain PR practitioners' usage of the new media for maximum productivity in tertiary institutions in Edo State.

METHODOLOGY

The survey method was adopted for this study and the area covered is Edo State where the staff of the PR departments/units of five selected tertiary institutions, make up the population. The five institutions selected for the study include: University of Benin (Uniben), Benin City; Edo State Polytechnic, Usen; Ambrose Alli University (AAU), Ekpoma; Edo State University, Uzairue and Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi. The total PR staff strength of the schools are: Uniben 15; Edo Poly 4; AAU 4; Edo University 3 and Auchi Poly, 6 totaling 32, thus, the entire population forms the sample size of the study. The instrument of data collection was the questionnaire, with two parts. The first part is the demographic data of the respondents while the rest questions were formulated such that they elicited responses to the research questions. The data were analyzed, using tables and percentage.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 32 copies of questionnaire were administered and all were returned as a result of the researchers and assistants' personal contact with the respondents as copies of the questionnaire were retrieved on the spot after administration.

Table 1. Respondents' demographic characteristics

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Males	18	56.25
Females	14	43.75
Educational qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
School certificate	8	25
NCE	2	6.25
B.Sc, B.A.	12	37.5
M.Sc	8	25
PhD	2	6.25
Ages of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
30 below	5	20.84
31 – 40	13	37.5
41 – 50	9	25
51 and above	5	16.67
Total	32	100

The table above, reveals that 18 (56.25%) of the staff are males while 14 (43.75%) females. The educational qualification of the respondents shows that B.Sc & B.A. in the PR departments/units of the tertiary institutions are 12 (37.5%). This is followed by school certificate holders (8) representing 25%. M.Sc degree are 8 (25%), N.C.E 2 (6.25%) while PhD is 2 representing 6.25%. The table shows, that staffers of the PR departments/units have an impressive educational qualification. In the age distribution 5 respondents representing 15.625% were below 30 years, 13 representing 40.625% were between 31-40 years old, 9 or 28.125% were between 41-51 years while 5 respondents (15.625%) were above 50 years old.

Table 2: Social media platforms used in PR communication to the public

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook	0	0.00
WhatsApp	0	0.00
Instagram	0	0.00
Twitter	0	0.00
All of the Above	32	100
Total	32	100

Table 2 reveals that all the 32 respondents (100%) use the new media platforms in the PR communication to their publics.

Table 3: Frequency of social media platforms usage

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Frequently	22	58.34
Frequent	10	41.66
Occasionally	0	0.0
Total	32	100

Above table reveals that 22 (68.75%) respondents (PR practitioners) use the new media platforms very frequently while 10 (31.25%) of the PROs use the new media frequently. This clearly shows that the PR practitioners exploit the new media for gratifications.

Table 4: The extent to which social media platforms satisfy your PR needs

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very much	23	71.875
Much	9	28.125
Little	0	0
Total	32	100

Table 4 clearly reveals that the new media platforms satisfy their needs as 23 (71.875%) respondents admitted “very much” while 9 (28.125%) also admitted social media satisfy them much.

Table 5: The effectiveness /efficiency of social media to your practice

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very Effective	22	68.75
Effective	10	31.25
Ineffective	0	0
Total	32	100

Above Table also shows that the new media platforms are “very effective” as revealed by 22 (68.75%) respondents, while 10 (31.25%) admitted they are “effective”.

Table 6: Extent to which traditional media (radio, TV, newspaper, magazine) are being used with social media in PR practice

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very much	29	90.625
Much	3	9.375
Little	0	0
Total	32	100

Table 6 above indicates, that 29 respondents (90.625%) admitted that the traditional media are still “very much” in use by the PR practitioners while 3 respondents representing 9.375% also agreed that the conventional media are still much in use by the PR practitioners in tertiary institutions.

Table 7: Cost effectiveness: social media or traditional media

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Social media	30	100
Traditional media	0	0
Total	32	100

Above Table indicates that social media are more cost-effective. All the respondents (32 or 100%) agreed that social media are more economical to use.

Discussion of Findings

The data collected and presented in the various tables provide answers to the research questions formulated for the

study on use of the social media for PR practice in tertiary institutions in Edo State. It was revealed in Table 3, that 22 respondents representing 68.75% and 31.25% or 10 respondents of the PR practitioners use the social media frequently. And the respondents in Table 4 admitted that the social media satisfy their needs. Table 5 revealed that the social media are effective and efficient in their communication task of reaching the target audience (publics).

Contrary to the notion that the new media have rendered the traditional media irrelevant, Table 6 revealed that the latter are still very much in use by the PR practitioners in communication. Thus, social media and the traditional media are synergistic in PR communication.

The study in Table 7 also showed that social media are cheaper in terms of running cost compared to the traditional media that require procuring air-time or space in broadcast and print media respectively. Commenting more on the benefits of the social media on campus, the respondents unanimously admitted that they only need to subscribe for data to be online so they can reach out to their target public(s). They added that social media are more effective in crisis management as they easily get to students on campus that belong to different platforms such as WhatsApp. This is much easier to achieve because social media are characterized by easy, simple and instant messaging, content sharing and virality (Naseer, 2023). This implies that news and information are easily spread to individuals and groups since majority of students have access to android phones on campus.

CONCLUSION

This study, "Use of the Social Media Tool for Effective Public Relations Practice Tertiary Institutions in Edo State" successfully came out with the following findings:

1. Tertiary institutions in Edo State have formidable PR departments/units.
2. Social media are frequently used by the PR practitioners in tertiary Institutions for communication to the target audience (publics).
3. Social media are also effective in information dissemination to the publics.
4. The traditional media complement the social media in PR communication, in tertiary institutions in Edo State. From the study, it could be deduced that the social media have become a potent tool in PR communication in higher institutions and their characteristics of being a dialogic communication model afford the users of the platforms to generate their content and create an atmosphere of conviviality between the PR practitioners and the publics. The study also agrees with the "Uses and Gratification Theory" that PR practitioners satisfy their needs of using the social media for effective communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to enhance a more effective PR practice in tertiary institutions of Edo State:

1. The PR practitioners should perpetually use the potentiality of the social media which are cost-effective.
2. The PR officers should take advantage of the social media as a dialogic communication and conversational media to enhance a more peaceful co-existence between tertiary institutions and their publics (students, staff, contractors, host community).

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