

ADOPTION AND USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AS PUBLIC RELATIONS CHANNELS IN RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT OF SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study was on the adoption and use of social media platforms as PR channels of universities in North Central Nigeria. Survey research design was adopted for the study with the use of closed-ended questionnaire serving as the survey instrument for the elicitation of quantitative data. Findings showed that there was active use of social media platforms as PR channels in the select universities namely: Federal University, Lokoja (FULokoja), Nasarawa State University, Keffi (NSUK) and Base University, Abuja all located in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Additionally, the study also revealed that the adoption and utilisation of the SM platforms comes with its attendant challenges in form of poor network connection, lack of social media operational knowledge, epileptic power, and technophobia. The study concluded that time has shown that technology determines a number of things and so is the adoption and utilisation of social media as PR channels by higher educational institutions such as the universities under the study. Among other things, the study recommended that efforts should be made by concerned authorities to ensure access to social media platforms as this will broaden the scope of organisations and institutions to target specific audiences using them as PR channels.

Keywords: Adoption, Education, Public Relations, Social Media, University

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Introduction

In these modern times, for any individual, institution, business, etc, in both developed and developing nation to excel, creation and maintenance of a mutually beneficial relationship with its stakeholders is not negotiable, especially in an interdependent society like ours. (This informs that) Institutions and businesses like every person would also want to be seen in the good light and accepted no matter how battered their image. Consequently, universities like its contemporary institutions are beginning to employ the services of the public relations officers for a better management of their image, reputation and maintenance of favourable relationships with its diverse publics. Aliede Chile, & Achioko, (2020) opined that the quality of the

relationship between any organization and its publics is an indication of public relations' effectiveness and for such organization to succeed in the 21st century; a collaborative networking relationship is indispensable.

The definition of PR provided by the Public Relations Society of Association (PRSA) (2022) is "strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics," though opinions on the matter vary and whether the latter is a hybrid and advanced communication form while the former is not precisely that (para. 4). The inference is that the dispute regarding the two's relationship is based on this definition.

Regarding the goal, it is clear from the above

that PR plays a significant role in influencing public opinion and strategically manages the dissemination of information between an organisation and its important stakeholders, influencers, and the publics through consistent efficient communication (Silfwer, 2020). In addition to always giving the public the facts they need, PR's role in times of crisis guarantees that the narrative is managed, harm is minimised, and public trust is reestablished.

Since communication channels are crucial in the exchange of information, PR professionals at higher educational institutions in Nigeria and other African countries are reportedly gradually and resolutely accepting social media and related new media technologies to interact with their diverse audiences, with the ultimate goal being effective relationship management and high-quality corporate communication. Schaffer (2024) observes that organisations and companies that used social media saw an improvement in customer loyalty and brand awareness over time. Additionally, small businesses have taken advantage of social media's extremely potent features and started their own initiatives to increase involvement.

It is imperative to consider the influence of social media on the full spectrum of corporate communication and public relations message development initiatives in the twenty-first century. Corporate communication actually has the potential to foster collaborative relationships and foster innovative and creative ideas and inventions (Linos, 2018). It facilitates communication between businesses and between company levels, as well as the actualisation of efficient and effective employee insights and engagement with internal and external publics.

College and other postsecondary students worldwide have embraced social media as a communication tool (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Dumford et al., 2023). Similarly, it's said that Nigerian institutions are using social media for PR and brand interaction. Research has shown that universities in Nigeria are active on social media (Inya, 2017; Olaleye et al., 2020). Specific results from similar studies, however, indicate that although universities are present on social media, it is still quite little (Akintola et al., 2017; Amali et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is not possible to compare how students utilise social media to how other university PR departments have adopted it. Numerous studies have demonstrated that Nigerian university students are active social media users with strong participation on various platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and many more (Akinwalere &

Adeosun, 2022). The consequence of the above is that students at these colleges have demonstrated interest in social media-backed communication endeavours, in contrast to the institutions that have demonstrated little interest in such platforms.

Since universities and colleges have adopted the social media network for various measures, even for online teaching; it is thus a matter of concern if some universities in North Central Nigeria particularly, Federal University Lokoja, Nasarawa State university, Keffi and Base university, FCT-Abuja have keyed into this concept. It is especially worst if the Public relations practitioners who are communication managers of these universities are still lagging behind in acquiring the necessary skills to surmount the communication barriers of these universities. It is in this connection that this study investigates the adoption and use of social media platform as public relations channels in relationship management of selected universities in North Central Nigeria with the study's primary goal of evaluating the chosen universities' adoption, presence, and usage of social media in order to comprehend the dynamics of their interactions with the public, both internal and external. This is with the intention of determining the platforms' efficacy as PR avenues used by the select institutions in North Central Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

It is interesting to note how the PR environment has changed over time, moving from a focus on mass media to a holistic strategy that embraces the usage of a variety of channels, including social media in modern culture. The idea underlying this significant shift and uptake is due to technological advancement and the need to use these technologies in our contemporary society. As a result, social media is increasingly and frequently utilised in public relations campaigns. Social media, with over 4 billion users (Mohsin, 2023), offers businesses a unique way to contact their audience with minimal effort. Bates (2022) asserts that the use of social media by PR allows it to reach a wider audience. Social media gives the common person a unique opportunity to establish their own platform, build an audience, and interact with them whenever they want (Mekky, 2019).

Social media as a PR communication tool is widely adopted and used in most academic settings across the world. In spite of adoption, PR practitioners have not done much to take advantage of social media platforms' capabilities to foster positive relationships for their institutions, according to a study conducted on higher education institutions in North West Nigeria

(Ende et al., 2020). The study's findings further showed that, even although adoption occurs, it cannot be characterised as complete. Asemah (2015) and Inya (2017), among other research, also found that there appear to be certain practitioners in Nigeria who have not fully embraced social media's potential to promote public relations programmes and efforts in their respective fields. For this reason, this study makes an effort to evaluate how several colleges in North Central Nigeria have adopted and used social media as a PR tool.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. identify social media platforms used as Public Relations channels by Universities in North Central Nigeria
2. find out the impact of social media usage as PR channels on the image of the selected universities in North Central Nigeria.
3. find out the challenges associated with the adoption of social media as PR channels by the select universities.

Conceptual Review

In this study, the concepts of public relations and social media are reviewed. Social media is an assortment of applications and websites that let users engage in social networking activities and exchange materials. It is an online space that can take the shape of webpage collections or programme created especially to facilitate content sharing among users who are also permitted to partake in "social" networking based on the features and attributes provided. Consequently, platforms facilitate communication and micro-blogging (Valenzuela & Blockmon, 2023).

It is a digital technology that facilitates the exchange of ideas and information, including text and images, through online communities and networks. Its ability to facilitate user-generated content sharing and engagement as seen by comments, likes, shares, and discussions - is what makes it so strong. These platforms are beautifully replicable in that developers can provide several access points, including mobile applications, online platforms, and the web. This enables "on-the-go" access to and usage of social media platforms, in line with the norms of modern society, which emphasise digital collaboration. The suggests that the world is becoming more sophisticated in almost every aspect, including technical advancements (Valenzuela & Blockmon, 2023).

Social media has influence over netizens in the contemporary world. Depending on usage, it can function like a double-edged sword with divisive and unifying tendencies. It has the capacity to cause harm when used in misinformation, mishandling emotionally charged and thought-provoking issues in relationship. It could as well be very potential as channels in PR crises and relationship management (Weismueller, 2023).

Many attempts have been made to interpret the two words that make up the notion of "public" and "relations," which are commonly referred to as PR. Public relations comprises both a concept and a discipline. The idea that public relations (PR) is about building mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics is shared by many definitions put out by researchers, according to Asemah (2022). Any confusion that would result from using words and complicated terminology to describe PR at any one time was resolved by the claim. In an organisation's effort to preserve, cultivate, and/or respond to public discourse, public relations is also a component of strategic communication (Forsey, 2023). This definition encapsulates the essence of public relations (PR) and goes on to imply that PR encompasses more than just image management, but also an organisation's contributions to public debate.

Community engagement is a crucial component of public relations and can also impact public opinion. Community involvement, according to Izryadnov (2023), is one of the cornerstones of public relations (PR) and aims to cultivate positive relationships between an organisation and important stakeholders as well as the public. Asemah (2022) argues that an organisation is viewed as a vital component of the community and, as such, must make a conscious effort to offer the assistance that it needs in a number of areas, such as the provision of health services, financial support, recreational facilities, education, and much more. Additionally, organisations take on the responsibility of planning community events, sponsoring local projects, and contributing to other significant community causes that are consistent with their core principles.

Given how vital PR initiatives are to the expansion and advancement of society, it is impossible for the average person to comprehend the full effects of these initiatives on society. Also imperative to remember, though, is that public relations serve both the organisation and the public interest. It is also crucial to keep in mind that, because it is typically aimed at a certain group of people, humans are the

ones who gain from the brand's social responsibility as well as its communication strategy. More so, that PR involves people, not animals or other inanimate objects. Therefore, PR is considered as human communication efforts at creating opportunities for relationships and cementing same through strategic moves in respect to communication.

Review of Literature

Globally, the rise of social media is changing how society is organised and what it does. Social media's influence is felt in many areas of society. The educational sector is one of the key areas that social media has impacted. The dynamics of learning and teaching have changed as a result of the rise of social media. Therefore, any institution that does not integrate new media technologies into its operations runs the risk of missing out on global best practices when it comes to obtaining cutting-edge teaching resources that will improve learning.

Nannim, Njoku, Onuoha, Orji, and Njoku (2023) hold the opinion that most colleges use social media to market their brand to the outside world through a range of activities. This is because social media offers enormous benefits. In their study, they also observed that social media has shown to be an effective tool for raising tertiary students' academic performance when they use it to actively participate in their education. Studies by Friday, Ovwasa, and Nwosu (2024) at public universities in Nigeria attest to the high degree of social media adoption in the teaching of library and information science.

In their study, Buttang, Saleh, and Niswaty (2023) highlighted the critical role that social media plays in giving the university community access to sufficient and pertinent information. They emphasised that the public relations department must inform the university community about system developments for the university system to operate effectively. Important information regarding the activities of students and staff on campus needs to be properly distributed and presented. This may be essential in times of crisis to maintain the environment of safety and tranquility both inside and outside the university community.

According to Macnamara and Zerfass (2012), social media analytics is a crucial component of modern public engagement because it provides consultants and public relations officers with valuable data on audience behavior and preferences, which in turn aids in strategic communication. Additionally, one of the key areas where new media technology is significantly influencing the practice of public relations

is the effectiveness of assessing results in terms of research. Information and communication technology has made it easier and less laborious than in the past to determine the results of research. This has improved the information's overall efficiency and reliability to comply with global best practices.

Mavimbela, Conradie, and Dondolo (2018) state that there are also observable difficulties when using social media as PR tools. The most notable issue is content and space abuse because social media platforms feature user-generated content. The study also found that privacy is a problem, as in the length of time it takes for users to interact with platforms.

There are a lot of empirical studies on social media's usage for public relations in the twenty-first century, but not many of them concentrate on how universities throughout the globe are adopting and using it, which is why this study is necessary. It is essential to take into account some of these research in light of how they differ and how they are comparable to the current study. This is thought to be essential in order to synthesise the areas of concentration and identify the aspects of this study that set it apart from others. As a result, although several of the research efforts examined in this section are directly relevant to the current study, a few are just evaluated in order to capitalise on the current study's distinctiveness. Consequently, the following empirical studies are taken into consideration under this area.

According to the results of a study by Ende et al. (2020), participants had a broad understanding of social media's functions, types, and applications by organisations for public involvement. Further research revealed that social media is heavily used by both Federal University of Technology (FUTMinna) and Niger State College of Education, both located in the state capital of Minna. The two educational citadels employ Facebook and Twitter (now X) as their main social media channels for public relations. In essence, they use their official accounts on various platforms to notify staff and students about events taking place in the institutions. This confirms previous research that indicated social media was one of the platforms that institutions employed for public relations.

Raj, Joseph, and Rousseau (2019) studied a subset of practitioners in Bengaluru, also called Bangalore, which is a city in the Indian state of Karnataka. The most popular social media channel for business communication among corporate communicators in Bengaluru, according to the findings, is Facebook. This is predicated on the opinions of 95.24% of respondents who said they use

social media for that reason. Furthermore, it was found that practitioners in the city were making extensive use of sites like SlideShare, Tumblr, Twitter, blogs, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, Pinterest, and others.

According to the results of a study by Haroon-Sulyman, Olanipekun, Kadiri, and Tunde (2020), WhatsApp is the most widely used and dependable social media platform for educational purposes among instructors and students. Lecturers' and students' use of social media sites, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Classroom, and blogs, was determined. Of the platforms chosen from the survey, WhatsApp was found to be the most dependable and widely used. Additionally, some other social media channels were recognised as useful for university students' study and such include Google+ and Skype among others. Additionally, difficulties with their acceptance and use were noted in relation to issues with integrity and privacy, Internet services, electronic devices, technical know-how (knowledge), epileptic power supplies, and attention.

Nyabera and Lando's (2021) study looked at how social media affects public relations practices in Kenya's private institutions. Through improved communication, publicity, and engagement, social media improved service delivery in PR departments, according to their mixed-methods study. The study reviewed that social media improved public engagement and made information more accessible. In a similar vein, the current study investigates how PR professionals in North Central Nigerian colleges utilise social media. The two studies highlight the beneficial effects of social media on public relations strategies in educational environments. But while Nyabera and Lando concentrated on private universities in Kenya, the current study looks at public relations in a particular area of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Technological Determinism theory serves as theoretical base of the study. The theory was first proposed in 1962 by Thorstein Veblen but popularized in 1964 by Marshal McLuhan in his efforts to offer explanations on how technological advancement effects and shapes people's action, thinking, feeling and how societies operate and organize themselves. The theory connects technological innovations as a determinant for major historical and societal changes. It links the revolution in technology as a pace setter for communication and social change (Baran and Davies, 2012).

Technological determinism theorists interpret

technology in general and communications technologies in particular as the basis of society in the past, present and even the future. The theorists stressed that technology such as writing, print, television, and computer, etc. 'change society'. And that the entire society is run and seen determinably by the technology. The advancement in technology functions as a developmental magnet at all phases of the society to include how institutions like university interact with their publics, their channels of communication and relationship management (Anweh and Hile, 2021, Ukonu, Okoro and Agbo, 2013). This explains the possibility of social media platforms to revolutionize public relations profession and cause the desired changes in the university when used as PR channels.

A theory of this kind becomes more relevant when the issue hinges on a technology that facilitates global communication. The World Wide Web (WWW) and its attendant tools like the social media and websites supported by internet connectivity largely determines societal developmental strides. This is because information is power, power guarantees knowledge thus development. This leaves no doubt that the import of this theory conforms to a study that aims at assessing the adoption and use of social media platforms as public relations channels in relationship management of selected universities in North Central Nigeria.

Methodology

Survey research design was used for the study. The instrument of data collection was questionnaire. A multi-stage technique was applied to arrive at choosing FCT—Abuja, Kogi state and Nasarawa state as study area in North Central Nigeria. The same technique was adopted to choose three universities (Base university, FULokoja and NSUK) one from each of the three states. The PR staff from the three universities were purposively chosen as population of study. Data yielded; Base university-6, FULokoja-6 and NSUK-20; totalling 32 PR staff. The entire 32 staff were used as the sample size for this study because of its unique and manageable size. The method of data collection was through online WhatsApp platform survey link sent to the respondents. Data generated from the respondents were analysed using frequency tabulation and it yielded results.

Data presentation

The study yielded quite significant results as presented in the tables below:

Table 1: Social media type used as channel by universities. SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, SD=Strongly disagree, D=Disagree, %=percentage

Variables & Options	SA	A	SD	D	Total	%
LinkedIn as channel	2	-	-	-	2	6
X (formerly twitter) as channel	2	1	-	-	3	9
Facebook as a channel	6	3	-	-	9	28
WhatsApp as a channel	3	1	-	-	4	12
All the Options	10	4	-	-	14	44
Frequency	23	9	0	0	32	100
Percentage	72%	28%	0%	0%	100%	

Source: Field work, 2024

Figure: 1

Data on the table above and figure 1 revealed that 7% of the respondents adopted LinkedIn as their social media channel, 9% adopted X, 28% adopted Facebook, 12% adopted WhatsApp while the greater 44% respondents representing the entire population adopted all the social media channels. Inferably, while the PR practitioners in the select universities uses all the above-mentioned social media platforms as channels, specifically, Facebook is the most utilized platform for their engagements.

Table 2: Agreement on whether specific challenges a social media adoption. Keys: SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, SD=Strongly disagree, D=Disagree

Variable & Options	SA	A	SD	D	Total	%
Lack of SM operational knowledge	1	1	-	-	2	6
Poor network connection	3	2	-	-	5	16
Technophobia	-	-	-	-	-	-
Epileptic power supply	1	1	-	-	2	6
All the options	13	10	-	-	23	72
Frequency	18	14	-	-	32	100
Percentage	56%	44%	0%	0%	100	

Source: Field work, 2024.

Figure: 2

On table 2 and figure 2 above, 6% of the respondents demonstrated that the challenges they encountered in association with their adoption of social media as channels of PR practice in their university is lack of the operational knowledge, 16% indicated poor network connection, none indicated technophobia as a challenge, 6% indicated epileptic power supply, while 72% being the greater percentage of the respondents indicated to be challenged by all the above options. From the data presented on the above table, it is deducible that PR practitioners encounter among other challenges: lack of operational knowledge, epileptic power supply, but specifically, poor network connection as the challenge associated with the adoption of social media as channel of PR practice in the select universities.

Discussion of Findings

Results indicated that the chosen universities

actively use social media sites. This confirms findings from a related study that indicated colleges have social media profiles and use them to interact with the publics (Lund, 2019). Nonetheless, the study's conclusions revealed that a few of the social media channels utilised by the various PR departments of the chosen colleges were Facebook, X, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. Forty four percent of the respondents on Table 1 said that they use all of these platforms.

Data presented on Table 1 shows that Facebook is the most popular social media network with 28%, though with the respondents saying their PR teams use it as their primary social media platform, while 44% indicated they use all other social media platforms. This is consistent with the results of a study by Ende et al. (2020), which found that the most widely used social media platforms in FUTMinna, Niger State, Nigeria, are Facebook, websites, and Skype. Indeed, data indicated that 28% of survey participants confirmed that they are familiar with Facebook as the social media site used.

The results of the study showed that there was evidence to support the idea that using social media as a PR channel in a few chosen colleges in North central Nigeria is not without its difficulties. The study identified a few related difficulties, including an epileptic power supply, lack of operational experience but specifically poor network connection as the challenge associated with the use of social media as channel of PR practice. This is based on respondents' perceptions on Table 2 with 72% responses, according to which using social media as a medium for communication with colleges presents three challenges. The study conducted by Ende et al. (2020) yielded comparable results regarding the obstacles that hinder the use of social media as a public relations channel. These challenges include inadequate power supply, insufficient technical knowledge, subpar gadgets, insufficient funds, subpar ICT infrastructure, inadequate training, and high data acquisition costs.

Conclusion

People are realising the value and usefulness of social media on a regular basis, and it has become a valuable tool in the society for all social classes owing to its capacity to solve the communication and information need of our digital age. Furthermore, this is not exclusive to any one industry as continuous communication and information sharing are necessary in many fields of human endeavour, including security, aviation, education, health, and many more. The importance of participation and information sharing in the academic setting cannot be over. The demand

keeps expanding, ranging from providing information to potential students looking to enroll in different undergraduate and graduate programmes to informing the public about impending events like convocations, lecture series, conferences, and seminars, among other things. The study concludes that universities in North Central Nigeria use social media as PR channel with Facebook as a leading platform. There are however, a number of obstacles associated with the use of social media in the educational sector; they include lack of operational knowledge for social media, epileptic power supply, technophobia (fear of technology), lack of constant network and many more.

Recommendations

From the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Concerted efforts should be made by stakeholders to ensure access to social media platforms through the provision of strong signal and affordable data subscription rate. This can be championed by the regulators - the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) in conjunction with the telecommunication companies operating in the country. That way, the potentials of platforms as channels of engagement between organisations and their publics will be fully maximised.
2. PR practitioners in HEIs should identify and use all the social media in reaching a wide, diverse and heterogeneous audience members comprising of students, their parents and prospective students seeking admission to the different institutions. The platforms are not only affordable, but they are also easy to access and utilise on both ends.

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