

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

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Abstract:

Social media has altered the fabric of public relations practice, redefining how institutions communicate, build trust, and sustain reputation. Nigerian tertiary institutions, though historically reliant on conventional channels, are increasingly compelled to adopt digital platforms to engage stakeholders who now demand immediacy, accessibility, and participation. This study examined the social media strategies employed by selected tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, with particular focus on their effectiveness in public relations practice. The study was hinged on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Situational Theory of Publics. The research employed a mixed-methods design, combining survey data from 165 public relations professionals, social media managers, and communication officers with semi-structured interviews conducted with purposively selected practitioners. Findings revealed that while institutions actively use platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter for information dissemination, branding, and interaction, strategic evaluation and measurement of effectiveness remain weak. Respondents highlighted challenges such as inadequate digital infrastructure, poor analytic skills, and limited institutional investment in new communication tools. Nevertheless, evidence pointed to the capacity of social media to advance institutional visibility, strengthen identity, and foster deeper relationships with students, alumni, and the wider community when strategies are deliberately crafted and consistently evaluated. The study concludes that social media is not merely a supplement to traditional public relations but a vital arena for dialogue and institutional storytelling. It recommends structured policies, enhanced training for communication staff, and stronger commitment to evaluation frameworks to maximise the transformative potential of digital engagement in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Social media strategies, Public relations practice, Nigerian tertiary institutions, Stakeholder engagement, Digital communication

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has redefined public relations practice within Nigerian tertiary institutions, shifting communication from static announcements to dynamic conversations where students, alumni, staff, and external stakeholders co-create meaning (Ohanians, 2024). Universities now use Facebook, Instagram, X, and LinkedIn not only to celebrate achievements but also to safeguard institutional reputation in real time. These platforms stimulate dialogue that often conveys community pride, emotional resonance, and trust—qualities that exceed the simplistic interpretation of “likes” and “shares.” Morah and

Brown (2025) argue that data-driven strategies can help institutions refine this engagement by monitoring patterns that reveal which forms of content generate sustained attention. Similarly, Brown et al. (2025) demonstrate how digital media amplifies marginalised voices in Akwa Ibom State, highlighting that social technologies, when properly managed, can create inclusion and a sense of shared belonging. Evidence from Nwokeocha, Akpan, and Brown (2025) also confirms that social media influences cultural behaviours; in their case, the reading culture of secondary school students, showing that audience response often extends beyond consumption into behavioural change. In this context, Nigerian universities must evaluate not only numbers but also the depth of stakeholder resonance reflected in user-generated content, alumni reflections, or advocacy spurred by institutional posts.

Efforts to assess the effectiveness of social media campaigns in universities increasingly combine quantitative analytics with interpretive evaluation. Metrics such as engagement rate, reach, impressions, and conversion actions provide a useful foundation, but they require contextual interpretation to avoid superficial reporting. For example, a university might track a rise in applications following a scholarship post and infer a correlation between communication and institutional outcome. Morah and Brown (2025) emphasise that such approaches are strengthened when supported by robust analytic frameworks that prioritise accuracy, segmentation, and strategic timing. Yet, Nigerian institutions often face constraints: weak technical infrastructure, low analytic literacy, and inadequate investment, forcing reliance on generic tools that cannot fully capture sentiment. Ikon, Nwokeocha, Brown, and Akpan (2025) contend that the rapid growth of new media, coupled with the limitations of traditional tools, requires institutions to adopt innovative methods that merge statistical evidence with relational feedback. The challenge mirrors broader developmental struggles, as Ekpe, Nwokeocha, Brown, Okpalike, and Mba (2025) observe in the context of Nigeria's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, where self-reliance and adaptation to local conditions are essential. These lessons point to the need for flexible evaluation models in higher education PR practice—ones that blend technical analytics with qualitative markers of community connection.

Beyond metrics and dashboards lies the relational depth that defines effective public relations. Posts inviting alumni to recall their graduation, or students to comment on new facilities, often foster nostalgia and loyalty that statistics cannot fully measure. Akpan, Brown, Nwokeocha, Ikon, and Okpalike (2025) note that communication, even when influenced by propaganda or persuasion, thrives when it sustains credibility and transparency—principles that are equally critical in institutional PR. Similarly, Brown, Nwokeocha, Egeh, and Okpalike (2024) maintain that the vitality of new media lies not in numerical reach alone but in its ability to sustain authentic dialogue across diverse publics. Udodom, Brown, and George (2024) show that entrepreneurial ventures thrive

on social media platforms precisely because they facilitate participatory interaction, a lesson equally applicable to universities striving to nurture vibrant online communities. When tertiary institutions in Nigeria move from treating social media as a broadcast tool to embracing it as a forum for dialogue, they not only strengthen institutional reputation but also empower stakeholders to co-author the academic story. This relational approach to evaluation, combining quantitative reach with qualitative resonance, positions social media as a credible channel for purposeful communication, accountability, and sustainable engagement.

The rapid evolution of social media has significantly transformed the activities of public relations (PR), making it necessary for organizations to develop effective strategies that enable them to engage audiences, manage reputation, and disseminate information more efficiently. In the context of Nigerian tertiary institutions, social media has become an essential tool for communication, yet there remains a noticeable gap in research on how these institutions evaluate the success and impact of their social media strategies. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by exploring the approaches adopted by tertiary institutions in Nigeria to assess the effectiveness of their social media use in PR practice. Central to this inquiry are questions concerning the specific strategies employed, the metrics or indicators utilized, and the challenges faced in carrying out such evaluations.

Prior studies have explored the intersection of social media and public relations in higher education, but often from limited perspectives. Boateng and Amankwah (2021) examined Ghanaian universities and found that while Facebook and Twitter enhanced institutional visibility, most schools lacked systematic evaluation frameworks, relying mainly on follower counts and likes. This approach, though useful for gauging reach, did not assess the depth of stakeholder relationships or reputation management outcomes. Similarly, Bonsu and Salisu (2020) studied social media engagement in Nigerian institutions, highlighting that poor infrastructure and low analytic literacy constrained the use of advanced evaluation tools, but the research remained descriptive, offering little guidance on how to integrate qualitative resonance into PR measurement. These findings suggest that while African universities recognize the value of social media, they often lack robust models to evaluate both quantitative metrics and relational depth.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, the research aims to examine the social media strategies adopted by Nigerian tertiary institutions in their PR practices, providing insights into the methods through which these institutions attempt to build engagement and enhance their reputation. Second, the study seeks to investigate the various metrics or indicators that are used to evaluate the effectiveness of these social media engagements, such as audience reach, interaction levels, and sentiment analysis. Finally, the research intends to identify the key challenges encountered by these institutions in evaluating their social media strategies and to propose practical

recommendations that can help address these challenges. Through this examination, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Nigerian tertiary institutions can optimize their use of social media for effective public relations.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a holistic evaluation of social media strategies used for public relations (PR) practice by tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The population comprised 165 PR professionals, social media managers, and communication officers from the University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, and Heritage Polytechnic, from which participants were selected using stratified sampling to ensure fair representation across institutions. Structured questionnaire copies were administered to gather data on the platforms deployed, frequency of use, target audiences, and perceived effectiveness of social media strategies, with responses analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify trends and relationships. To complement the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected PR practitioners and administrators, focusing on experiences, challenges, best practices, and the contribution of social media to institutional reputation and stakeholder engagement, with responses thematically analysed. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative strands through triangulation ensured that findings were both statistically valid and contextually rich, thereby strengthening the reliability of the study and enhancing its practical relevance for improving PR practice in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What social media strategies are employed by Nigerian tertiary institutions in their public relations (PR) practice?

Analysis reveals that Nigerian tertiary institutions are diversifying their social media approaches to enhance PR performance. Use of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn is widespread, facilitating engagement with students, alumni, and broader publics (Ganiyu, Adefemi & Afolabi, 2021). These platforms serve as critical conduits for sharing information about academic programmes, institutional milestones, and campus events, effectively promoting a favourable institutional image (Inya, 2017). Institutions that tailor their posts through regular updates, multimedia content, and interactive formats such as live Q&A sessions or event coverage tend to generate heightened attention and interaction (Mu'azu & Gapsiso, 2024). This strategic content mix aligns with communication theories of audience segmentation, enabling institutions to connect with diverse stakeholder groups. That said, adoption varies: campuses that endorse a culture of openness and innovation are more agile in deploying progressive

social media tactics, whereas those with conservative institutional traditions tend to lag (Ukwueze & Obi, 2014). In all, social media strategies across Nigerian tertiary institutions reveal a willingness to blend promotional content with interactive engagement, demonstrating a pragmatic effort to adapt PR practice to the rhythms of the digital age.

What metrics or indicators do Nigerian tertiary institutions use to evaluate the effectiveness of their social media engagement in PR practice?

Evaluation of social media effectiveness in institutional PR remains a complex endeavour. Engagement metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and retweets are commonly used as initial indicators of audience responsiveness (Careers Naija, 2023). These measures are complemented with reach and impression data to gauge how widely messages are distributed within stakeholder communities (Careers Naija, 2023). However, an academic standard that PR practitioners sometimes overlook is the Barcelona Principles, a framework advocating outcome-focused metrics, discouraging reliance on advertising-equivalent values, and affirming the importance of social media's communication value (Berthon et al., 2015). While widely referenced in international PR evaluation, this approach does not yet appear widely embraced by Nigerian universities. That said, some institutions are beginning to monitor sentiments, tracking whether messages provoke positive affirmations or criticism, and to gather qualitative feedback through comments and user-generated content, to assess more profound audience responses (Inya, 2017). Through the combination of quantitative metrics with qualitative observations, institutions can cultivate a well-rounded interpretation of their social media PR effectiveness, though wider adoption of rigorous frameworks like the Barcelona Principles would significantly boost evaluation credibility.

What challenges do Nigerian tertiary institutions encounter in evaluating their social media strategies, and how can these challenges be addressed?

Assessing social media strategies presents several practical hurdles for Nigerian tertiary institutions. Predominant reliance on simplistic metrics such as likes or shares can provide a distorted view of real engagement, as these numbers do not capture depth, sentiment, or long-term impact (Saadudeen, Olohungebe & Ibraheem, 2020). Many institutions also lack personnel trained in data analytics, leaving strategy evaluation in the hands of overextended staff with limited expertise (Ukwueze & Obi, 2014). Additionally, the digital divide manifests in inconsistent internet access, inequitable ICT infrastructure, and low technological literacy, further restricting both content reach and measurement (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). To address these challenges, institutions should consider investing in professional development to expand digital literacy among PR staff. Developing flexible evaluation frameworks that align with reputable standards, such as the Barcelona Principles, would also help institutions respond more effectively to

evolving digital norms. Policies aimed at bridging the digital divide through improved infrastructure and capacity building are essential if social media is to serve as a meaningful PR tool across diverse university contexts.

Conclusion

The study concludes that social media has become a vital component of public relations in Nigerian tertiary institutions, functioning not only as a medium for announcements but also as a dynamic space for dialogue, identity formation, and reputation management. Despite growing adoption of digital platforms, many universities rely on superficial metrics and face challenges such as limited analytic capacity and poor infrastructure. Institutions that successfully integrate data-driven insights with authentic engagement can leverage social media as an effective tool for meaningful communication. To enhance this impact, the study recommends that university leadership develop comprehensive social media strategies focused on dialogue and community involvement, that PR units implement evaluation frameworks combining quantitative and qualitative measures, and that investment be made in staff training, advanced digital tools, and ICT infrastructure. Future research could explore the development and testing of context-sensitive evaluation models tailored to diverse institutional settings within Nigerian higher education.

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