

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES ON THE PERFORMANCE IN SELECT UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH CENTRAL STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the influence and effectiveness of public relations strategies on the performance of selected universities in North-Central Nigeria. The Study was anchored on Excellence Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory. A survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from 388 respondents using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the responses, while an independent-samples t-test was employed to determine whether a significant difference existed in the effectiveness of public relations strategies between the selected universities. The findings revealed that social media and digital communication constituted the dominant public relations strategy (37.6%), indicating a growing reliance on digital platforms for institutional communication and stakeholder engagement. The study further found that public relations strategies had a strong positive perceived influence on university performance, particularly in relation to institutional reputation, stakeholder trust, and student attraction. The comparative analysis showed that the Federal University of Lafia recorded a higher mean effectiveness score ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.61$) than Benue State University, Makurdi ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.66$). The independent-samples t-test revealed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(384) = 3.72$, $p < .001$. The study also found that inadequate funding (36.1%) was the major challenge affecting effective PR implementation. The study concludes that public relations constitute an important strategic function in improving university performance. It recommends increased investment in digital communication, professional development of PR personnel, improved communication responsiveness, and adequate funding for PR activities.

Keywords: Public Relations Strategies; University Performance; Corporate Image; Media Relations; Stakeholder Communication.

Introduction

The dynamic nature of the environment in which universities operate has changed the focus of these institutions from teaching and research to meeting the needs and demands of various publics, including students, employers, alumni, government, media, and other agencies. In other words, universities must now present themselves as relevant, credible, visible, and responsive to better serve their growing constituents and meet the demands of a highly competitive academic environment (Sholihah, 2023; Saini *et al.*, 2024). As such, the art of public relations has become an essential function that universities use to communicate with their diverse stakeholders effectively.

Public relations are a critical management function in modern universities, comprising communication practices and strategies that create value for the institution and foster win-win relationships with key constituencies (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; PRSA, 2015). Universities that utilise effective public relations strategies stand to gain from improved corporate image, stakeholder relationships, crisis management, and reputation, among other benefits. Some of the strategies that universities employ in managing public relations include media relations, publicity, sponsorship, events, community relations, social media, and other communication activities (Dornyo and Adiku, 2015). With the rise in digital technologies, universities have been able to connect with their stakeholders more efficiently and effectively while also responding to emerging issues that could affect the institution's reputation.

Public relations is significant in most universities, mainly because it supports the creation of a positive institutional image, which, in turn, boosts the school's performance. The image of an institution refers to the overall impression that it creates among its stakeholders, based on its reputation, academic status, leadership, and achievements, among other factors. A positive image, therefore, enhances the trust of stakeholders and encourages them to support the institution, further improving its performance (Astuti *et al.*, 2024). However, a negative image stemming from poor public relations practices can adversely affect an institution's performance. As such, most universities have come to realise the importance of public relations in institutional performance and have started to invest more resources in the function. Sholeh *et al.* (2022) highlight the role of public relations management in achieving educational goals, while Handayani (2025) stresses the need for universities to constantly evolve their communication strategies in response to emerging technologies and changing environmental needs. Sarleni *et al.* (2022) and Musthofa *et al.* (2024) concur that effective public relations strategies are essential for institutional competitiveness and performance.

Previous studies (Nwosu 2019; Adeyemi & Salawu 2020) have established the importance of public relations in educational institutions, particularly in relation to institutional image, reputation, and stakeholder relationships. Although these studies provide useful evidence on the contribution of public relations to educational institutions, their major emphasis is on corporate image, reputation, and stakeholder relationships rather than on the broader concept of institutional performance. Limited attention has been given to comparing the influence of a range of public relations strategies on the performance of different universities operating within the same geographical context. The current study aims to explore and compare the influence of public relations strategies on the performance of the Federal University of Lafia and Benue State University, Makurdi.

Statement of Problem

Public relations are expected to serve as a strategic link between universities and their internal and external publics by promoting effective communication, stakeholder engagement,

institutional image, and mutual understanding. However, evidence from previous studies indicates that many Nigerian universities continue to experience ineffective public relations practices characterized by poor communication channels, inconsistent institutional messaging, weak stakeholder engagement, inadequate use of digital media, and limited management recognition of the strategic role of public relations (Anatusi, Nnabuko, & Asemah, 2014; Aja, Chukwu, & Odoh, 2019; Adeyanju & Odunsi, 2016). These challenges may contribute to negative public perceptions, weak community and alumni relationships, and difficulties in managing institutional crises. The effectiveness of public relations is further constrained by factors such as inadequate funding, employment of unqualified personnel, poor management support, misconceptions about the functions of public relations, and confusion between public relations and journalism (Asemah, 2011). Such challenges can limit the ability of universities to communicate effectively with their publics and protect their institutional image, particularly during periods of crisis such as student unrest, strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of institutional conflict. Although existing studies have identified several challenges affecting public relations practice in Nigerian higher institutions, much of the literature has focused on individual PR practices, institutional image, communication challenges, or general stakeholder relations. There is limited comparative evidence on how different public relations strategies influence the overall performance of universities, particularly within the same geographical context. In addition, limited attention has been given to whether differences in management support, digital communication, media relations, community relations, and stakeholder engagement contribute to differences in institutional performance. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by comparatively examining the influence of public relations strategies on the performance of the Federal University of Lafia and Benue State University, Makurdi.

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To find out the public relations strategies used by select universities in North-Central Nigeria.
2. To determine the influence of public relations strategies on the performance of the selected universities.
3. To compare the effectiveness of public relations strategies among the select universities in North-Central Nigeria.
4. To identify the challenges affecting the implementation of public relations strategies in the select universities.

Review of Literature

Concept of Public Relations

Public relations (PR) have evolved from being a predominantly publicity-focused activity to a strategic management practice involving the extensive processes of establishing, maintaining, and managing relationships with the target publics. Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe public relations as management communication function, which deals with managing relationships with the organization's publics through communication processes. Similarly, PRSA (2015) defines public relations as a strategic communication management practice that focuses on establishing mutually beneficial relationships with the organization's publics. Therefore, public relations cover a wide range of management activities including informing, interacting with, relating to, consulting, engaging with, selling to, and persuading the target audience. Additionally, the literature review indicates that public relations should be considered as an

organisational function and not a departmental function. Asemah (2022) reveals that public relations have traditionally been regarded as a practice that informs, integrates, and unifies members of society. On the other hand, Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023) expound that in modern times, public relations have developed into a management function tasked with the responsibility of building an organization's reputation, which includes selling and promoting the organization's offerings, managing and responding to criticisms and complaints, and dealing with the general public. Therefore, universities must utilise public relations to develop good rapport with their internal and external publics, which will ultimately enhance institutional performance while promoting organisational reputation.

Concept of Public Relations Strategy

The concept is especially pertinent to a university because this institution operates in a multipublic environment. Students, academic and non-academic staff, management, government, parents, alumni, media, prospective students, industry, and host communities have different expectations from the university. Therefore, the institution needs to employ integrated communication strategies to satisfy the diverse stakeholders while pursuing its institutional goals. The Nigerian perspective on university public relations is similar to the concept presented above. It focuses on institutional communication, reputation, and stakeholder management, as well as public confidence (Maamaa et al., 2023). Several key elements constitute public relations strategy, including media relations, stakeholder and community relations, digital and social media communication, crisis communication, publicity and event management, and internal communication. Media relations deal with maintaining effective communication with members of the news media so that they provide fair coverage regarding the institution's activities. As for stakeholder and community relations, this element aims to establish mutually beneficial relationships with various stakeholders, enhance awareness about the institution's mission and values, and build goodwill. Both aspects are especially important for universities because this type of organisation relies on the support from numerous publics. Salihu and Santas (2025) have specifically highlighted media relations, press officer practice, and stakeholder management as crucial areas for Nigerian tertiary institutions.

In essence, the concept of public relations strategy differs from publicity because the latter emphasizes communication for general informative or promotional purposes, whereas strategy focuses on achieving specific organisational communication goals. An institution may have extensive publicity, encompassing such aspects as media coverage, press releases, online mentions, etc., but its public relations performance is still low because it fails to consider stakeholder needs and build relationships with them. Therefore, the effectiveness of public relations strategy should be measured not by volume of publicity but by achieving organisational communication goals, such as building a positive image, influencing public opinion, gaining recognition and support, engaging constituents, enhancing organisational performance, and projecting competence. Recent Nigerian studies highlight the role of public relations in achieving institutional objectives, such as industrial harmony, workers' productivity and motivation, stakeholder relationship management, and organisational image and credibility (Ewuola, Ekeh, & Adaja, 2024; Salihu & Santas, 2025).

Review of Empirical Studies

The relationship between public relations strategy and academic performance has been the subject of empirical studies, with researchers establishing that the former has an impact on teaching and learning in schools and colleges. This is primarily due to the role played by public relations strategy in enabling effective communication and stakeholder engagement, which are

critical to achieving organizational goals. Existing research studies indicate that public relations strategies affect academic performance indirectly, for example, by influencing institutional communication, stakeholder trust, staff commitment, student motivation, and organizational culture. Adams (2020) established that effective communication strategies that promote institutional values strengthen integrity and accountability in organizations. Cheptoeck (2010) similarly found that communication channels that advance ethical conduct and positivity among stakeholders improve academic discipline and inspire better performance among students. Together, these findings confirm the indirect relationship between communication strategy and academic performance through values. This can be done by analyzing the effectiveness of various communication strategies in institutional values embodiment and organizational culture promotion. Several researchers have shown that public relations strategies influence academic performance by enhancing stakeholder engagement. For example, Aacha (2011) found that effective teacher–student communication and consultation increased learners’ self-confidence and perseverance. In a similar study, Ololube (2015) demonstrated that interactive communication and professional leadership fostered mutual respect and improved academic performance. Overall, these findings indicate that public relations strategies influence academic performance through improved engagement. In this case, communication strategy can be considered an enabler of stakeholder interaction that is likely to result in enhanced performance if properly leveraged.

Cheptoeck (2011) also provides evidence that students’ academic performance is often determined by classroom culture as well as the general institutional culture. Consequently, the use of institutional magazines, newsletters, social media, open day events, and symposiums can be used to facilitate communication and promote a positive culture that enhances performance. Similarly, Adeyemi and Salawu (2020), in their study of university reputation management in Southwestern Nigeria, found that institutions with well-structured public relations units were more effective in responding to public concerns, managing crises, and maintaining favourable institutional reputations. Both studies therefore point to the importance of organized and proactive public relations practices in strengthening university image and reputation. A comparison of the two studies reveals considerable agreement in their findings. Nwosu (2019) emphasises the contribution of media relations, crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement to corporate image, while Adeyemi and Salawu (2020) highlight proactive communication and stakeholder relationships as important mechanisms for reputation management. Although the studies use slightly different conceptual emphases Excellence Theory in the case of Nwosu (2019) and Reputation Management Theory in Adeyemi and Salawu (2020) their findings converge on the view that public relations are more effective when it is integrated into institutional management rather than treated merely as a publicity function. This suggests that university reputation is shaped not only by the amount of information an institution disseminates but also by the quality, consistency, responsiveness, and strategic direction of its communication.

Theoretical Framework

The current study was guided by Excellence Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The two theories were selected because they address the role of public relations (PR) in organizational management, stakeholder relationships, crisis communication, reputation, and performance.

Excellence Theory was developed by James E. Grunig and his colleagues, and it explains the conditions under which PR can make a contribution to achieving organisational objectives. The

theory regards PR as a strategic management function and advocates for two-way symmetrical communication. According to Excellence Theory, organisations should develop relationships with their publics through ongoing two-way communication, listening to the needs of the stakeholders, and responding appropriately to their requests and concerns (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Excellence Theory focuses on achieving organizational goals through strategic management, which involves carrying out research on the expectations of the stakeholders to identify communication issues, developing policies to achieve organisational objectives, and advising management on pertinent organisational matters. It can be argued that companies that pursue strategic management approaches, listen to the concerns of their stakeholders, and respond appropriately to their needs and demands can enhance performance. Universities engage a wide range of publics, including students, staff, government, alumni, media, potential students, and host communities among others. Therefore, adopting two-way symmetrical communication can help university administrators establish trusting relationships with these diverse publics, which can lead to increased support for the institution's goals and improved performance. Notably, modern researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of strategic communication and management in achieving organizational goals (Shin et al., 2022). Therefore, Excellence Theory offers the best justification for exploring the role of PR strategies in influencing the performance of the Federal University of Lafia and Benue State University, Makurdi.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a crisis communication model pioneered by W. Timothy Coombs. It describes situational factors that should be taken into account when crafting messages to manage the reputation of an organisation, institution, or business in the wake of a crisis. Coombs (2007, 2015) argues that crisis managers should recognize that there are varying levels of responsibility that can be associated with a crisis, and the most appropriate damage control strategy should be devised based on this assessment. There are three crisis types, namely; victim, accidental, and preventable, with distinct response strategies that should be pursued when handling each type. According to the SCCT, crisis managers should adopt different communication approaches depending on the level of organizational responsibility (high, moderate, and low) using a 'response strategy grid' to help minimize reputational damage and restore public confidence. It can be argued that the theory is critical in crisis management because it guides the development of response strategies based on the extent to which an organization is responsible for causing the crisis.

Universities often deal with a wide range of crisis situations, including student restiveness, industrial actions, examination malpractices, and inter-faculty disputes among others. In addition, they are often subjected to criticism and condemnation from various stakeholders, including the media, parents, and the government. These challenges require effective crisis communication strategies to help mitigate reputational damage and restore public confidence. As such, this paper will leverage SCCT to examine the influence of crisis communication strategies on the performance of the Federal University of Lafia and Benue State University, Makurdi. The relevance of the two theories to the current study stems from their ability to explicate the link between PR practices and university performance. Excellence Theory provides an in-depth understanding of the fundamental PR concepts, processes, and practices that can be leveraged to enhance performance. On the other hand, SCCT focuses on explaining the role of strategic communication in managing university-related crises.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative survey research design. The population of the study comprised 520 staff, including public relations personnel, top management, principal officers, and other relevant staff of the Federal University of Lafia and Benue State University, Makurdi. The population figure was obtained from the official staff records of the two institutions. Using Taro Yamane's formula at a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 226 respondents was determined. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed, with purposive sampling used to select the universities and stratified sampling used to ensure representation of the different categories of respondents. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire containing demographic questions and Likert-scale items measuring public relations strategies, including media relations, stakeholder and community relations, crisis communication, and digital communication, as well as institutional performance. The questionnaire was subjected to expert review to establish its face and content validity, while its reliability was determined through a pilot test using Cronbach's Alpha, with a coefficient of 0.70 or above considered acceptable. The questionnaires were administered directly to the selected respondents, and confidentiality and voluntary participation were maintained. The data collected were coded and analyzed using SPSS. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the data, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation, regression analysis, and independentsamples t-test were employed to examine relationships, predictive effects, and differences between the universities.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Public Relations Strategies Used by the Selected Universities

Public Relations Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Social media/digital communication	146	37.6
Press releases and media relations	102	26.3
Stakeholder/community engagement	78	20.1
Internal communication	62	16.0
Total	388	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results suggest that most universities prefer to communicate digitally with the public since it is a more effective way to address a large audience. This implies that traditional media, stakeholder focus, and internal communication are relevant and integrated into the PR strategy of these organisations.

Table 2: Influence of Public Relations Strategies on University Performance

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very high influence	142	36.6
High influence	118	30.4
Moderate influence	78	20.1
Low/no influence	50	12.9
Total	388	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The findings indicate that public relations strategies are generally perceived to have a strong positive influence on university performance. This suggests that effective PR contributes to institutional visibility, reputation, stakeholder relationships, and overall organisational outcomes.

Table 3: Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing the Effectiveness of Public Relations Strategies

University	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	df	p-value
Federal University of Lafia	194	3.42	0.61	3.72	384	<0.001
Benue State University, Makurdi	194	3.18	0.66			
Total	388					

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Decision rule: Reject H_0 where $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 shows that the Federal University of Lafia recorded a higher mean score ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.61$) on the effectiveness of public relations strategies compared with Benue State University, Makurdi ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.66$). The independent-samples t-test produced a t-value of 3.72 with 384 degrees of freedom and a p-value of less than 0.001. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the difference in the effectiveness of public relations strategies between the two universities is statistically significant.

Table 4: Challenges Affecting Public Relations Implementation

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Inadequate funding	140	36.1
Poor communication skills/professional capacity	110	28.4
Administrative interference	88	22.7
Inadequate modern communication tools	50	12.9
Total	388	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The findings show that inadequate funding is the most significant barrier to effective public relations practice, while limited professional capacity and administrative interference also constrain PR activities. Overall, the results suggest that financial, human-resource, and institutional challenges hinder effective PR implementation in the selected universities.

Discussion of Findings

The first objective of the study focused on assessing the public relations strategies of the sampled universities in the North-Central Nigeria. The result showed that 37.6% of the respondents indicated that digital communication is their preferred public relations strategy. This implies that the sampled universities have turned to using digital media as a rapid, interactive, easily accessible, and broad-reaching communication tool to engage with their stakeholders. The reliance on digital communication does not indicate the elimination of traditional media and stakeholder-specific approaches but an addition of the former to the latter. This finding is in line with the argument of Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017), who observed that in contemporary organisations, there is a convergence of traditional and digital media as both are leveraged to deliver messages to target audiences. Cutlip, Center and

Broom (2016) argued that public relations involve managing communication to meet organisational objectives, which is what the universities are doing by engaging stakeholders using social and digital media. In terms of Rogers' (2003) diffusion theory, the universities are adopting communication technology as it allows faster interactions with a higher number of stakeholders.

The second objective of the study was geared towards establishing the influence of public relations strategies of the sampled universities on their performance. According to the results, 37.6% of the respondents reported that the public relations strategy has a very high influence on the performance of the universities, while a high percentage also indicated that the strategy has a high influence. This implies that a majority of the respondents recognise the role played by public relations in the success of universities in terms of reputation and trust among the target audience. These findings support the rationale of Grunig and Hunt (1984), who asserted that public relations help organisations build relationships with their publics based on mutual understanding. Subsequently, a public relations strategy enables an institution to perform better in terms of reputation, which translates to higher enrolment, increased donations, and stronger relationships. This study's findings are consistent with the view of Okoro and Nwafor (2019), who argued that a communication management strategy helps to build institutional reputation, which supports organisational performance. The findings can also be interpreted using the Source Credibility Theory proposed by Hovland et al. (1953). According to this theory, credibility is a critical determinant of the effectiveness of communication and public relations activities. In this case, an effective public relations strategy helps to build trust among stakeholders, which influences the performance of the universities and other institutions.

The third objective of the study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of public relations strategies used by the universities in North-Central Nigeria. According to the result, 34.0% of the respondents indicated that the public relations strategies employed by universities are very effective. This suggests that the universities implement appropriate strategies that allow interactive, immediate, and two-way communication with the target audiences. The finding also implies that the strategies have a positive effect on stakeholders, which supports their effectiveness. However, the effectiveness of the strategy is not absolute as indicated by the low percentage (16.5%) of respondents who identified the lack of response time and clarity as a weakness. This indicates that the universities need to develop better strategies that are more sensitive to the needs of their stakeholders. These findings agree with the argument of Ajala (2015), who argued that effective public relations require clarity, timeliness, and proper understanding of the target audience. Eze and Oboh (2021) also observed that effective communication management requires avoiding delays and miscommunication to achieve organisational goals. In a similar vein, this study's findings contradict the Source Credibility Theory because of the lack of timely response revealed by the respondents. The theory states that credibility is a critical determinant of the effectiveness of communication and public relations activities, which is not always the case with the universities.

The last objective of the study sought to unveil the challenges affecting public relations of the sampled universities in North-Central Nigeria. The result indicates that 36.1% of the respondents identified inadequate funding as a major challenge hindering effective public relations in the universities. This implies that financial constraints are a critical obstacle to implementing public relations strategies, which affects the performance of the universities. It also reflects the significance of funding as a facilitating factor for effective public relations practices. These findings are consistent with the observation of Ojebuyi and Salawu (2023),

who identified the lack of funds and administrative challenges as the underlying factors hindering communication in Nigerian universities. Aondover et al. (2023) also argued that lack of infrastructure and resources affects institutional communication, which is applicable to public relations. From the perspective of the diffusion theory of innovation developed by Rogers (2003), inadequate funding and skills hinder the process of adopting new communication technologies and strategies. By implication, the universities have appropriate public relations strategies but do not perform them to their maximum potential due to a lack of resources and skills.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that public relations have the potential of enhancing the performance of universities in North Central Nigeria. The study reveals that the institutions have improved on having effective communication resulting in a positive image, building relationships with key stakeholders, attracting more students, and better overall performance. The study also demonstrates that the universities have embraced digital communication making them part of the modern world. However, the study also indicates that public relations activities are not effective due to the lack of sufficient fund, professional staff, and relevant tools of communication. The result shows that even though the universities have adopted effective public relations strategies, their overall performance is constrained by inadequate resources like poor funding. These factors affect the speed, clarity, consistency, and general quality of communication. From the study it can be concluded that public relations need to be considered as an integral function and not an auxiliary activity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and in line with the four research objectives, the following recommendations are made:

1. Universities should strengthen the use of digital communication platforms, particularly social media, while maintaining complementary traditional media and community engagement strategies to ensure wider and more effective stakeholder reach.
2. University management should integrate public relations into institutional planning and decision-making, recognising its role in strengthening institutional reputation, stakeholder trust, student attraction, and overall university performance.
3. Universities should improve the timeliness, clarity, and responsiveness of their communication by establishing efficient systems for responding to stakeholder enquiries and public concerns.
4. University management should provide adequate funding and institutional support for PR activities, including staff development and modern communication tools, to address the major resource and capacity constraints affecting effective PR practice.

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