

REVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE AS PUBLIC RELATIONS CHANNELS BY SELECT UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is not a fact in dispute that public relations practice has taken a new turn with the arrival of the social media and this in turn significantly altered ways universities interact with its publics. But this interactive and information management potentials of the social media in connecting people has not been fully harnessed by the universities in connecting its diverse publics. This study, relying on available literature, published research works, seminar papers and anchored on two-way symmetric theory reviews use of social media as channels of public relations by select Universities in North-Central Nigeria. It is demonstrated in the literature that public relations practitioners in the universities seem not to be living up to expectation in using social media platforms for the management of information, crisis and interacting with the publics of the universities. This study therefore, takes the position that the public relations practitioners in the universities as a matter of necessity has to be sensitised, educated and really helped to improve upon in the art of using technology and social media in the management of universities' information, interactions and bridge the communication gab with its publics in a digital world.

Keywords: Social media, public relations, channels, university, practice.

Introduction

Some decades ago, in Nigeria and other parts of the world, news and other pieces of information were only accessible when one bought a newspaper, watch television or listened to radio news regularly. However, all that is now history as the ingenuity of social media technology and World Wide Web (WWW) which connects computer around the World has altered the narrative (Inobemhe, Ugber and Udeh, 2020). Nowadays, at any given opportunity whether in the bathroom, streets, bus, taxis, railway terminal, office, restaurant, place of worship and classroom, it is not uncommon to observe that people, especially students are always chatting on one social media platform or the other (Nwabuzor and Ekerikevwe, 2015).

This internet innovation via web 2.0 brought in a new dawn in public relations profession and its practice in the university.

Unlike before, universities now create websites, operate homepages with detailed information through which they communicate and update their diverse public across the globe on stringent issues that borders the university. Accordingly, Aja, Chukwu and Odoh (2019) note that application of the relevance of internet/website in university public relations practice will entrench professionalism that will improve the image of the university and enhance effective communication. More so, while generating a university website, it is essential for public relations practitioners to guarantee that the website designed for the university utilizes the interactive benefits of internet that sees for a two-way flow of communication since receiving information from the universities' publics is as sacrosanct as informing them (Aja, Chukwu and Odoh, 2019).

These technological revolutions and innovations that led to the evolution of social media in communication spectrum have significantly contributed to the growth in social advocacy and professionalism. It certainly has no doubt, tremendously impacted on the practice of public relations and journalism globally (Nyabola, 2023). Although to some analysts, the entrenchment of social media in the practice of public relations is a development that is yet to fully create positive impacts on the profession expectedly. Yet other scholars see the impact of the combination of the two elements as powerful tools, owing to the fact that it has helped in boasting the channels of communication now available to Public Relations Practitioners in the universities. That notwithstanding, as a profession that reclines more on two-way communication via social interactions, Akande (2021) states that public relations practice, be it in the universities or other institutions has literally found an ally in social media tools like WhatsApp Facebook, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and Twitter among others in furthering its cause/course.

This is to say, crisis affecting the various individuals or publics relevant to universities could be constructively dissected and resolved by the public relations practitioners of the universities on their social media platforms like Facebook pages, Twitter handles, etc. Similarly, breaking news and other crucial occurrences in the institution could be instantly communicated to the relevant publics by the PR manager through these universities' platforms, thereby achieving two-way communication (Akande, 2021).

Hill and Tarnaha (2020), affirm the level of social media usage in public relations practice by universities to be high. Oyeleke (2021) collaborate that public relations and

crisis management strategies in the universities have significant effects on the staff performance. For Anweh and Hill (2020), the digital tools of websites and other social media platforms have been adopted by universities' PR units to enhance their communication activities. Although the practitioners do not use the social media and websites to frequently update recent news about the institutions. As a result, the websites of the institutions are not interactive in the actual sense. They scholars admit that notwithstanding constrains like: finance, time, resources that militate against the uses of such digital tools, it is capable of curtailing negativity such as students' unrest and general insecurity on the campuses.

Scholars like Inya (2017) argues that traditionally, billboards used to be the channels through which the university communicates with its internal publics but the novelty of some social media platforms has become substitute channels preferably by students who form major publics of the universities. He added that university PR managers no longer wait for the traditional media to publish their press releases; they provide updates on the universities' activities using blogs, Facebook and twitter platforms. The researcher adds that though the social media can be used to instigate crisis in the universities, but they also provide faster channels for university PR managers to combat rumours and respond to potential harmful comments against their institution (Inya, 2017).

Though, Odimabo and Obinichi (2018) observe that a substantial number of public relations officers are cyber-phobic and technophobic and consequently, unable to explicitly use social media to carry out their functions in the universities. This unfortunately, discourages the incorporation of the social media as channels of

communication by these information experts. The researchers noted that the social media is being meagrely used as a result of these phobias. They traced this to be the reasons for image damage and the undermined reputation of the universities by incessant, often avoidable school fees increment crisis, students' unrest, strike actions occasioned by likely delayed feedback and slow information dissemination being a cardinal feature of the traditional media. Their study revealed the causes of this backdrop among others to include: poor/shortage electricity supply, internet connectivity, unskilled personnel and non-maintenance of ICT facilities.

However, the issue of public relations being used as part of decision making body in universities is well enshrined in literatures according to (National School of Public Relations Association, 2012) cited in Hile and Tarnaha (2020). The need for growth of public relations practice in colleges, universities and other institutions of higher learning has become very important in recent years. In their view, they state that senior PR administrators' role is to participate in decision-making for the institutions. This in furtherance explains how public relations play the role of a modern management function in the universities. Although artful exercise of the profession in most of the universities is being consigned to backdoor office only with the primary concern of managing the universities reputation; indicating that public relations roles in the university is being given a shallow view.

Social media has been adopted by universities' public relations practitioners, evident from existing literature (Hile and Tarnaha, 2020; Anweh and Hile, 2021; Taofeek and Oyedeji, 2021), however, the problems are that social media have not been fully used as PR channels by universities; the factors negating against its usage as PR

channels by universities despite its potentials is not very clear and reasons why it should be adopted as PR channels by universities is not well founded. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to review social media use as public relations channels in select universities of North-Central Nigeria.

Literature Review

A number of studies have been carried out by researchers on social media and public relations practice in universities. For instance, a study by Anweh and Hile (2021) in their study of Page header, primary text, navigation, graphics, contact options and footer discovered that the universities adopted the digital tools of website and other social media to promote public relations activities and enhance communication. Although they were unable to effectively and frequently update the institution's websites on recent news probably because of the universities' omitted social media platforms like, WhatssAp, Facebook and twitter as their channels of communication and this hampered the websites interactive. Among the hindrances of the universities in digital tools operation were financial constraint, inadequate time and human resources. The study however, showed that effective management of the digital tools like the social media will enhance communication and curtail negativities like students' unrest in the universities. They researchers therefore drew conclusion on the need for improvement in the use of digital technologies among universities in Benue state which is North Central Nigeria. As such, the universities' social media platforms should be regularly updated through university's PR experts to achieve effective information management.

For Hile and Tarnaha (2020), the university uses public relations strategies to build its corporate image and contributed to the long-term growth of the university by

building an enduring relationship with students, faculty members, the general staff and the university community. The scholars suggested that the university should take the issue of timely dissemination of information very seriously by providing quick and accurate information to its publics to avoid unnecessary apprehension.

In the same vein, Taofeek and Oyedeji (2021) stressed that there is a high level of access to the Internet facility among the public relations practitioners. But most of them used the Internet mainly for chatting with friends, conducting research and sending e-mails, while the use of Internet for information dissemination was the least. The study further indicated that most of the image makers still rely on traditional media (newspaper, radio, television and billboard) for communication. More so, that the commitment of public relations practitioners towards news and article on the internet was still very low. The study deduced clear evidence of preference for the traditional media and use of Facebook above all other platforms of the social network.

The study concluded that the use of social media has a greater positive impact on the practice of public relations in higher institutions. That effective usage of social media gives opportunity to PR practitioners to connect its critical publics together. Since primary publics of the university are students who seem to interact more in the language of social media; it is recommendable that the educational institutions should tap into the new means of dissemination and bridge the barriers that existed between the institutions and its diverse publics.

Also, Aja, Chukwu and Odoh (2019) posited that the new media technologies present new challenges to media relations practice in Nigeria and that there are as well new prospects features inherent in the

emerging media technologies that the PR practitioner might leverage on and work from home. Whereas, some users of social media mainly take advantage of the technology to interactively relate with families, friends and business associates, some simply employ it to reach out to diverse communities that exist therein (the various platforms). The emergence of these social media platforms has avail individuals, organisations and groups the luxury of communicating across physical and cultural borders at a relatively cheaper cost. Businesses, vocations and careers of different endeavours around the world, including the public relations have taken advantages of the ubiquitous, accessibility and spread of social media to market products, ideas, thoughts and services of different kinds such as campaigning, electioneering, mobilisation, crisis management etc.

This is possible because social media is a multipurpose interactive communication platform where messages could be packaged and communicated in the form of videos, comics, songs, stories, among others. Most of such information are easily communicated on twitter, blogs, Facebook pages, wiki, Youtube and others. Even without these websites, the social media applications are readily available to users with electronic tablets, androids, smartphones, etc. The BlackBerry Message (BBM) is an example, on BBM handles; news and information of different kinds are made with ease of broadcasting and even modification. More so, is the whatsapp application which possesses essential elements in facilitating, formulating and dissemination of information. These social media applications are intertwined in functionality and usage. Users who own Facebook pages, twitter handle for example can operate with ease on Blackberry Messenger application (BBM) and

upload videos and other documents from their smartphones to youtube (Onwe, 2016).

These web 2.0 internet base media combines audio with visual to appeal to a wide spectrum of the society. It has become the popular choice of the global news audience. The first leap into the realm of social media was in 1971 by Ray Tomlinson but the Internet penetrated Nigeria in 1996 after the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) agreed to grant license to 38 internet services (Ogenyi, Ebiri and Akpan, 2020).

While there are disputed claims as to who coined the term 'Social media', researchers like Jeffery, Stephanie, Casey and Diana (undated), observe that the term appears to have emerged in the early 1990s in connection with emergence of web 2.0 internet-based communication tools that facilitates online interactivity. They bemoan however the difficulty in formulating a universally acceptable definition that encapsulates all the technologies and activities associated with social media because the media is not defined by any specific scope, format, topic, audience or source (Yakubu, Temidayo, Yusuf and Adamu, 2020).

Greg, Chika and Edogor (2013), social media are contemporary interactive platforms or channels of communication where people interact, relate, connect with each other through sharing of experience, ideas, information, message, pictures etc, of common interest within a shared field of knowledge. The social media platforms among others are: Twitter, Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, whatsapp, QQ, Q zone, Tencent, Google+, wechat, Tunmlr, Baidu, Line, snap chat, Line, Viber, Tieba, Sina Weibo, Skype, Vicontakte, Digg.com, Pinterest, Xing, Y.Y.com, Tagged, Renren, Reddit, Myspace, LinkedIn, Telegram, etc. According to these scholars, it is the

interactive features of these media which allow its audience to participate in creating, sending and receiving messages in any form, from any part of the globe which is what actually distinguished these media from the traditional media. These unique features according to Manning (2014), has divided the social media era into two: broadcast era and the era that marks unceasing interactivity.

Tong, (2018), argues that comparatively, social media is more 'social' than the conventional media and with its introduction, audience are now not only information consumers but they create contents and disseminate it unhindered in any way. This also resonates well since on virtual environment or online platforms, news creation and information dissemination is faster and cost little or nothing compared to what it used to be with traditional media (McNair, 2017; Tong, 2018).

As the media keep expanding alongside evolving technology, there are also new terms such as hashtags (#), handles @, 'likes', 'posts' and can more oftentimes confuse the users. It has drastically influenced, impacted and changed the mode of individuals, professionals, organisational and societal channels of sending, receiving of information and maintaining relationships. This is with a particularly concern with its use as channel of public relations practice in universities (Akande, 2021).

It has been reported both by traditional and non-traditional media outfits, argued and documented by researchers like (Aliede, Chika and Achioko, 2020) on how social networking especially the social media is seriously affecting information management, interactivity and how universities operate. That prior to the inception of social media, the heavy burden of over-reliance on the traditional media which is often more costly has been lifted off

the shoulders of PR practitioners. So, with a functional website, twitter handle and Facebook page, modern day PR practitioners no longer have sleepless nights on possibility of reaching out to their target audience at appropriate time, with the correct information at the affordable cost (Aliede, Chile and Achioko, 2020).

More so, in these modern times for any individual, institution, businesses, etc, in both developed and developing society to excel, creation and maintenance of a mutual relationship with its contemporaries especially in an interdependent society like ours is not negotiable.

Aliede, Chile and Achioko, (2020) have noted that a key to organisational success in the 21st century will be relationships. These scholars stressed that the level of excellence attained in maintaining relationship between a university and its publics is an indication of a proactive, effective function of the university's PR function. It is the establishment and maintenance of this relation for mutual benefit between institutions and its key publics that reflects public relations definition as management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends (Hile and Tarnaha, 2020).

In this context, Amisha and Robina (2017) observe the practice of public relations in diverse organisational forms, from public affairs roles or in-house government to corporate communication roles in large, medium, small listed and non-profit organisation. Through a strategically planned communication and management, public relations create an enhanced institutional reputation as well as build and secured relationships that are essential to the institution and its objectives/goals.

For Rabi (2020), PR managers can function in a number of places: labour unions, government ministries, private industries, departments and agencies, charitable enterprises, international organisations, political institutions, music's art, religious groups, non-governmental organisations (NGO), civil societies, etc. In his view, whichever area a beginner in the profession indulges, the objective is the same, which is being accepted by the publics. The public, whichever one the practitioner chooses to address is master, since the public reserves the acceptance or rejection. And no endeavour in this regard can strive without a reasonable degree of acceptability by the impersonal masses also known as the publics.

Amisha and Robina (2017) cited in Rabi (2020) further notes that most public relations are responsible for monitoring and responding to changes in the external environment, including issues, expectations, relationships, reputation and at the same time, also contribute to maintaining effective working environments within the organisation through employee communication. An effective communication between an employer and employee will sure explain organisational priorities and disseminate useful information on what is going on in the organisation; so as to enable employees understandably queue into the organisational vision and mission with committed efforts, innovative ideas and morale towards adopting the necessary changes that will help the organisation achieve its overall goals. Rabi (2020), emphasises that among the activities that might be considered normal for public relations' officer in an organisation are: planning and managing public relations advertising, planning and conducting meetings, advising on top management policy, preparing publicity items, attending meetings, planning and managing events,

planning public relations programmes, holding press conferences, writing and producing booklets, doing research on public opinion, making speeches, selling programmes to top management and to other employees, planning and sometimes directing films or video tapes, participating in policy decisions, talking to editors and reporters, writing speeches for others, screening charity request, conducting tours, making awards, writing letters, feature stories, posters, speeches, leaflets, greeting visitors and doing all other things that involves establishing contact with the publics. Contributing in this regard, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in Rabi (2020), he write public relations forces to include:

Writing: this involves the preparation of reports, booklets, news releases, broadcast copies, print copies, technical materials, speeches, trade paper, etc.

Editing: this has to do with formation of shareholders reports, employer – employee publications, management communication, newsletters, etc.

Placement: of contacts with the editors of newspaper, magazines, radio, TV stations and business publications that may carry values interesting enough for organisation or client publications.

Speaking: this has to do with apparent preparation for an engaging intellectual discussion before groups. The one who can skilfully speak to the group has an edge over those that can only write.

Production: it is concerned with some artful knowledge of graphical preparation of brochure, reports, their uses and supervision.

Institutional Advertising: this is an advert on a company's name and reputation rather than production or services.

Programming and counselling: it bothers on determining the needs, defining goals and recommending steps in carrying out the project.

A public relations man must know his media and learn how to write, distribute press release, interview memo, etc which are basic prerequisite in public relations practice. Each medium, newspaper, magazine, radio, television, social media platforms has its own house styles and contents. The public relations officer should have in mind their publics or readers they intend to reach with their write-ups. Smart public relations require a feeling for language, a knowledge of how to talk to different kinds of people. The valence of public relations is in reaching the publics with right messages. This is why public relations firms are often engaged to counteract bad/undesirable publicity (Rabi, 2020).

In managing public images and stakeholder's relationship in any institution, public relations officers employ a variety of strategies. And through consistent messages an institution is more likely to be known and looked upon favourably by key stakeholders. Another public relations management function is the crisis management which is usually strategically carried out through dialogue, mediation and negotiation etc. Universities' Public Relations Units are not left out in these strategies of communication with its publics through the social media platforms (Oyeleke, 2021).

Consequently, this work theoretically focused on a two-way symmetric theory of communication mechanism that emphasizes on using Public Relations to bring institutions and their publics together

through a mutual two-way beneficial communication. Adejoh (2021) emphasised that it is the idle way of improving an institution's reputation among its numerous interest publics. In this model, PR experts depend on a two-way communication to position their brand among end-users. It ensures a free flow of information communication between an institution and its publics- the stake holders, investors, employees and vice-a-versa. Misunderstandings and conflicts that may erupt in such an organization are better resolved through the public Relations crisis management approach of mutual symmetric communication that exists between the institution and its diverse publics. This maintains that communication takes place between two parties and the information flow tides in the desired form. The feedback from the stakeholders and target audiences are also taken into consideration.

Hile and Tarnaha (2021) adds that the key characteristics of this model is that institutions engage in a real dialogue with stakeholders, not just to persuade, but also to listen, learn and most importantly, adapt institutional behaviour as a result of the communication process. In contrast to linear one-way communication model, this is a circular two-way process, with the parties engaged in communication on equal terms. In other words, the two-way symmetric model takes into cognizance the needs, wants, demands, interests, likes and dislikes of both the publics and the organisations at the same time. This model can be seen as the current and most acceptable approach to PR management practices and the latest stage in the development of public relations as a management functions. At this, it uses research not only to shape messages, but to effect positive change. Public Relations practitioners, therefore, strive to put in place good information gathering and service system, a process of functional feedback

opportunities, getting management and her public together (Adejoh, 2021). The two-way symmetric model of public relations is relevant to this study because certain institutions like universities may not do without public relations considering the nature of services it renders, which is bringing the institutions and its publics together, hence its import to this study sacrosanct.

Methodology

This study employed library method to review existing studies on use of social media as channels of public relations by select universities in North-Central Nigeria. It is a method where most of the information sources are drawn from previous literature (Inobemhe, Ugber, Ojo and Santas, 2020). The research method was chosen by this researcher because according to Idamieba (2020, p. 19), 'it can easily uncloak the hiatus in the literature, thus providing other research findings on the subject matter with which the issues raised can be explicitly discuss'. The data were basically gathered from textbooks, journals, periodicals and online materials.

Discussion

At all levels, social media is used in various ways to solve communication needs. Available literatures show that university PR units have adopted social media as channels of communication but yet to fully utilise its potentials for effective interactivity, participatory and information sharing to meet needs of its diverse publics and university.

Perhaps, the decline in usage is orchestrated on the grounds among others that social media is a new media with its uniqueness. Unlike the traditional media, social media is internet enabling application that makes high demands on computer literacy and technical know-how on the users

and operators. Observed with dismay, most of the PR officers who are supposed to be the managers of their university websites, social media platforms handles, blogs, etc, are computer illiterate, inexperienced and technophobia (Odimabo and Obinachi, 2018). This in turn affects the extent of their output in using social media to achieve a corporate communication experience expectedly.

This is further exacerbated by the nonchalant attitude exhibit by practitioners who are indifferent to their personal plight of inexperience and professional backwardness. Most of them are not making stringent personal efforts for self-improvement. They lack self-motivation as a result, refused to upgrade, get updated and embrace the ingenuity of the modern media; which is why they rely more on traditional media of communication as noted by Anweh and Hile (2021). Unfortunately, their publics especially the students have gone very far ahead of them into the digital world such that they utilise their social media prowess to organise rallies, protests and campaigns or even cause crises with little or no hindrances or intervention from the PR experts. This is because they PR practitioners cannot achieve institutional crises management objective without strategic communication of which social media is a timely enabler.

Also peculiar to internet, social media users in Nigeria is the epileptic power supply experience. The social media tools rely mostly on energy/power generated devices, such as computers, android phones, etc; meaning that the extent to which social media platforms are accessed can largely be determined to a reasonable extent by the constancy and quality of power supply. But in North Central Nigeria, netizens do not enjoy 24 hours electricity; even the limited supplies rarely come daily and are often so

poor that it can hardly power the devices sufficiently.

Also observed, most universities in Nigeria don't have standard modern days ICT unit and still operate analogically. The lack basic essential tools like modern computers, android phones, devices and internet facilities. The few universities with ICT units are either under-equipped, sub-standard or with near obsolete tools. Worse still, the ICT units are not regularly checked, updated and maintained. The resultant effect leads to the universities' social media platforms becoming inactive and ineffective PR communication channels, by extension, poor PR service delivery (Nwaeke and Nsereka, 2016).

More so, some universities policies/modus of operandi down-plays the relevance of PR in their institution despite the pivotal roles it plays communicatively in maintaining mutual relationship among its publics and image building of the university. These PR units are often relegated to backdoor and fused into other departments (Taofeek and Oyedeji, 2021). Until the PR units are run separately from other departments with sense of inclusivity and recognition as part of the administrative policy making body of the university, they may not give in their best and its practice in the university might not attain professional prominence irrespective of the communication channels employed.

Conclusion

This study employed library method to review existing studies on the use of social media as channels of public relations by select universities in North-Central Nigeria. This paper, relying on the secondary data and works of the scholars reviewed, deduced that the social media is not completely neglected in usage by public relations practitioners in information management of the universities.

But the practice is yet to climb a crescendo height of success expected of a profession of its kind in a 21st century considering the many opportunities social media has presented to leverage on and achieve an all- round effective communication with its publics.

The studies reviewed indicate that majority of the public relations practitioners are computer illiterates, technophobic, lack technical know-how and inexperienced in social media operations. This is perhaps, why they still rely more on using the traditional media in the information management of the university even when the emergence of social media has given them better options as channels.

Consequently, this study concludes that the universities management has not and should sufficiently train, retrain and expose their public relations staff regularly on how to savage technology in the information management of their universities. More so, be educated on the advantages embedded in use of social media over traditional media in interacting with its diverse publics. With this in place, the paper concludes that universities public relations practitioners will attain both local and international best practices standard expectedly and realise its organisational communication goals in good time.

Recommendations

The universities' Public Relations in North-Central Nigeria should be well provided for and equipped with sophisticated modern technological and digital equipment to enable it meet up with the standard of world university best Public Relations practices. More so, the universities in North-Central Nigeria should sufficiently fund the Public Relations units and run it as an independent department to enable it carry out its functions effectively well. Since most of the universities public relations staff are computer illiterates, cyberphobic,

technophobic, etc, the university in North-Central Nigeria should organise symposiums, workshops for the staff from time to time, either monthly, quarterly or annually and employ the services of experts in these areas who will train and liberate them (the PR staff) from this phobi

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