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Navigating social media's influence on public relations in the 21st century: balancing challenges with opportunities

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Abstract

The integration of social media into public relations (PR) has transformed how organizations communicate, build trust, and respond to public sentiment. In Nigeria particularly in the Northwestern region limited research has explored this shift from the perspectives of PR professionals in Sokoto metropolis. The objectives of the study were to determine the roles, challenges, and emerging opportunities presented by social media in PR practice. Qualitative design was adopted, using Focus Group Discussion and interviews to collect data from PR professionals across sectors in the study area. Data were analyzed using Narrative analysis. The finding from the research revealed that while social media enhances audience engagement and brand visibility through real-time, two-way communication, it also introduces major challenges, including misinformation, crisis mismanagement, and ethical concerns related to AI, authorship, and data privacy. The study concludes that social media's influence on PR is both powerful and complex. While it creates room for innovation through tools like AI and influencer marketing, it demands careful strategy, ethical awareness, and technical adaptability. It recommends ongoing digital training, development of ethical PR frameworks, and adoption of culturally responsive communication strategies to help PR professionals balance innovation with responsibility.

Keywords: Social Media, Public Relations, Crisis Management, Ethical Communication, AI Tools.

Introduction

Public relations (PR), as both a concept and a practice, has developed significantly over the decades, reflecting broader societal, technological, and political changes. PR refers to the strategic management of communication between an organization and its various publics to build, maintain, and nurture mutually beneficial relationships (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). This field is not static but dynamic, adapting to the contexts in which it is applied.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Nigeria, where PR has grown from its traditional roots in colonial administration to its modern applications in corporate governance, media, and technology.

Public relations is fundamentally about building and sustaining relationships. Scholars like Grunig and Hunt (1984,) define Public Relation is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics. This principle shows the importance of PR in aligning organizational goals with societal expectations. Public Relations in the 21st Century is a strategic management function that uses communication strategies to help to build and maintain the relationship between organisations and their publics, Parsons (2010). Public Relations Society of America (PRSA,2011) defines PR as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Similarly, Jefkins (1998, p. 6) defines public relations as *"all forms of planned communication, outward and inward, between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding."*Seitel (2011) defined PR as a planned process to influence public opinion through sound character and performance based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication.

However, the advent of the Internet has generated enormous interest in the contribution of social media to numerous human endeavors including public relations. Moreover, the digital revolution has fundamentally transformed how PR is practiced. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram have empowered individuals and organizations to engage directly with their audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. This shift has significant implications for PR in Nigeria, where the increasing penetration of mobile technology has created new opportunities for real-time communication and audience engagement. For instance, the #EndSARS movement in 2020 highlighted the power of digital PR in mobilizing support and driving social change, showing the need for PR professionals to adapt to this new technology (Ogunyemi, 2021).

There is a recurrent interest in the literature of social media and its role in public relations from different scholarly perspectives. But most of the researches on the relevance of social media in public relations were conceptual and conducted outside Nigeria. So, the status of social media's influence in public relations remains yet a puzzle especially in Northwest Nigeria. Hence, the need to examine the roles, opportunities and challenges of social media from the perspectives of PR experts and professionals in Sokoto State.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this paper is to examine the roles, challenges, and opportunities presented by social media in public relations practices.

Research Objectives

i. To investigate the role of social media in facilitating audience engagement from the perspectives of public relations professionals in Sokoto metropolis.
ii. To analyze the challenges faced by PR professionals in Sokoto metropolis in addressing disinformation and crisis communication on social media.
iii. To explore the opportunities provided by social media PR practitioners operating in Sokoto metropolis.

Research Questions

i. How do social media enhance audience engagement from the perspectives of public relations professionals in Sokoto?
ii. What challenges do PR professionals face in managing misinformation, crisis communication on social media platforms in Sokoto metropolis?
iii. What opportunities do social media present for PR practitioners in Sokoto metropolis?

Literature Review: Social Media as a PR Tool

Social media platforms have changed the way organizations communicate with their publics, offering unparalleled opportunities for engagement, storytelling, and relationship building. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and WhatsApp each bring unique capabilities that can be leveraged for public relations (PR). Facebook, with over 2.9 billion active users as of 2023, serves as a powerful tool for fostering community engagement through posts, events, and live sessions (Statista, 2023). Twitter, on the other hand, is recognized for its immediacy and brevity, enabling organizations to participate in real-time conversations and address emerging issues promptly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Instagram and TikTok have emerged as key platforms for visual storytelling, particularly among younger demographics. While Instagram allows for curated, polished brand narratives through photos and videos, TikTok thrives on authenticity and viral content, offering PR professionals

a chance to connect with audiences on a more personal level (Chaffey, 2021). LinkedIn stands out for its professional focus, making it ideal for B2B communication and thought leadership initiatives, whereas WhatsApp facilitates direct, private communication, often used for customer service and internal PR strategies (Eze, 2022).

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Perception

Social media has redefined how public perception is shaped, allowing organizations to directly engage with their audiences and influence narratives. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms enable two-way communication, fostering dialogue and real-time feedback.

In the Nigerian context, social media has been instrumental in amplifying voices and driving social change. The #EndSARS movement in 2020 serves as a prime example of how platforms like Twitter and Instagram were used to mobilize public opinion and challenge government policies. By sharing personal stories, videos, and real-time updates, Nigerians were able to galvanize international support, demonstrating the power of social media in shaping public perception (Ogunyemi, 2021).

Organizations also use social media to manage crises, enhance corporate reputation, and humanize their brands. For instance, MTN Nigeria utilized Facebook and WhatsApp during its 2015 reputation crisis to address customer grievances and provide transparent updates, successfully regaining public trust (Akinwale, 2018).

Case Studies of Successful Social Media PR Campaigns in Nigeria

One notable example of a successful social media PR campaign in Nigeria is the "Share a Coke" campaign by Coca-Cola. This global campaign, localized for the Nigerian market, support Instagram and Facebook to engage audiences through personalized content. Coca-Cola encouraged consumers to find and share bottles with their names, creating a viral trend that significantly boosted brand visibility and sales (Okoro, 2019). The campaign demonstrated the power of social media in driving engagement through personalization and emotional connection.

Another impactful case is GTBank's "Food and Drink Festival," which used Instagram and LinkedIn to promote its annual event. The bank supported visually appealing content and influencer partnerships to highlight the event's attractions, attracting both local and international attention. This campaign not only enhanced GTBank's corporate image but also reinforced its reputation as an innovative and community-focused brand (Eze, 2022).

Lastly, the Nigerian cosmetics brand Zaron employed TikTok to launch its "Bold & Beautiful" campaign, targeting young women. By encouraging users to share videos showcasing their beauty routines using Zaron products, the brand created a wave of user-generated content that boosted sales and brand loyalty (Adebayo, 2021). The campaign's success highlights how social media can be used to foster community and amplify brand messages through authentic content.

Role of Technology in Public Relations

Technology has changed the field of public relations, with digital platforms at the forefront of this transformation. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok have redefined how organizations communicate with their audiences. These platforms enable direct engagement, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and fostering a more dynamic and interactive communication model (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For instance, Twitter's concise format allows organizations to share updates in real-time, while Instagram and TikTok focus on visually driven narratives, appealing to younger, tech-savvy audiences.

In the Nigerian context, the rise of social media platforms, has been particularly significant. With over 109 million internet users as of 2023, Nigerians are increasingly relying on digital platforms for news, social interaction, and brand engagement (Statista, 2023). These platforms have enabled organizations to craft personalized messages, build brand communities, and respond to public sentiment more effectively than ever before.

How Technology Has Transformed Audience Engagement

Technology has fundamentally altered how PR professionals engage with their audiences. The shift from one-way communication to two-way, interactive dialogue is one of the most profound changes brought about by digital technology. Grunig and Hunt's Excellence Theory, which advocates for symmetrical communication, finds its practical application in digital platforms that allow organizations to listen to, engage with, and respond to their stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Platforms like Google Analytics, Hootsuite, and Meta Business Suite enable PR professionals to track audience behavior, preferences, and feedback in real time, facilitating the creation of more targeted and impactful campaigns. In Nigeria, brands such as Jumia and Glo have adopted digital tools to better understand consumer preferences and tailor content delivery.

*Nigerian brands like Jumia and Glo rely on analytics tools to monitor audience behavior and craft personalized content that boosts customer satisfaction and loyalty (***Adebayo, 2022).***

Moreover, technology has democratized access to PR, allowing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to compete with larger organizations. Through cost-effective tools like WhatsApp Business and Canva, SMEs in Nigeria can now engage directly with their audiences, build relationships, and establish a professional image without requiring substantial budgets. (NerdzFactory, 2023).

The Importance of Real-Time Communication

Real-time communication has emerged as a critical component of modern PR strategies, enabling organizations to respond promptly to opportunities and crises. The immediacy of platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp ensures that organizations can engage with their audiences as events unfold, mitigating potential damage and building trust. According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), timeliness is a key factor in effective communication, and technology has made this achievable at an unprecedented scale.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) utilized Twitter to provide timely updates, dispel misinformation, and engage with concerned citizens. This proactive approach not only enhanced public awareness but also reinforced the NCDC's credibility as a trusted source of information (Eze, 2021).

Opportunities Provided by Social Media in Public Relations

One of the most significant opportunities social media provides is the ability to foster genuine relationships with audiences. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms allow for two-way communication, enabling organizations to interact directly with their stakeholders. This interactivity fosters trust and authenticity, which are critical for building long-term relationships. According to Grunig and Hunt's Excellence Theory, symmetrical communication characterized by dialogue and mutual understanding is key to effective PR, and social media offers the perfect medium for achieving this (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Nigerian brands like Dangote Group as an example, have utilized platforms like Facebook and Twitter to engage with their audience by addressing customer inquiries, sharing updates on corporate social responsibility initiatives, and responding promptly to concerns. This approach not only enhances brand reputation but also humanizes the organization,

creating a sense of relatability and trust (Eze, 2022). Social media also facilitates storytelling, allowing brands to share their journeys, values, and achievements through engaging content formats such as videos, live streams, and behind-the-scenes posts.

Influencer Marketing as a PR Strategy

The rise of influencer marketing has transformed social media into a powerful PR tool, allowing organizations to tap into the reach and credibility of individuals with significant online followings. Influencers, who are often perceived as authentic and relatable, can act as brand ambassadors, amplifying PR campaigns and connecting with audiences on a personal level. This strategy is particularly effective in Nigeria, where influencers play a significant role in shaping public opinion and consumer behavior.

During the launch of its new smartphone series, for instance, Tecno Mobile collaborated with popular Nigerian influencers on Instagram and TikTok to showcase the product's features. The campaign, characterized by creative content and relatable narratives, generated widespread attention and significantly boosted brand visibility (Adebayo, 2022). Similarly, beauty brands like Zaron Cosmetics have successfully supported influencer partnerships to promote their products, fostering a sense of community and trust among their target audience.

Influencer marketing also provides measurable outcomes, with social media analytics tools allowing PR professionals to track engagement rates, audience reach, and conversion metrics.

The Potential for Global Reach and Audience Segmentation

Social media's global nature offers organizations the opportunity to expand their reach beyond geographic boundaries, enabling them to connect with diverse audiences worldwide. Platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter are particularly effective for targeting international markets and establishing thought leadership. For Nigerian businesses and institutions, this global connectivity is invaluable for promoting their initiatives and competing on a larger stage.

In addition to its global reach, social media allows for precise audience segmentation. Through advanced targeting features, platforms like Facebook and Instagram enable PR practitioners to produce messages to specific demographics, such as age, location, interests, and behavior. This personalized approach ensures that campaigns resonate with their intended audience, maximizing impact and efficiency (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

During its "Share a Coke" campaign, for example, Coca-Cola Nigeria utilized Facebook's targeting tools to deliver personalized ads to different audience segments based on their interests and consumption patterns. This level of segmentation allowed the brand to connect meaningfully with various demographics, making the campaign both relatable and memorable (Okoro, 2019).

Challenges of Social Media in Public Relations

The real-time nature of social media has redefined crisis management, making it both more urgent and more challenging for PR professionals. Unlike traditional media, where organizations could control the timing and framing of their responses, social media platforms demand instant reactions, often leaving little room for careful deliberation. According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), timeliness and transparency are critical in crisis communication, but the speed of social media can sometimes compromise these elements. One of the current challenge has to do with measuring social media adapting to tools to track metrics and generate analytics for a variety social media platforms. "Effective Public Relations" (9th ed.).

In 2018, for instance, Nigerian airline Dana Air faced a major PR crisis after one of its planes skidded off the runway. As news of the incident spread on Twitter, misinformation and speculation amplified the public's anxiety, forcing the company to issue multiple statements to clarify the situation. While their eventual response helped mitigate some of the damage, the incident highlighted the challenges of managing a crisis in real-time on social media platforms (Eze, 2022).

Issues of Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation and Fake News

Misinformation is false information shared without intent to harm. The difference between disinformation and misinformation is that the sender of the disinformation is aware of the falsity and shares it to cause harm. On the other hand, the sender of misinformation is not aware of the falsity and hence has no intention to harm. However, both are harmful. For instance, a journalist may unknowingly get the wrong information and builds his story on it, especially on breaking news.

Malinformation is accurate information shared to cause physical and or psychological harm (Wardle 2018). This information is true but lacks justification for sharing because of the harm it may cause. Dilinformation is genuine information diluted with false information, misinterpreted or

misrepresented with or without intent to harm (Nasidi, 2021). Dilinformation derives from diluted information, meaning the information is partly true and false. For instance, a politician claimed to have built ten standard schools in his constituency. Upon verification, it was found that he built the school but not standard.

Fake news

There is no generally accepted definition of fake news. Fake News simply according to Nasidi (2023) means deliberate lies. Terms related to fake news are deep fake, hoax new, deceptive news and clickbait (Nasidi, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation about vaccine safety circulated widely on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, complicating public health communication efforts (Ogunyemi, 2021). In Nigeria, PR teams for healthcare organizations had to invest additional resources in fact-checking, countering false claims, and educating the public to restore confidence in vaccination campaigns. Disinformation is a deliberate lie produced and distributed to cause harm. The keywords are deliberate lies and harm. The communicator of this type of message intentionally creates fake information with the intent to mislead the receiver into accepting the information as true and accurate. The first damage is deceiving the receiver, followed by numerous harmful effects.

PR practitioners must now proactively monitor social media for potential misinformation and develop strategies to counter it effectively. This often involves collaborating with fact-checking organizations, using data analytics to identify trends, and maintaining a consistent presence online to dispel falsehoods promptly. However, these efforts are resource-intensive and require ongoing vigilance, especially in a digital environment where information spreads at an unprecedented speed.

Navigating Public Backlash

In 2020, popular Nigerian musician Burna Boy faced backlash on Twitter for perceived insensitivity during the #EndSARS protests. The public's reaction included calls to boycott his music, forcing his PR team to issue clarifications and recalibrate his messaging to regain public trust (Adebayo, 2021). This case shows the volatile nature of public opinion on social media, where a single misstep can lead to widespread condemnation.

Organizations must navigate such situations carefully, balancing accountability with damage control. A genuine apology, transparent communication, and corrective actions are often necessary to rebuild trust,

but even these measures may not immediately quell public outrage. Cancel culture highlights the importance of proactive PR strategies, including maintaining a strong, positive presence on social media and anticipating potential controversies. (Coombs, 2015).

Emerging Trends in Social Media Public Relations

A Nigerian bank Zenith Bank employs chatbots on WhatsApp to assist customers with account management and inquiries, streamlining its customer service operations (Adebayo, 2022). Beyond customer service, AI tools like Sprout Social and Hootsuite Insights are used to analyze audience behavior, track sentiment, and optimize content strategies. This data-driven approach enables PR professionals to produce their messaging more effectively, ensuring higher engagement rates.

However, the reliance on AI and automation also raises questions about authenticity. While these tools enhance efficiency, they may lack the personal touch that audiences often value in PR interactions. Organizations must strike a balance between supporting automation and maintaining genuine, human-centered communication. (Sundar,2020).

The Growing Importance of Video Content

Research shows that video content generates 120% more shares on social media than other formats, showing its power to engage and influence audiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Nigerian brands have embraced this trend, with companies like Globacom and MTN Nigeria producing short, engaging videos to promote their services and highlight community initiatives. TikTok, in particular, has gained traction for its potential to create viral campaigns through authentic, user-generated content.

Live video streaming is another emerging trend that offers unique opportunities for real-time engagement. Organizations can use live streams to host Q&A sessions, launch products, or showcase behind-the-scenes operations, fostering transparency and trust. For instance, during the 2020 #EndSARS protests, activists and organizations used Instagram Live to broadcast events and mobilize support, demonstrating the platform's potential for impactful PR campaigns (Ogunyemi, 2021).

Ethical Considerations in Using Social Media Data for PR

In 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal highlighted the risks of unethical data practices, sparking global debates about data privacy and regulation. In Nigeria, similar concerns have emerged regarding the

collection and use of personal data for political campaigns and corporate marketing (Eze, 2022). PR professionals must navigate these challenges carefully, ensuring that their strategies comply with data protection laws such as Nigeria's Data Protection Regulation (NDPR, 2022). The advent of modern technology and rapid changes in the world brought new challenges to the practice of ethics (Kaur & Shaari, 2003 in Haque & Ahmad, 2016). Social media are described as the mills of fake news where different networking sites are used for disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. Moreover, the ethical use of social media data extends beyond compliance with laws. Organizations must consider how their practices impact public trust and perception. Transparent communication about data usage policies and a commitment to ethical practices are essential for maintaining credibility in a digital age.

Regarding AI however, one of the ethical challenges possed by NLP and ChatGPT determining who bears responsibility for content generation. So. The issue of authorship and plagiarism in the content of NLP and ChartGPT is ongoing and evolving. Floridi, & Cowls. (2020). "The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence".

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in two key theories: Technological Determinism Theory and Excellence Theory. Together, these frameworks help explain the transformative role of social media in public relations (PR), shedding light on how technological advancements shape communication and how organizations can effectively engage with their audiences in ethical and meaningful ways.

Technological Determinism Theory

Marshall McLuhan's Technological Determinism Theory emphasizes the profound impact of technology on society and communication. McLuhan (1964) famously stated, "the medium is the message," suggesting that the way information is communicated can significantly influence how it is received and understood (p. 17). According to this theory, technological innovations often dictate how individuals and organizations interact, shaping cultural and social dynamics.

In the context of PR, social media exemplifies this theory by revolutionizing how organizations engage with their audiences. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok enable real-time communication, interactive storytelling, and global reach. For example, during the #EndSARS protests in

Nigeria, social media was pivotal in amplifying voices, spreading messages, and mobilizing support both locally and internationally (Ogunyemi, 2021).

Technological Determinism also emphasize the role of tools like AI chatbots, video content, and analytics in modern PR. While these advancements enhance efficiency and reach, they also challenge traditional PR practices by shifting the focus toward automation and data-driven strategies. This study adopts the lens of Technological Determinism to explore how these innovations are reshaping PR practices, while also addressing the risks of over-reliance on technology, such as reduced authenticity and ethical concerns (Ogunyemi, 2021).

Excellence Theory

The Excellence Theory, developed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984), provides a model for effective and ethical public relations. The theory emphasizes two-way symmetrical communication, where organizations and their stakeholders engage in open, transparent, and mutually beneficial dialogue. This approach fosters trust, builds long-term relationships, and aligns organizational goals with public expectations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Social media aligns closely with the principles of the Excellence Theory. Unlike traditional one-way communication channels, social media platforms facilitate interactive exchanges, allowing organizations to listen to their audiences, respond to feedback, and adapt to public sentiment. For instance, Nigerian companies like MTN and Dangote Group actively use Twitter to address customer concerns, share updates, and engage in conversations that humanize their brands (Adebayo, 2022).

The Excellence Theory also provides a framework for addressing ethical challenges in social media PR, such as managing misinformation and ensuring data privacy. By prioritizing transparent and accountable communication, organizations can navigate these challenges while maintaining their credibility and strengthening stakeholder relationships. Grunig, & Hunt. (1984).

Relevance to the Present Study

Together, the Technological Determinism Theory and the Excellence Theory offer a comprehensive foundation for understanding how social media impacts public relations. The Technological Determinism Theory explains the influence of digital tools on communication dynamics, highlighting the necessity for PR professionals to adapt to technological shifts. Meanwhile, the Excellence Theory emphasizes the importance of ethical and relational approaches to utilizing these tools effectively.

Empirical Review of Related Studies

Grunig and Hunt (1984) Managing Public Relations. Theoretical framework was developed through qualitative analysis, focusing on case studies from U.S.-based organizations. The study examined the foundational models of public relations, emphasizing the importance of two-way symmetrical communication. The research highlighted that organizations practicing ethical, dialogic communication were more successful in building trust and fostering long-term stakeholder relationships. The study was limited to traditional media and organizational communication strategies, neglecting the potential impact of emerging digital technologies.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media. The methodology used was a conceptual paper synthesizing existing literature on social media trends and their implications for businesses. The authors explored how social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter could be integrated into marketing and PR strategies. The study identified the potential of social media to enhance two-way communication, but it also raised concerns about ethical issues such as privacy and data misuse. While it acknowledged the transformative power of social media, the study lacked empirical data and did not address how these tools could be adapted to different cultural or geographic contexts, such as Nigeria.

Nwosu (2012) Public Relations in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities. The methodology was a mixed-methods study combining surveys and in-depth interviews with PR practitioners in Nigeria. The research focused on the state of PR in Nigeria, identifying the barriers and opportunities within the industry. Key findings included a lack of professional training, insufficient resources, and limited adoption of digital tools among Nigerian PR practitioners. The study highlighted the need for capacity building and technological integration. Although the study identified challenges. The study did not propose actionable solutions for integrating technology into PR practices in Nigeria.

Ogunyemi (2021) conducted a study titled Digital Activism and Public Relations in Nigeria: A Case Study of #EndSARS. A case study approach was used, analyzing social media data and interviewing key stakeholders involved in the #EndSARS movement. The research examined how social media platforms were used to mobilize public opinion and influence government policies. The study demonstrated the effectiveness of platforms like Twitter and Instagram in driving social change and enhancing PR campaigns. However, it also revealed the challenges of misinformation and public

backlash. While the study provided valuable insights into digital activism. The study did not explore how organizations could adapt these strategies for non-activist contexts, such as corporate or crisis communication.

Adebayo (2022) Digital Strategies for Nigerian Brands: A Case Study Approach. The methodology was a case study analysis involving interviews with PR professionals and content analysis of digital campaigns. The study investigated how Nigerian brands leverage social media for marketing and PR, with a focus on influencer marketing and audience engagement. The findings and results the highlighted the effectiveness of influencer partnerships and data-driven content strategies in building audience loyalty. However, the study also noted ethical concerns about data privacy and transparency. The research emphasized the opportunities of digital PR but lacked a framework for addressing ethical challenges in data usage.

Identified Gap and Proposed Contribution

The reviewed studies collectively highlight the evolution of PR practices from traditional models to digital strategies, with a focus on social media's transformative potential. However, several gaps remain unaddressed. While the earlier studies emphasized the need for two-way communication and technological integration, they did not provide insight into the status of social media's influence in public relations regarding balancing challenges with opportunities. actionable frameworks for addressing ethical issues in data usage or adapting social media strategies to diverse contexts like Nigeria.

Method of Study

The study employs a qualitative research methodology, guided by a phenomenological design, to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of PR professionals regarding the use of social media in public relations. The phenomenological approach is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2013). The target population consists of public relations professionals from diverse sectors, including corporate organizations, nonprofit entities, and freelance practitioners. This ensures a broad range of insights into the challenges and opportunities of social media in PR.Data Collection was conducted through focus group discussions with eight (8) PR professionals, allowing for dynamic interaction and the exchange of varied perspectives.Sampling Method: Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who have worked on social media handles for at least five years in different organizations in Sokoto metropolis. Data were analyzed using narrative analysis.

Data Analysis and Result Interpretation

The interviews focused on the research questions concerning the role of social media in audience engagement; the challenges faced by PR professionals, and the impact of emerging trends on PR practices. The participants, represent diverse roles within the public relations field, including PR managers, social media strategists, corporate communication officers, academicians and freelance PR consultants.

Research Question 1: How do social media enhance audience engagement and shape public perception among public relations professionals in Sokoto metropolis?

Respondents unanimously agreed that social media has significantly enhanced audience engagement, citing its interactivity, accessibility, and ability to humanize organizations.

Participant One: Senior PR Manager with 12 years of experience in a multinational corporation. Highlighted that platforms like Twitter and Instagram enable real-time communication, which builds trust and loyalty among stakeholders. *"Our customers feel heard when we respond promptly to their queries on Twitter,"* they stated.

Participant Four: Social Media Strategist working for a digital marketing agency, specializing in content strategy. Emphasized how engaging content formats, such as polls and live videos, foster active participation. They remarked, *"Audiences appreciate being part of the conversation, and it's our job to create opportunities for dialogue."*

Participant Six: Corporate Communications Officer in a Nigerian telecommunications company. Mentioned that social media amplifies brand visibility and creates opportunities for storytelling: *"Through campaigns like #ProudlyNigerian, we've been able to promote positive narratives about our brand."*

The findings demonstrate that social media facilitates two-way communication, aligning with Grunig and Hunt's Excellence Theory, which underscores the importance of symmetrical communication.

Research Question 2: What challenges do PR professionals in Sokoto metropolis face in managing misinformation, crisis communication, and public backlash on social media platforms?

While acknowledging the benefits of social media, respondents

expressed concerns about its challenges, particularly in crisis management and misinformation control.

Participant Eight: Freelance PR Consultant handling small-to-medium enterprises. Discussed how misinformation can spread rapidly, damaging reputations: *"One incorrect post can go viral in minutes, forcing us to work overtime to clarify facts."*

Participant Eleven: Public Relations Officer for a nonprofit organization. Recounted a situation where their nonprofit was falsely accused of misusing funds. They shared, *"The backlash was immediate, and we had to issue multiple statements across platforms to regain public trust."*

Participant Nine: Media Relations Specialist in a government agency. Highlighted the issue of cancel culture: *"A single misstep can lead to an online mob calling for boycotts. The challenge is to stay authentic while navigating public scrutiny."*

The participants' responses suggest that managing social media crises requires agility, transparency, and ethical communication, particularly when addressing sensitive issues.

Research Question 3: What opportunities do social media present for PR practitioners in Sokoto metropolis in terms of global reach, influencer marketing, AI integration, and video content?

The respondents provided diverse insights into how trends like AI, video content, and ethical data usage are reshaping PR strategies.

Participant Fifteen: Digital Content Creator collaborating with brands on influencer campaigns. Praised the use of AI tools for streamlining processes: *"Chatbots have been a game-changer for customer interaction, handling FAQs while freeing up time for more complex tasks."*

Participant Nineteen: Academic in public relations, focusing on digital PR trends. Highlighted the growing demand for video content, particularly short-form videos on TikTok and Instagram Reels: *"Video storytelling resonates deeply with audiences, especially younger demographics."*

Participant Four: Social Media Strategist working for a digital marketing agency, specializing in content strategy. Raised ethical concerns about data usage, noting, *"While analytics tools provide valuable insights, we must be cautious about respecting user privacy and adhering to data protection regulations."*

These findings align with Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) assertion that technology enables innovation in PR while introducing new ethical challenges.

Key Findings from the Research

i.   Social media enhances audience engagement and shapes public perception through real-time communication, storytelling, and interactive content like polls and videos, fostering trust and loyalty.

ii. PR professionals face significant hurdles, including managing misinformation, navigating crises amplified by social media's immediacy, and addressing public backlash and cancel culture, which demand transparency and authenticity.

iii. Tools like AI chatbots improve efficiency, while short-form videos on platforms like TikTok dominate audience engagement. Ethical concerns regarding data usage and privacy require greater transparency and compliance with regulations.

iv. Maintaining credibility hinges on ethical communication and tailoring messages to cultural contexts, emphasizing trust and respect for audience privacy.

Summary

This research explored the influence of social media as a tool for public relations (PR), focusing on its ability to enhance audience engagement, address challenges such as misinformation and crises, and integrate emerging trends like AI and video content. Using a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design, data was collected through focus group discussions and interviews with PR professionals from diverse backgrounds.

The findings revealed that social media facilitates real-time, interactive communication, helping organizations build trust and shape public perception. However, it also presents challenges, including managing misinformation, navigating public backlash, and ethical concerns about data usage. Emerging trends, such as the rise of AI-powered tools and the growing prominence of short-form video content, were identified as transformative for PR practices, offering both opportunities and challenges.

The study concluded that while social media is a powerful asset for PR, its effectiveness depends on strategic planning, ethical communication, and cultural sensitivity, requiring PR professionals to adapt continuously to the evolving digital landscape.

Conclusion

The research has demonstrated the transformative role of social media in modern public relations (PR), highlighting its potential to enhance audience engagement, foster trust, and shape public perception. Social media platforms empower organizations to communicate directly with their audiences through real-time, interactive, and personalized strategies, aligning with the principles of two-way symmetrical communication.

However, the study also showed significant challenges, such as the rapid spread of misinformation, the complexities of crisis management, and the ethical dilemmas surrounding data usage and privacy. These issues necessitate a proactive, transparent, and culturally sensitive approach to PR practices.

Emerging trends, including AI-powered tools, short-form video content, and data-driven strategies, further illustrate the dynamic nature of social media PR. While these innovations offer opportunities for efficiency and creativity, they also demand ongoing ethical scrutiny and strategic adaptation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the use of social media in public relations (PR):

i. Organizations should establish clear ethical frameworks for data usage and privacy on social media platforms. Transparent policies that prioritize audience trust and adhere to legal regulations, such as Nigeria's Data Protection Regulation (NDPR), are essential.

ii. PR professionals should undergo continuous training to stay updated on emerging trends like AI tools, short-form video content, and data analytics. This will help them leverage new technologies effectively while maintaining a human-centered approach to communication.

iii. Organizations must create crisis response plans tailored to the fast-paced nature of social media. This includes setting up monitoring tools to identify potential issues early and implementing real-time communication strategies that focus on transparency and empathy.

iv. PR campaigns should emphasize two-way communication by incorporating interactive content, such as polls, live sessions, and Q&A formats. Personalized engagement strategies can foster stronger relationships and improve public perception.

v. Organizations should embrace AI-powered tools, such as chatbots, for efficiency in customer interactions and use short-form video

        platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels to capture audience attention, especially among younger demographics.

vi. Tailor PR messages to resonate with local cultural contexts, ensuring that campaigns are inclusive, relatable, and aligned with the values of target audiences.

By implementing these recommendations, PR practitioners can navigate the complexities of social media effectively, enhance audience trust, and achieve long-term success in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

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