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Assessing the Use of Public Relations Strategies for Image Management in Select Universities in North-Central Nigeria

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Abstract

This study assessed the use of public relations (PR) strategies for image management in selected universities in North-Central Nigeria, specifically Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), Osara, Kogi State, and Bingham University, Nasarawa State. The study employed a quantitative survey design, targeting staff and students, with 385 respondents selected using proportionate sampling. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Findings revealed that press releases, newsletters, and social media engagement are the most recognised PR strategies, while alumni engagement, events, and crisis communication are less visible. The study also showed that PR strategies are generally perceived as effective in fostering community relations and managing crises, though challenges such as poor stakeholder engagement, limited digital communication, lack of qualified personnel, and insufficient funding hinder their full effectiveness. The researchers concludes that a more integrated, well-resourced, and strategic PR approach is essential for enhancing institutional image and stakeholder engagement. Recommendations include increasing awareness of PR strategies, investing in digital platforms, improving stakeholder engagement, and building institutional PR capacity. The findings contribute to knowledge on strategic communication in higher education and provide practical guidance for improving university reputation management in Nigeria.



Keywords: Public Relations Strategies, Image Management, Universities, Stakeholder Engagement, Institutional Reputation.

Introduction

In the contemporary knowledge-driven society, the reputation of higher education institutions has become a critical determinant of their growth, competitiveness, and sustainability. Universities are no longer evaluated solely on academic output but also on how effectively they engage stakeholders, communicate values, and manage public perception. Consequently, public relations (PR) has assumed a central role in the strategic management of universities, serving as a vital mechanism for building, maintaining, and protecting institutional image in an increasingly competitive global academic environment (Nweze et al., 2020).

Public relations extends beyond the mere generation of media visibility; it encompasses deliberate and sustained efforts aimed at fostering mutual understanding and trust between an organisation and its diverse publics. It involves the use of strategic communication tools such as media relations, social media engagement, crisis communication, community relations, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to shape favourable perceptions and sustain institutional credibility. Lucas (2020) conceptualises public relations as the creation of understanding through knowledge that leads to meaningful attitudinal and behavioural change. Similarly, PR has been described as a management function that establishes and maintains mutual lines of communication, understanding, and cooperation between an organisation and its publics, thereby enabling institutions to respond effectively to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Within the university system, public relations plays a dual role. On one hand, it is deployed to promote academic excellence, research achievements, and institutional milestones; on the other hand, it serves as a strategic tool for reputation and image management, particularly during periods of controversy, organisational change, or crisis. Denny et al. (2020) note that PR strategies have been utilised since the nineteenth century as instruments of persuasion and influence, demonstrating PR's enduring capacity to shape public opinion and institutional narratives. These strategies underscore the importance of proactive and well-coordinated communication in reinforcing institutional legitimacy and public trust.

In the Nigerian context, public relations practices within higher education institutions are gradually evolving, although many universities still face challenges in integrating PR into their core management structures. Artzi (2024) identifies monitoring and listening as critical PR strategies for effective image management, emphasizing the importance of tracking public opinion, media discourse, and online conversations across social media platforms, news outlets, and digital forums. Through effective monitoring, institutions are better positioned to identify emerging issues early and implement timely interventions before they escalate into reputational crises.

However, the absence or weak application of strategic PR often exposes universities to misinformation, crisis mismanagement, and reputational vulnerabilities. Nwankwo (2025) argues that without deliberate PR engagement, institutions are more susceptible to communication breakdowns that can undermine public confidence. Several structural challenges hinder the effective implementation of PR strategies in Nigerian universities, including inadequate funding, insufficient staffing, weak stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and limited awareness of the strategic value of institutional reputation. Asemah (2011) observes that many Nigerian universities lack clearly articulated PR policies and professionally trained personnel capable of executing comprehensive strategic communication plans. As a result, PR activities are often fragmented, reactive, and incapable of delivering sustainable image benefits.



Despite the growing scholarly attention to public relations as a discipline, there remains a significant gap in empirical research focusing specifically on PR practices within Nigerian higher education institutions. Existing studies tend to concentrate on corporate organisations or general media communication, leaving limited understanding of how universities deploy PR strategies to manage their institutional image. Scholars such as Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023) have therefore called for context-specific investigations that examine how cultural, institutional, and technological factors shape PR practices and outcomes in educational settings.

Due to increasing competition and heightened public scrutiny in Nigeria's higher education sector, public relations (PR) has emerged as a critical strategic tool for effective image management and institutional sustainability. Universities are increasingly required to engage diverse stakeholders, manage crises, and maintain credibility in the face of security challenges, media exposure, and growing expectations for transparency. However, despite the strategic importance of PR, its application for systematic image management in many Nigerian universities, particularly in North-Central Nigeria, remains largely inadequate, fragmented, or reactive rather than proactive (Asemah, 2011; Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023).

It is against this background that this study assesses the use of public relations strategies for image management in two selected universities –Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), Osara, Kogi State, and Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State. The selection of these institutions is both strategic and purposive. First, the two universities represent different ownership structures within the Nigerian university system, CUSTECH as a state-owned university and Bingham University as a private faith-based institution, thereby providing a comparative perspective on how PR strategies are adopted and implemented across varying administrative and governance contexts. Second, both universities are located within North-Central Nigeria, a region that has witnessed growing security concerns and reputational challenges affecting tertiary institutions.

Recent security-related incidents further justify the selection of the two universities for this study. In 2022, Bingham University was confronted with online reports alleging a Boko Haram threat, while in 2024, Confluence University of Science and Technology experienced a bandit invasion and the kidnapping of students. These incidents underscore the vulnerability of universities to reputational crises and highlight the crucial role of effective public relations in crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, and the protection of institutional image. Such events raise critical concerns about how universities communicate with the public, manage information during emergencies, and sustain stakeholder trust in periods of uncertainty.

In line with the foregoing, this study is designed to examine public relations practices as a tool for image management in selected universities in North-Central Nigeria, with specific reference to Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), Osara, Kogi State, and Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State. The study seeks to identify the public relations strategies currently employed by the selected universities for managing their institutional image, evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in enhancing public perception and stakeholder confidence, and ascertain the challenges that hinder the optimal use of public relations for image management within the universities. Through these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how public relations functions are utilized in university administration and how they can be strengthened to improve institutional reputation and sustainability.



Theoretical Framework

Two-Way Symmetrical Model

This study is anchored on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Public Relations Models, with specific reference to the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. According to Grunig and Hunt, public relations can be categorized into four models: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. The Two-Way Symmetrical Model emphasizes mutual understanding and balanced communication between an organization and its stakeholders, promoting collaboration rather than one-sided persuasion. This model is particularly relevant for higher education institutions, where the goal of PR is not only to disseminate information but also to build trust, manage institutional reputation, and foster sustainable relationships with internal and external publics.

Two-Way Symmetrical Model provides a theoretical lens for examining organisations employ PR strategies to manage their image. For instance, the use of press releases, newsletters, social media engagement, and community outreach can be interpreted through this model as tools for engaging stakeholders in a two-way communication process. The model underscores the importance of feedback and stakeholder input, which aligns with findings from Hassan et al. (2023) and Ekwueme et al. (2021) that highlight the role of community engagement and transparent communication in fostering trust and enhancing institutional image.

In relation to this study, Two-Way Symmetrical Model can critically assess whether the universities' PR practices go beyond one-way information dissemination to actively involve stakeholders in dialogue, address concerns, and collaboratively enhance the universities' reputation. Moreover, the model provides a framework for analysing gaps in PR implementation, such as limited stakeholder engagement or inadequate digital communication, etc.

Method

This study adopted a quantitative survey design to assess the use of public relations (PR) strategies for image management in selected universities in North-Central Nigeria, specifically Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), Osara, Kogi State, and Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State. Recent security crises involving the two universities such as an alleged Boko Haram threats against Bingham University in 2022 and a bandit invasion with student kidnappings at Confluence University of Science and Technology in 2024 underscore the vulnerability of universities to reputational damage and highlight the critical role of effective public relations in crisis communication and stakeholder trust management. The survey population comprised 17,895 staff and students, with 8,162 individuals from CUSTECH and 9,733 from Bingham University. Using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% margin of error, a sample of 400 respondents was determined to ensure adequate representation of the population. To allocate respondents across the two universities, proportionate stratified sampling was employed, whereby the population of each university was divided by the total population and multiplied by the sample size. This yielded 182 respondents from CUSTECH and 218 respondents from Bingham University, reflecting their respective population sizes. Convenience sampling was then used to administer questionnaires to staff and students available during the data collection period. A self-developed structured questionnaire was used as instruments for data collection. The questionnaire was designed to capture the PR strategies employed, their effectiveness in enhancing institutional image, and challenges encountered in PR implementation. The instrument was subjected to expert validation by public relations and communication specialists and a pilot test conducted among 20 staff and students from a nearby university, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.81, indicating acceptable reliability. Quantitative data were collected personally by the researcher between October and



November, 2025, and analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) with SPSS version 25 to examine the PR strategies employed, their effectiveness, and the challenges faced. Findings were interpreted in line with the study objectives, emphasizing how strategic communication practices contribute to institutional image management and stakeholder engagement in the selected universities. Ethical considerations were strictly observed during the data collection process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to questionnaire administration. Respondents were adequately informed about the purpose of the study, assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and notified that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. No personal identifiers were included in the questionnaire, and the data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Findings

A total of 385 copies of the questionnaire were administered to staff and students of Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), Osara, Kogi State, and Bingham University, Nasarawa State. Out of this number, 380 copies were correctly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 98.7%. The analysis focuses on issues that respondents are best positioned to assess, namely their awareness of public relations (PR) strategies, the effectiveness of these strategies in fostering institutional image, and the challenges affecting the implementation of PR initiatives. The analysis of the 380 valid responses is presented in line with the study's objectives.

Table 1: Awareness of PR Strategies in the Institutions

PR Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Social media engagement	256	67%
Press releases and newsletters	331	87%
Events and outreach programs	95	25%
Crisis communication	103	27%
Alumni engagement	82	26%
Total	380	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data in Table 1 indicates that press releases and newsletters are the most recognised PR strategies among respondents. This suggests that both traditional and digital communication tools dominate the PR practices of the universities studied. In contrast, strategies such as events, alumni engagement, and crisis communication show relatively low awareness, indicating that some PR activities may be underutilized or not effectively communicated to stakeholders. Overall, the findings suggest that the universities employ a mix of traditional and modern PR strategies, but visibility and communication of certain strategies remain limited.



Table 2: PR Strategies and Relationships with Host Communities

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very well	143	38%
Well	122	32%
Neutral	30	8%
Poorly	53	14%
Very poorly	32	8%
Total	380	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results suggest that majority of the respondents perceive the universities' PR strategies as effective in fostering positive relationships with host communities. However, few of the respondents felt that PR efforts were poorly executed, while others remained neutral. This indicates that while the institutions have made progress in engaging stakeholders and enhancing town-gown relations, there is room for improvement through more consistent and inclusive PR initiatives.

Table 3: Perception of Crisis Management Strategies

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very effective	139	37%
Effective	125	33%
Neutral	29	7%
Ineffective	50	13%
Very ineffective	37	10%
Total	380	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

As shown in Table 3, majority of the respondents rated the universities' crisis management strategies as very effective or effective, indicating a generally favourable perception of how PR is used to manage institutional reputation during crises. Nevertheless, some perceived the strategies as ineffective or very ineffective, highlighting a need for improved preparedness, communication, and visibility of crisis management practices.

Table 4: Challenges in Implementing PR Strategies

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Limited funding	196	52%
Lack of qualified personnel	232	61%
Poor stakeholder engagement	315	83%
Inadequate use of digital platforms	342	90%
Total	380	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025



Table 4 reveals that the most significant challenges affecting PR implementation are inadequate use of digital platforms and poor stakeholder engagement, suggesting that the universities are not fully leveraging modern communication tools and inclusive engagement strategies. Additionally, lack of qualified personnel and limited funding were also cited, highlighting capacity and resource constraints. Collectively, these challenges point to the need for strategic investment in personnel, digital tools, and stakeholder engagement to strengthen institutional PR practices and enhance image management.

Discussion

This study examined the use of public relations (PR) strategies for image management in Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), Osara, Kogi State, and Bingham University, Nasarawa State, focusing on the PR strategies employed, their effectiveness in enhancing institutional image, and challenges affecting implementation. The discussion below is based solely on the analysis of survey data obtained from staff and students of the selected universities.

The first research objective sought to identify the PR strategies currently employed in the universities. Findings revealed that press releases and newsletters (87%) and social media engagement (67%) are the most recognised PR strategies among respondents. Other strategies such as events, alumni engagement, and crisis communication were less visible. This suggests that universities rely heavily on traditional and digital communication tools while other strategies are underutilized or not well communicated to stakeholders. These results are consistent with the findings of Hassan et al. (2023) and Nwachukwu et al. (2021), who reported that press releases, social media, and event sponsorship are key PR tools used by Nigerian universities to enhance visibility and strengthen public perception. The low awareness of strategies such as alumni engagement and crisis communication may indicate gaps in strategic PR planning and the need for a more integrated communication approach.

The second research objective examined the effectiveness of PR strategies in fostering institutional image and stakeholder relations. Results indicate that 70% of respondents believe PR strategies foster good relationships with host communities, and a similar proportion perceive crisis management strategies as effective or very effective (70%). These findings suggest that the universities' PR efforts positively influence community relations and crisis preparedness, reflecting the importance of proactive and strategic communication in image management. However, a notable minority (22% for community relations and 23% for crisis management) perceived PR efforts as ineffective, highlighting inconsistencies in execution and stakeholder engagement. These observations align with Ekwueme et al. (2021), who found that community engagement programmes significantly improve public perception, and Coombs (2015), who emphasized that effective crisis communication is critical to maintaining institutional reputation.

The third research objective sought to identify challenges affecting the implementation of PR strategies. Findings revealed that the most significant challenges include inadequate use of digital platforms (90%), poor stakeholder engagement (83%), lack of qualified personnel (61%), and limited funding (52%). These challenges suggest that while universities recognise the value of PR, structural and operational constraints limit the effectiveness of their strategies. Specifically, limited use of digital platforms indicates underutilization of modern communication tools critical for engaging contemporary stakeholders, particularly students and online communities. These results corroborate Asemah (2011) and Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023), who reported that Nigerian universities face capacity and resource constraints that hinder the effective use of PR for image management.



Overall, the findings indicate that PR strategies in the selected universities are partially effective, with strong reliance on traditional and digital media, moderate effectiveness in crisis management and community engagement, and significant challenges in implementation. The results underscore the need for universities to adopt a holistic PR approach, integrating multiple strategies, investing in human and digital resources, and ensuring consistent engagement with all stakeholder groups to strengthen institutional image and reputation. While the findings indicate that the selected universities employ PR strategies that support image management, these strategies do not fully conform to the ideals of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. The reliance on one-way communication tools, limited stakeholder engagement, and weak digital interaction suggest that PR practices are more hybrid than symmetrical. To align more closely with the theoretical framework, universities need to prioritize feedback mechanisms, participatory communication, and sustained stakeholder dialogue.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study, it can be concluded that public relations practices in the selected universities in North-Central Nigeria play a meaningful but not yet fully strategic role in institutional image management. While public relations is recognized and operational within the universities, its application remains largely functional and routine rather than dialogic and relationship-driven, as envisaged by contemporary public relations theory. The study establishes that the universities have embraced public relations primarily as a tool for information dissemination and visibility, rather than as a structured mechanism for sustained stakeholder dialogue and mutual understanding. This suggests that institutional image management is being pursued in a reactive and communication-centered manner, rather than through a holistic, stakeholder-oriented strategy. Consequently, although positive perceptions exist regarding community relations and crisis response, these outcomes appear to be situational achievements rather than products of an embedded, long-term communication philosophy.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. To improve awareness and visibility of PR strategies, university management should organize regular training workshops, seminars, and sensitisation programmes to expose staff and students to the full range of PR strategies, emphasising their role in building institutional reputation and stakeholder engagement.
2. To enhance the effectiveness of PR strategies in fostering relationships and managing crises, universities should adopt a more holistic and integrated PR approach that combines traditional and digital communication tools, including consistent press releases, social media campaigns, and proactive community engagement initiatives.
3. To address challenges related to stakeholder engagement and digital communication, universities should invest in modern digital communication platforms and ensure consistent, inclusive, and transparent interaction with all stakeholder groups, including students, alumni, faculty, and host communities.

Limitations, and Practical and Policy Implications of the Study

This study was limited by its reliance on a quantitative survey design, which captured respondents' perceptions but did not allow for in-depth exploration of how public relations strategies are formulated and implemented within university administrations. In addition, the focus on only two universities in North-Central Nigeria and the exclusion of other critical stakeholder groups, such as alumni, parents, host community leaders, and media professionals, restrict the generalisability and breadth of the findings. The



use of descriptive statistics and the cross-sectional nature of the study further limited the ability to examine causal relationships or long-term image management outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study has important practical and policy implications. Practically, it underscores the need for universities to reposition public relations as a strategic management function, strengthen digital communication systems, improve stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and invest in professional PR capacity. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the necessity for regulatory bodies and university governing councils to establish clear institutional communication policies, ensure adequate funding for PR units, and promote two-way, participatory communication practices in higher education governance. Collectively, these implications emphasize the role of strategic public relations in enhancing institutional reputation, trust, and sustainability within Nigeria's university system.

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