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## Public Relations and Patronage of Ibom Air by Passengers in Akwa Ibom State

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### Abstract

Public relations has become one of the non-conformist human endeavours, and permeates several if not all facets of human endeavour. In light of this, this study investigated how public relations employed by Ibom Air, Akwa Ibom State's airline company, influenced patronage among passengers of the company. Leaning on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods, employing survey for passengers – a population of 2,004,068, and a sample size of 400, determined using the Taro Yamane formula. Furthermore, interview was adopted to collect data from the marketing communications team of Ibom Air, led by the Group Head, Marketing Communications. Findings from the study revealed that the public relations strategies mainly employed by Ibom Air included media relations, stakeholder engagement, and corporate social responsibilities. More so, passengers of Ibom Air in Akwa Ibom State demonstrated a moderately high awareness of the airline's public relations strategies, with 53% recognising PR activities; and Ibom Air's public relations strategies, particularly social media engagement (29%), significantly contributed to increased passenger patronage in Akwa Ibom State. It was concluded in the study that Ibom Air's comprehensive public relations framework significantly enhanced passenger awareness, and the strategic deployment of targeted and customer-centric public relations practices played a crucial role in strengthening its corporate reputation, and driving patronage. The researcher recommended that Ibom Air should invest in continuous training for its PR and communications teams, and deploy targeted awareness campaigns that combine emotional branding with clear, visible storytelling.

**Keywords:** Public relations, Ibom Air, patronage, passengers, and Akwa Ibom State.



## Introduction

Public Relations is the lubricant that oils the wheels of an organisation's progress. It is, according to Chikwado and Tochukwu (2018), the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Effective public relations refer to communications and tools that are applied consciously by individuals and organisations as a means of influencing the public. However, when it is carried out unprofessionally, the result can be unsavoury.

The concept comprises a set of practical skills and strategies designed and adopted to enhance organisational reputation among its publics, strengthen relationships with key stakeholders, and foster mutual understanding (Igben & Ilaya, 2021). This strategic approach involves deliberate and sustained efforts to build goodwill, maintain open communication, and ensure organisational success. It is further emphasised that public relations, sometimes termed public communication in certain contexts, focuses on fostering effective dialogue to resolve conflicts, prevent misunderstandings, and mitigate negative perceptions. Central to this discipline is cultivating a well-earned reputation through exceptional customer service, social responsibility toward employees and communities, and transparent engagement with the public (Igben & Ilaya, 2021).

From a managerial perspective, public relations is defined as a function that creates, develops, and implements policies and programmes to shape public opinion or reactions toward an idea, product, or organisation (Nwabueze, 2022). Despite its critical role, many organisations, both private and public, lack full awareness of how public relations contributes to achieving their goals. Even among those who recognise its value, gaps persist in understanding how to strategically integrate PR practices into broader organisational management (Bailey, 2020).

Moreover, the scale of activity to promote good public relations may vary considerably according to the size and nature of an organisation, but the philosophy, strategy and methods adopted are usually similar irrespective of whether the Public Relations programme is designed to influence understanding or to improve relationship between an organisation and its customers, agents and employees (AMW Group, 2020). Thus, customer satisfaction, one of the points of public relations application, is considered one of the most important factors, whether it is meant for a product or a service. Organisations offering various services have to be more vigilant because there is a special attitude that plays an important role in attracting and retaining customers. Whether the customer is satisfied after patronage depends on the performance of the offered services in relation to the customer's expectations.

Hence, the sustenance of many organisations in the market is determined by the number of satisfied customers that they have. Customers are the key factor to the continued existence and development of any organisation in the market space. It is, therefore, obvious that firms that want to face competition need to provide valuable and unique terms to their customers that will satisfy their needs. This satisfaction includes not only the feelings associated with the purchasing process, but also the atmosphere before and after the execution of purchases (Pires et al., 2025). If an organisation brings itself closer to its clients, it would be easy for such an organisation to fulfill its desired goals for a long period of time.

Therefore, a crucial factor of building long-term success in any organisation is to continuously satisfy the needs of customers. Customer satisfaction is often associated with customer satisfaction. Products or services which are a source of satisfaction, at least to a sufficient degree, provide the desirable value to their customers. The International Standard Organisation (ISO) notes that satisfaction is a judgement or an opinion expressed by the customer. The degree of satisfaction reflects the gap between the customer's



vision of the expected product and the customer's perception of the delivered product. Owing to, Achilov (2016, p.2) establishes the connection between public relations and customer satisfaction thus:

Public relations was previously an instrument to work and communicate effectively with an organisation's public. Today, public relations covers areas which relate to leading and changing public views and thinking. For example, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media (platforms) allow organizations not only to access and communicate with its (sic) publics, but they also tackle key issues, access new social groups, and constantly involve them to change their thinking, attitudes and character.

Meanwhile, Ibom Air, as a limited liability company wholly owned and operated by the Akwa Ibom State government, has been making milestone achievements. One of such milestones is that of air-lifting of two million passengers, which the company achieved on December 16, 2022, since it commenced operation on June 7, 2019. However, one wonders whether such services were informed, in any way, by public relations strategies adopted by the company to endear itself to customers, or if such achievements are a result of other factors. This study intended to fill this noticed gap in available information, understanding that the goal of a commercial organisation like Ibom Air is to make profit, and that such goals cannot be achieved without organisations courting, attracting, and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with both its internal and external publics. Additionally, the success of any organisation, especially for-profit organisations such as Ibom Air, depends, largely, on the public relations strategies adopted and practised among the workforce. This assertion is borne out of the notion that the reputation of every organisation influences its acceptance or otherwise in society.

This estimation or evaluation by members of society is shaped by a range of factors, from past actions to societal perceptions, and serves as a useful proxy for predictability and reliability, enabling individuals and groups to make informed decisions in a variety of contexts. The evaluations would then propel customers or move prospects to patronise the goods or services offered by the individual or organisation. It is, however, not certain whether the level of patronage enjoyed by Ibom Air is owed to the public relations strategies practised by the company or other factors. Therefore, this study was carried out to provide answers to the question: do the public relations strategies adopted by Ibom Air contribute to the level of patronage it enjoys among passengers in Akwa Ibom State?

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the public relations strategies adopted by Ibom Air to enhance its reputation among passengers in Akwa Ibom State;
2. ascertain the extent to which passengers of Ibom Air in Akwa Ibom State are aware of the public relations strategies adopted by the company to enhance its reputation; and
3. determine the contribution of public relations strategies adopted by Ibom Air to patronage by passengers in Akwa Ibom State.

### Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, developed by Richard E. Petty and John Cacioppo in the early 1980s, with significant foundational work published in 1986. Petty and Cacioppo proposed this model to explain how persuasive communications influence attitudes, emphasising two distinct routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves thoughtful and deliberate processing of message content, while the peripheral route relies on superficial



cues and heuristic processing. Moreover, Sanusi et al. (2025) add that these paths depends on an individual's ability to process information, implying that while persuasion subsists, human agency is an intervening factor that may determine how much or how little an individual may be persuaded.

Furthermore, while Kitchen et al. (2014) point out that there is an avalanche of literature written on the model, owing to its application to advertising and marketing-related studies, the central idea of ELM is that the likelihood of elaborating on a persuasive message depends on the individual's motivation and ability to process information. Kitchen, et. al (2014) suggest that the popularity of the model is owed to its clarity in explaining the persuasion process, application across diverse communication contexts, and its influence and frequent citation in marketing communication research.

The theory applies to what Fang et al. (2025) describe as neuromarketing, where in public relations could be classified, especially in industries like the aviation, where the competition goes beyond peripheral factors such as pricing to other components targeted at customer perception. More so, in view of the contributions of Yu (2026), the theory possibly explains measures that optimise user experience and enhance patronage for organisations such as Ibom Air. The relevance of ELM to the study of public relations and patronage of Ibom Air lies in its ability to provide insights into how different types of PR strategies could affect passenger attitudes and behaviours.

## **Method**

The mixed method was adopted for this study, consisting survey design and interview. The survey design was considered appropriate owing to its amenability to studies that collate respondents' opinions. Moreover, the population of the study is large, and poses difficulty to studying every of its component. The population of the study comprised 2,004,068 (two million, four thousand and sixty-eight) passengers of Ibom Air, as well as 10 staff in the department of public relations of the company. The size of the public relations department of Ibom Air was manageable, thus, sampling was not considered. All staff of the department participated in the qualitative aspect of the study, interview sessions that lasted between 15 to 25 minutes. On the quantitative side, a sample size of 400 respondents was drawn for the study using the Taro Yamane formula at 95% confidence level and 5% error limit. The availability sampling procedure was adopted for the study, which meant that any passengers available at the time of data collection, and willing to participate in the study were given the questionnaire to complete. Meanwhile, the questionnaire contained close-ended questions that were tailored to the research objectives. While the instrument for data collection was face-validated by other communication scholars, the test retest method was adopted for the reliability test, and the Cronbach Alpha calculation yielded a result of 0.7, which was considered excellently reliable. Moreover, to obtain informed consent from the respondents, both the questionnaire and the interview guide had consent statements, which were pointed to the respondents before they attended to the instruments. The statement is represented thus "You are invited to participate in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time without consequences. Rest assured all information provided would be treated confidentially, and used strictly for academic purposes." For the qualitative segment of the study, excerpts of the interview conducted on the Marketing Communications Manager and public relations of the airline were emailed to them to confirm that they represented their views. This was done to ensure that the study met some major pillars of trustworthiness for qualitative instruments – credibility and confirmability. Data obtained from the questionnaire were presented in simple tables and percentages, further discussed in relation to the model adopted for the study, and interpreted in the light of the research questions formulated at the onset of the study. For qualitative data, explanation building was adopted, in addition to excerpts being incorporated in the discussion of findings.



## Findings

The data presented were obtained from the questionnaire and interview guide. From the 400 copies of the questionnaire administered to the passengers of Ibom Air, only 374 were retrieved and used for the analysis, which represents a 94% return rate of the instrument.

**Table 1: Respondents' Awareness of Ibom Air's Public Relations Activities**

| Response          | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Very Large Extent | 110        | 29         |
| Large Extent      | 130        | 35         |
| Fair Extent       | 85         | 23         |
| Not Sure I know   | 49         | 13         |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>374</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents (64%) were quite aware of Ibom Air's public relations activities.

**Table 2: Ibom Air's PR strategies Respondents are Most Aware of**

| Response                    | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|
| Event Sponsorship           | 90         | 24         |
| Social Media Engagement     | 150        | 40         |
| Press Release               | 70         | 19         |
| Customer Loyalty Programmes | 64         | 17         |
| <b>Total</b>                | <b>374</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 2 shows that the most significant PR strategy respondents were aware of was Social Media Engagement (40%).

**Table 3: Respondents' Satisfaction with Ibom Air's Response to Customers' Complaints and Concerns**

| Response         | Frequency  | Percentage |
|------------------|------------|------------|
| Very Satisfied   | 110        | 29         |
| Satisfied        | 160        | 43         |
| Unsatisfied      | 70         | 19         |
| Very Unsatisfied | 34         | 9          |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>374</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 3 shows that a majority of respondents (72%) put together were either satisfied or very satisfied with Ibom Air's response to customer complaints and concerns.



**Table 4: Respondents' likelihood to Recommend Ibom Air to Family and Friends Based on Satisfaction with Public Relations**

| Response      | Frequency  | Percentage |
|---------------|------------|------------|
| Very Likely   | 140        | 37         |
| Likely        | 130        | 35         |
| Neutral       | 54         | 14         |
| Unlikely      | 30         | 8          |
| Very Unlikely | 20         | 6          |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>374</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 4.11 shows that majority of respondents (72%) were likely or very likely to recommend Ibom Air to family and friends based on their satisfaction with the airline's PR.

**Table 5: Respondents' Choice of Ibom Air over another airline due to its public relations efforts (e.g., promotional offers, community engagement)**

| Response     | Frequency  | Percentage |
|--------------|------------|------------|
| Yes          | 160        | 43         |
| No           | 80         | 21         |
| Maybe        | 90         | 24         |
| Not Sure     | 44         | 12         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>374</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 5 shows that a significant portion of respondents (43%) choose Ibom Air over another airline due to its public relations efforts.

#### **Data from Interview with Ibom Air Marketing Communications Team**

Ibom Air adopts a multifaceted public relations (PR) strategy tailored to enhancing brand loyalty, stakeholder engagement, and reliable messaging. Key tactics include localized branding, using campaigns like *"From Ibom, With Love"* that promote a sense of ownership among Akwa Ibom people while positioning the airline nationally. The emphasis on On-Time Performance (OTP) promotion reflects their commitment to operational excellence. As noted by the Marketing Head, *"We regularly communicate innovative performance indicators to reinforce our reliability."*

Also, Interviewees 2 and 3 reinforced this by highlighting community-based engagement and real-time responsiveness. They noted, "Ibom Air focuses on multi-channel communication, combining digital responsiveness with community engagement, sponsoring cultural events and supporting grassroots programmes." This echoes the strategic depth of Ibom Air's PR efforts beyond just messaging to experiential branding. In addition, collaborations with national and state-owned media ensure wide-reaching positive brand representation. These deliberate strategies demonstrate IbomAir's understanding of the role of strategic communication in aviation industry competitiveness.

Another important aspect of Ibom Air's PR approach involves strategic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and event sponsorships. The airline's CSR efforts are designed around community needs, such as education sponsorships, open-heart surgeries, and the signature FamPACT malaria eradication programme. Event sponsorships like the AkwaIbom Christmas Carnival further entrench Ibom Air within the cultural fabric of its primary market. As the Marketing Head indicated, these initiatives *"deepen cultural ties and reinforce community goodwill."* By embedding itself into both the social and economic life of its stakeholders, Ibom Air successfully positions its brand not just as a transportation service but also as a socially responsible corporate citizen.



Ibom Air prioritises the cultivation of strong, long-term relationships with media partners, understanding that credible third-party validation is crucial for brand reputation. Regular press conferences during route launches or CSR milestones ensure that journalists have first-hand, accurate information. In addition, media familiarisation trips offer journalists opportunities to experience the airline's services directly. As the interviewee noted, *"we invite journalists on familiarisation trips to experience and report authentically. Interviewee 2 added "We foster media relationships through regular press briefings, personalised communication, and inviting journalists to company events."* These initiatives foster trust, resulting in more favourable media coverage.

## Discussion

The findings that addressed the first research question were interpreted from the interview with the Marketing Communications team at Ibom Air. These themes - Multifaceted Public Relations Strategies; Media Relationship Management, Stakeholder Partnerships; and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as Strategic PR collectively reveal the deliberate and robust public relations framework employed by Ibom Air.

Ibom Air's adoption of multifaceted public relations strategies highlights its intent to project a reliable, community-embedded, and nationally respected image. Through initiatives such as "From Ibom, With Love" and the strategic promotion of On-Time Performance (OTP), the airline consolidates its competitive advantage while nurturing a sense of local ownership. The deliberate promotion of operational excellence, as a core narrative, positions Ibom Air as a brand synonymous with reliability and excellence, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the pivotal role of strategic communication in strengthening brand loyalty and stakeholder engagement.

Moreover, strong emphasis on media relationship management underpins Ibom Air's ability to sustain favourable public narratives. Organising regular press briefings and familiarisation trips places the airline on the ideal path to fostering authentic and positive media reportage. Finally, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is positioned not merely as philanthropy but as a strategic pillar of Ibom Air's reputation-building efforts. Initiatives such as youth empowerment schemes, health interventions, and environmental projects illustrate a CSR philosophy aligned with the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) framework.

Recent scholarly studies resonate with these findings. For instance, a study by Adeola and Evans (2022) demonstrated that airlines leveraging both traditional and digital media channels fostered greater trust and loyalty among African customers, aligning closely with Ibom Air's dual-channel strategy. Similarly, research by Okorie and Bwala (2021) found that strategic CSR initiatives, particularly those addressing local community needs, significantly enhanced brand affinity and market positioning in Nigeria's service sector. These studies substantiate the alignment of Ibom Air's PR strategies with contemporary best practices in corporate communication.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) effectively frames these findings. By utilising both central routes (e.g., communicating OTP performance and CSR impacts) and peripheral routes (e.g., using influencers and emotional storytelling), Ibom Air ensures that different audience segments are influenced according to their motivation and ability to process information. Customers motivated by factual performance engage centrally, while those more emotionally inclined respond to peripheral cues. This dual-track persuasion strategy exemplifies ELM's assumptions about variability in audience processing depth and reinforces the airline's holistic communication effectiveness.



In addressing the second research question on the extent to which passengers of Ibom Air in Akwa Ibom State were aware of the public relations strategies adopted by the company to enhance its reputation, findings showed that social media (38%) was the dominant source through which respondents first heard about Ibom Air, which underscores the company's success in leveraging digital communication. The significant role of word-of-mouth (23%) and online advertisements (20%) further illustrates a strong PR ecosystem built around immediacy and community-based messaging. Print media's marginal contribution (5%) affirms the declining influence of traditional print in aviation marketing communications, particularly among tech-savvy demographics. This pattern significantly illustrates Ibom Air's strategic alignment with contemporary media consumption habits to build brand awareness.

Where the majority of respondents (53%) could clearly recognise Ibom Air's public relations activities, the finding is crucial, underscoring respondents' level of awareness and recognition of the PR strategies of Ibom Air. The findings suggest that more than half of the passengers not only consumed information about Ibom Air, but were also sufficiently exposed to recognise deliberate PR efforts. The 15% who were unsure of their awareness points to areas where reinforcement of message clarity could be beneficial.

Moreover, with 40% of respondents fairly familiar with Ibom Air's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, the findings further support the notion of a moderately high awareness. CSR is a nuanced form of PR, and recognition of these activities implies a deeper cognitive processing of Ibom Air's brand values beyond service delivery. However, the 20% unfamiliarity rate suggests a need for amplifying the visibility of CSR campaigns, perhaps by integrating more storytelling approaches and community-based media relations strategies. From these findings, it is evident that Ibom Air has achieved a commendable level of public relations awareness among its passengers. The high percentages of awareness, recognition, and recall demonstrate a successful dissemination of PR messages across different channels.

In line with these findings, recent scholarly studies corroborate the efficacy of strategic digital engagement and media relationship management in brand reputation building. For instance, Olumide and Okoro's (2022) study found that airlines with an active social media presence and strong CSR narratives reported significantly higher customer trust and brand loyalty levels. Furthermore, Okorie and Bwala (2021) highlighted that effective media partnerships, especially those involving experiential journalism, substantially enhanced the public's perception of service quality and corporate credibility. These findings closely mirror the patterns identified in the current research.

Applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) further clarifies the results. The ELM posits that individuals process persuasive messages through central and peripheral routes depending on their motivation and ability. Ibom Air's detailed PR efforts, such as CSR initiatives and detailed online content, appeal to passengers willing to engage deeply (central route), while eye-catching social media promotions and frequent media mentions appeal to those influenced more superficially (peripheral route). Thus, the strategic diversity ensures that both thoughtful and casual audience members are effectively reached and influenced.

Respondents believed that Ibom Air's public relations strategies were significantly impactful on their loyalty. This research question was answered through analyses and insights derived from key numbers from the questionnaire. Survey statistics revealed that 78% of respondents rated Ibom Air's public relations strategies as very important and somewhat important in shaping their airline choice, while only 22% dismissed it as not important at all and not very important. This result reinforces the notion that well-



executed PR plays an essential role in enhancing brand image and trust, key determinants of patronage in a competitive service sector like aviation.

The digital PR strategies employed by Ibom Air have proved instrumental in strengthening brand visibility and loyalty, especially among younger demographics. Through tailored content across various platforms, the airline humanises its brand and maintains active dialogues with customers. This online vibrancy translates into enhanced customer engagement and influences patronage, aligning with the finding that social media engagement was the most influential PR strategy.

The finding from previous scholarly research has reinforced the findings of this study. For instance, Rahman *et al.* (2022) showed that public relations efforts, particularly in digital engagement and corporate social responsibility, substantially increased airline customer loyalty and trust, reflecting patterns identified in Ibom Air's strategic initiatives. Likewise, Kim and Choi (2021) found that strong media relationships and consistent CSR messaging directly influenced brand preference and purchase decisions in the aviation industry. These findings mirror the current study's outcomes, affirming that strategic, well-aligned public relations is not only supplementary, but also central to customer acquisition and retention.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) explains that persuasive communication can influence attitudes via central or peripheral routes. In Ibom Air's case, PR strategies operated on both routes. Social media engagement and media relations encouraged central route processing by providing customers with relevant, quality information that shaped strong, enduring attitudes towards the brand. Meanwhile, CSR activities functioned along the peripheral route by generating favourable emotional impressions without requiring extensive cognitive processing.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study was conducted with the view to finding the whether public relations influences the patronage of Ibom Air. In today's dynamic and highly competitive business environment, public relations has evolved into a critical strategic tool for organisations aiming to build sustainable relationships with their audiences. Beyond simply managing information, PR now focuses on storytelling, emotional engagement, digital interaction, and reputation management. Public relations has proven exceptionally useful for organisations in achieving customer patronage, trust, and loyalty, particularly in the aviation sector, where passenger experience extends beyond the flight itself to brand perception.

The findings of this study reveal that Ibom Air's comprehensive public relations framework significantly enhanced passenger awareness, satisfaction, and loyalty. Additionally, social media engagement, CSR initiatives, and operational excellence were identified as enhancers of patronage. Thus, it can be concluded that Ibom Air's strategic deployment of targeted and customer-centric public relations practices played a crucial role in strengthening its corporate reputation, driving customer loyalty, and securing competitive advantages in the increasingly demanding Nigerian aviation market.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Given Ibom Air's comprehensive PR framework, the airline should invest in continuous training for its PR and communications teams, especially in emerging digital storytelling trends and AI-driven customer engagement tools.
2. Since passenger awareness of Ibom Air's PR strategies is moderately high but requires improvement, the airline should deploy targeted awareness campaigns that combine emotional branding with clear, visible storytelling around its CSR activities and loyalty programmes.



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3. Since brand reputation have a strong impact on patronage, Ibom Air should deepen its strategy by investing in more interactive content formats such as live Q&A sessions with pilots, behind-the-scenes videos, customer feature stories, and real-time service updates.

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