Social Media Deployment for Public Relations Campaign: A Study of Nigerian Public Relations Professionals

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Abstract
In the digital age, social media is the bedrock of interaction and connectivity. Predominantly, social media is regarded as a valuable tool for mass communication and mobilisation. It is frequently deplored by professionals to execute PR campaigns. This paper examined the extent to which social media is used, the motives for using it, the varieties of the outlets that are used and the challenges associated with its usage by public relations professionals in Nigeria. The study is situated within Uses and Gratification Theory and employed a qualitative research method. In-depth interviews and narrative recordings were used to elicit information from 20 public relations professionals in the South Western part of the country. The criteria for inclusion of the selected professionals relied on their vitality and active involvement in public relations campaigns and stakeholders' engagements. The paper discovered that public relations professionals in the country use social media for need assessment, information dissemination, bridge building and evaluation, among others. Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter topped the list of the varieties of the platforms engaged by public relations professionals. Due to the absence of gate keeping in the social media use, the paper recommended that PR professionals should be ethical and actively guide against misinformation in their PR campaign on social media.

Keywords: Digital Age**,** Social Media, Public Relations Professionals, Use and Gratification Theory.

Introduction[123]

The obtainability and ease of use of social media have greatly impacted human activities tremendously. Public relations, (PR) as a strategic and deliberately planned communication process that seeks to build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics has not been left out of this development.

It harnesses opportunities presented by the usage of social media in its campaign, reaching out to both its internal and external publics (audience, stakeholders) with more ease and rapidity than when the only mean of communicating with the public was mainly through traditional channels (Popoola, 2014; Stewart & Wilson, 2016; Brown, 2020). The traditional channels include the usage of print media (mainly newspapers, magazines) and broadcast media (mainly radio and TV).

Ekeah and Ewabunze (2018) and Sogunro (2003) note that with the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which gives birth to social media, more public relations professionals are using social media to reach their publics. It has transformed the communication between companies and the publics. Hitherto, the PR process was mainly one-dimensional but now

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multi-dimensional and interactions between an organization and its publics are not only faster but are also efficient (Forest 2019).

At the moment, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Cision etc. are used alone or to complement other PR tools globally for PR campaigns (Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016;. Mohammed, 2017). Forest (2019) observed that roughly 6,000 tweets are shared every second on Twitter for official and non - official engagements by users. This study, therefore, examined the usage of social media among public relations professionals in Nigeria.

Though, there are several work on social media usage for PR purposes in abroad and Nigeria, methodological gaps exist in these studies (Waters, Tindall and Morton, 2010; Graham, 2014) Komodromos, 2016; Mohamed, 2017). Many of the available studies used quantitative method. This methodological gap is what this study filled.

Research Questions

i. To what extent do PR professionals use social media in Nigeria?
ii. What types of social media are being used by PR professionals in Nigeria?
iii. What are the reasons for using social media by Nigerian PR professionals?
iv. What are the challenges associated with the use of social media by PR professionals?

What is Public Relations?

According to Goldman (1948), Ivy Lebetter Lee in 1906 issued the *Declaration of Principles* that transformed to present-day public relations. This does not only set the mood for the practice, but also fixed the tone and gives direction to the conventionality guiding PR. In what could be regarded as the most significant edge and the positive leap of the profession, Lee asserted that PR was conceived to supply the press and public prompt and accurate information concerning subjects that are of value and interest to the public, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions (Goldman, 1948).

Adefemi (2013, p. 140), citing World Assembly of Public Relations (1978), defines public relations as, "the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action(s), which will serve both the organization and the public interests" . British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR ,n.d) suggests that Public Relations is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

In an attempt to arrive at an acceptable definition of public relations, Harlow (1976) sought 472 definitions of public relations between 1900 and 1976. He, eventually defines public elations as:

> A distinctive management function that helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinions; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management to keep abreast of and effectively utilise change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends, and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools (Harlow 1976, p. 36).

In all, the common ground in the above submissions is that public relations activities are intentional and not expected to be carried out in secrecy. In addition, it is expected to be a bridge and bridge-builder between an organization and its varied publics. Also, it is worth noting that public relations is employed by industries, individuals and associations and in each of the different areas where it is deployed, competencies, the purpose for its deployment, the background of the user and the process employed in its usage varied. Arising from this, there is no universally agreed definition of the term. (Grunig, 1992; White and Mazur, 1996; L'Etang, 1996; Moloney 2000; Tench and Yeomans 2006).

Publics in Public Relations

The term publics in public relations is not the same as the general public. It is a term that is used to describe people who are directly or indirectly concerned with the organisation in question. These

categories of people may include those who patronize the organisation's services, products or benefit in one way or the other, or who are affected by its policies or programmes.

Raufu (2014) citing Salu (1994) suggests that publics in public relations is a group of people, who by their activities, will influence the person concerned or are themselves influenced by the person. Irrespective of different standpoints, Public Relations publics can be segregated along two lines, which are internal and external public.

Internal publics consist of those who are concerned or affected by their location and the existence of the organisation. This category of the public has day-to-interaction with the organisation. An example of this is an employee of an organisation (Raufu, 2014). On the other hand, the external public can be classified as an outsider. Though they are concerned and affected by the existence of the organisation by their location. They relate with the organisation from outside the organisation.

Media of Public Relations

For obvious reasons, public relations professionals deploy diverse mediums of communication in conveying messages and public relations activities and programmes to their numerous publics. Many of these media are public and message specific. Media of public relations for information dissemination are Print media (Newspaper, Magazine, Books, Journal, Newsletter Handbill, Billboard etc); Broadcast media (Radio, Television, Film, Cinema etc); Internet (New media/Social Media- Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp; etc).

PR tools

PR tools are the instruments available to public relations practitioners to achieve PR objective(s). These include but not limited to the following: facility visit, press/news release, publicity, exhibition feature articles, House journal, press conference, fact sheet, bios etc. These tools and many others aid the realization of public relation objective(s). In the present day, all these tools are strategically deployed through various types of social media (Roshan, Warren & Carr, 2016). For example, press releases, interviews, exhibitions, in-house journals and others are now accessible on social media platforms.

Social Media

At present, any attempt to discuss public relations without a particular reference to new media will amount to speaking in a vacuum (Bates, 2020). This is so because social media, for instance, has revolutionised all aspects of human endeavours. And, the public relations profession is not left out of this worthy high-tech advancement (Brown, 2020).

PR professionals make use of social media to communicate effectively with their publics in their numerous campaigns. Prompt feedbacks are also received through social media from the publics. Social media channels such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Cision etc. are some of the vibrant tools that are facilitating these interactions (Golden, 2011).

Social media, in comparison with the mainstream media of communication, is relatively cheaper and allows organisations and individuals to engage direct end-users through their contacts (Heinlein & Kaplan, 2010). Thus, public relations professionals within and outside Nigeria are also leveraging on the unique opportunities presented by social media to execute various public relations activities. For example, social media has proven to be a veritable tool in crisis management (An & Cheng: 2010; Roshan, Warren & Carr; 2016) which is one of the key areas of the Public Relations campaign. Acar, Takamura, Sakamoto and Nishimuta (2013) underscore the importance of social media in public relations activities.

Public Relations and Social Media: A fine blend

In all, the public is an integral part of the public relations campaign. Getting the message to the public for a greater bond and sustained affiliation is the goal of every public relations organization, and in doing this, the choice of the medium of communication is prudently done on purpose.

As a readily available medium of communication, social media has some advantages over others channels of communication. Some of these advantages are a relatively, low-cost pattern of interaction that allows organisations to engage direct end-users through their contacts (Heinlein

and Kaplan, 2010). Bates (2020) notes that social media amplifies messages thus allowing Public Relations campaigns to be stronger and more impactful. More so, its messages can live longer, spread faster and reach larger audiences/publics and it enhances "relationship marketing".

To Forest (2019), social media leverage on the limitlessness of Visual Reality (VR) and other graphics of communication to disseminate information better. Also, it promotes prompt feedback and multi-dimensional conversations as it engenders conversations between an organisation and its varied publics (Brown, 2020).

Furthermore, with social media, the band of opinion leaders have widened dramatically. There are many people now called "Niche-Influencers" or simply put, "Influencers" due to their active presence on social media and large followers. Public relations professionals are leveraging on this by becoming Influencers or cultivating Influencers who in turn assist them to reach out more effectively to their publics. Unlike the traditional media that have strict gatekeepers, social media makes it possible for individuals to produce their platform and cultivate their audience/followers.

According to Forest (2019), the future of public relations success in the use of social media rests on the number of followers of a social media influencer. He identifies "the macro-influencers as those with fewer than 100,000 followers and micro-influencers as those with fewer than 10,000 followers". Other advantages of social media usage by PR professionals are: shortened of the life span of news, increasing the volume and quality of media relations tools being used, keeping PR professionals and journalists on alert always thus improving their responsibilities and performances, enhancing and improving relationship building and access among stakeholders, direct communication with a target audience, among other advantages (Brown, 2020).

Review of Empirical Studies

Social media is an enabler. From providing opportunities to engage with the audience to build trust to fostering understanding and brand loyalty and serving as a platform to develop brand advocates or brand ambassadors among clients and employees (Crane, 2010), social media have impacted every facet of human undertakings.

In a study on "Media Catching and the Journalist–Public Relations Practitioners' Relationship: How Social Media are Changing the Practice of Media Relations" Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010) found that as media environment is changing with the evolving online atmosphere, traditional media relations strategies are changing and tilting towards practices that are more relevant to a social media environment. Brown and Waddington (2013) validate this finding, pointing out that with the advent of social media, the discipline of public relations is in a process of swift-evolution, where its knowledge, skills and practice are in motion.

Highlighting the effects of social media on public relations practices, Hong (2013) in a study finds that social media helps the public provide the government with feedback. The researcher, in a nationwide survey of more than 2000 American citizens, investigates the influence of government websites and social media as the government's major public relations tools and found that the websites and social media have the potential to facilitate high-quality government-public relationships.

Also, using data collected from more than 450 local government officials from municipalities across the United States, Avery and Graham (2013) examine the impact that various community features have on local government's social media use. The inquiry reveals that social media is used to perform strategic and public relations functions, targeted at stimulating participatory and transparent government.

Similarly, Graham (2014) investigates how social media are used as a public relations instrument to promote democratic, participatory, and transparency models in government. Results from the study indicate that social media are vastly regarded as a valuable communication tool for local governments and that they are used to build relationships with citizens and enhance communication practices.

According to Komodromos (2015), whether or not we admit the need for labels like the new public relations, social media is changing the underlying forces of public relations beyond what we used to consider to be public relations. For a fact, the arrival of social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube has in

no small measure changed the communications landscape. For today's PR practitioners, social media presents a highly dynamic landscape.

Away from the foregoing submissions but in the same hint, Grigore (2015), in his assessment of social responsibility in the digital age, opines those public relations is a stand-alone practice, an element of the marketing mix, placing its promotional and penetrative effects side by side with advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, direct marketing and publicity.

Meanwhile, Toledano and Avidar, (2015) examine the associated risk involved in the use of social media by public relations professionals. They identify transparency and ethical issues - the use of fake identities in comments, the use of payments to bloggers, and the use of payments to social media experts for conducting smear campaigns – as the bane on the advancement. In his view, however, Lipschultz (2015) notes that the challenge of social media ethics, specifically on Twitter, comes in what Vonage co-founder Jeff Pulver has called communication at "the speed of now."

Komodromos (2016), cross-examines the perceptions of 20 public relations executives working in digital interactive agencies on the use of web 2.0 and social media in the communication practice of public relations executives in Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Malta. He found that the adoption of online interactivity is an important public relations tool, offering numerous opportunities for public relations practitioners to interact and engage with a wide range of stakeholders.

On his own, Mohamed (2017) explores public relations practitioners' perceptions and attitudes towards using social media during a crisis. A random sample of 160 PR practitioners was selected from different public and private organizations in the UAE. The results indicate that public relations practitioners are active and heavy social media users in their organizations during a crisis. The study confirms that the most commonly used communication strategies were compensation, corrective action and justification.

In their separate but related study, Su1, Scheufele, Bell, Brossard, Xenos (2017) note that social media have given rise to new opportunities for science organizations to communicate with the public. They examine scientific institutions' use of Twitter for one-way and two-way communication in connection with science festivals over the period 2012 to 2015 and conclud that actively embracing social media as a set of two-way communication tools will further empower science public relations practitioners to foster public engagement with science and cultivate sustainable relations between their organisations and the public.

On ethical issues and associated challenges in connection with the use of social media by public relations practitioners, Fearn-Banks, (2017) explains "crisis communications demands that one uses the best-crafted message delivered by the most effective method to the precise public (audience). This has not changed. What has changed is the fact that social media makes it possible for faster communication than traditional methods and to a very precise, often chosen, public. Whereas we used to have a "golden hour" to disseminate crucial information about a crisis, now we have a "golden few minutes" before the publics expect information. Social media encourage rapid and frequent two-way communication between an organization and its segmented publics, without a gatekeeper. Social media can build positive relationships with these publics."

Theoretical Framework

Using Uses and Gratification theory as a pedestal, this aspect of the work expounds on the motivation for media usage by Public Relations professionals in Nigeria. The adopted theory was first introduced by Elihu Katz in the early 1970s and propagated by Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, his friends. Uses and Gratifications theory is audience-centred and premised on the assumption that people use mass media for different reasons and seek to derive various gratifications (Asemah, 2011; Popoola, 2014; Musa, Azmi and Ismail, 2015).

The theory regards why people use media as a "need to be satisfied" and what they use the media for as "gratification", alluding to the proposition that users, in light of the current study, public relations professionals, deliberately choose media that will satisfy given needs. In consistence with the tenets of the theory, Richard and Lynn (2007) hold that the approach is unique in its assumptions

and summaries its focal points to include the under listed:

(i) The audience is active and its media use is goal-oriented.
(ii) The initiative in linking need gratification to a specific medium choice rests with the audience member.
(iii) The media compete with other resources for need satisfaction.
(iv) People have enough self-awareness of their media use, interests, and motives to be able to provide researchers with an accurate picture of that use.
(v) Value judgments of media content can only be assessed by the audience.

To a large extent, Richard and Lynn's (2007) submissions that social media usage, from the standpoint of the theory, is influenced by the need to satisfy set goals and that people have enough self-awareness of their media use, interests, and motives to be able to provide researchers with an accurate picture of that use are relevant to this work.

To PR professionals, social media provides a unique and strong base for social, personal and professional gratifications. At a glance, one can assume that the professionals simply employ social media to reach their target audience and to ensure effective communication but even at that, it is a veridical truth that social media is also deplored to heighten social interactions, to build or sustain mutual understanding between corresponding organisations and both their public - internal and external.

Methodology

Public relations is not a fixed system. The discipline is evolving and highly adaptive. Therefore, the call for a continuous assessment of the profession is in order. On this pedestal, this study employed a qualitative research method and in-depth interview as an instrument of data collection. Data were obtained from 20 public relations professionals in Nigeria. The responses were thematically analyzed in line with the research objectives. Those selected were mapped out and evaluated due to their membership in the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), years of experience (not less than 7 years of practice) and active involvement in public relations campaigns.

The study area is Southwest Nigeria. The survey was carried out to determine the extent to which the sampled PR professionals use Social media, to identify the types of social media they use, to find out their reasons for using social media and to examine the challenges in the usage of social media. The participants were recruited through purposive and convenient sampling that was initiated from the personal contacts of the researchers. A structured interview guide that contains questions to elicit responses to the four research objectives was sent to the email addresses of the participants. They responded through the same medium.

Summary of Data from the Interview

As earlier discussed, 20 public relations professionals in Nigeria were interviewed. The study used the Yin (1994) explanation building method where themes were deployed around the subject matter. The findings of the study are presented bellow based on each research objectives.

RO1: The extent to which PR professionals use Social media in Nigeria

The findings from the in-depth interview reveal that 17 out of 20 interviewees make use of social media on daily basis.

RO2: Types of social media are being used by PR professionals in Nigeria.

The study identifies the types of Social Media being used by the PR professionals interviewed. These include Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. The study also finds that Syndication of PR messages to media houses are made possible using the identified social media.

RO3: Reasons for using social media

The examination of significant reliance on social media platforms by PR professionals for PR activities reveals that their reliance on social media platform for some reasons. According to the interviewed PR professionals, the following are some of the reasons for the usage of social media for PR programmes: speed advantage in message development and delivery, wider reach of target audience, interactive nature of the medium, spontaneous feedback, open access, limitless geographical coverage. Also, it has multimedia enablement; using the social media is relatively cheaper than the mainstream media, and multi-sensory attractions.

In summary, the feedback suggests that social media constitutes part of the new rules/channels of disseminating PR information. They allow a PR executive to disseminate their messages directly to their audience rather than go through the gatekeeping of the traditional media. Information dissemination on social media is instant and easily reaches a large audience.

RO4: Challenges in the usage of social media by PR professionals

The following are challenges identified by the interviewed PR professionals: Inability to control the publics' reactions or treatment of the organisation, presence of many fake news and fake identity of on social media, insufficient funding of PR activities on social media, poor network and non-affordability of data. Others are: inabilities to gate keep responses or feedback from immature publics, distortion of PR messages by competitors and unwarranted attacks on Social Media.

Discussion

Thematic analysis of and imports from the elicited data show that none of the respondents operates without social media. Notwithstanding, they defer in the degree of usage of the medium. 17 out of the 20 respondents use social media "daily," "to a large extent" and "often." This goes further to confirm Komodromos (2015, 2016) and Toledano and Avidar's, (2015) position that social media is now a key player in day to day running of PR activities and campaigns.

On the justification for using social media, this study reveals that the medium is selected because social media: "has the bulk of (PR) target audience," "is formal and fast in reaching a target audience," "can reach the whole world," "modern trend and can reach many clients," and "trending and guarantee more followership." For one of the interviewed PR professional, social media is the impulse of new PR because of its "speed of execution, wider reach to specified target profiles, predictive analytics, measurable and quantitative analysis of responses from respondents." This is in line with Toledano and Avidar's, (2015) position.

To the majority of the interviewed PR professionals, the use of social media is conditioned by the assumption that it "constitutes part of the new rules/channels of disseminating PR information. They allow a PR executive to disseminate their messages directly to their audience rather than go through the gatekeeping of the traditional media. Information dissemination on social media is instant and easily reaches a large audience." This corroborate the position of Su1, Scheufele, Bell, Brossard, Xenos (2017) that social media have given rise to new opportunities for organizations to communicate with the public.

Just like every other channel of mass communication, social media is not without peculiar challenges when it comes to PR activities. Lipschultz's (2015) position on the challenge of social media ethics is attested to by the feelers from the professionals who claim that inability to control any aspect of customers' reactions to and/or treatment of brand or feedback from immature readers, fake news, insufficient fund, poor network, as well as unhealthy competitions from business rivals who strive to distort messages and sometimes, move to attack social media handle of their competitors are major challenges associated with the use of social media as a PR tool.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is established that most PR professionals are using social media frequently to execute their responsibilities and Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and others mostly used. However, some challenges like distortion of messages, spread of fake information due to absence of gatekeepers, network problems, and high cost of data among others are inherent in the use of social media.

Arising from the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested: PR professionals should endeavour to be ethical in the use of Social Media, to further train and retrain PR professionals in the effective use of social media for public relations activities. There is also the need to institute avenues on social media where contents can be verified. Due to the absence of gate keeping in the social media use, the paper recommended that PR professionals should be ethical and actively guide against misinformation in their PR campaign on social media.

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