

THEORIZING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A STRATEGIC TOOL IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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Abstract

This theoretical review examines how social media has redefined public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria by transforming communication from one-way dissemination to two-way participatory engagement. Drawing on Grunig's Excellence Theory and Kent and Taylor's Dialogic Communication Theory, the paper conceptualises social media as both a strategic management tool and a relational platform for ethical, interactive, and trust-based communication. Using qualitative synthesis of scholarly, industry, and practitioner insights (2019–2025), the review situates Nigerian PR practice within global debates on digital transformation. It highlights that platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok facilitate transparency, audience participation, and real-time feedback but also pose challenges relating to misinformation, algorithmic bias, and ethical accountability. The study further demonstrates that Nigerian PR professionals increasingly employ social media for corporate storytelling, crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement. However, theoretical gaps persist in aligning digital strategies with ethical standards and cultural realities. Integrating both Excellence and Dialogic theories, the review proposes a hybrid model emphasising strategic alignment, dialogic engagement, and ethical responsibility as pillars of effective digital PR practice. Overall, the paper contributes to advancing contextually grounded theories for understanding how social media shapes contemporary communication, reputation management, and public trust in Nigeria's evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Digital transformation, Public Relations, social media, stakeholder engagement, strategic communication.

Introduction

The digital revolution has profoundly transformed the theory and practice of public relations (PR), shifting its focus from one-way information dissemination to two-way, participatory engagement. In Nigeria, where over 122 million citizens have internet access and more than 85% of youths actively engage on social media (Statista, 2025), this transformation has far-reaching implications for how organisations communicate, manage reputation, and build relationships. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok now serve as vital tools for storytelling, advocacy, and stakeholder dialogue (Trevisan, Vaughan, & Vromen, 2025). They provide real-time audience access, immediate feedback, and global visibility. Conceptually, social media refers to digital, networked platforms that enable users to create and exchange content through interactive technologies (Nkemdilim, 2024). Within PR, these platforms enhance communication management, reputation building, and stakeholder engagement. However, this immediacy also raises challenges concerning credibility, ethics, and message control in participatory environments (Okorie & Salawu, 2023; Edegoh & Okoye, 2024).

Although social media's influence on Nigerian PR practice has expanded rapidly, scholarly engagement remains fragmented. Empirical studies often document adoption patterns and campaign outcomes (Olatunji, 2023; Akpan et al., 2022) but seldom integrate theory to explain how and why digital tools reshape communication dynamics. This disconnect sustains a gap between innovation and conceptualisation. Classical frameworks such as Grunig's (1992)

Excellence Theory, which emphasises two-way symmetrical communication, and Kent and Taylor's (1998) *Dialogic Communication Theory*, which focuses on ethical, relationship-centred dialogue, require cultural reinterpretation within Nigeria's collectivist, hierarchical, and digitally uneven context (Adebisi & Lawal, 2023). Hence, this paper theorises social media not merely as a technological extension of PR but as a relational and dialogic system embedded in Nigeria's communicative ecology.

Globally, social media has redefined organisational influence, transforming audiences from passive recipients into active participants in brand storytelling (Liu & Saffer, 2020; Hutchins & Tindall, 2023). This evolution aligns with dialogic principles of openness, mutuality, and responsiveness, demanding a shift from message management to conversation management (Kent, 2022). Conceptually, PR practice entails the deliberate management of relationships between organisations and publics to foster goodwill and mutual understanding.

In the digital era, this translates to crafting transparent narratives that encourage engagement and empathy. Nigerian corporations, NGOs, and government agencies increasingly leverage X and Instagram for crisis communication, stakeholder dialogue, and brand humanisation (Okon, 2024). These digital platforms merge the reach of mass communication with the intimacy of interpersonal interaction, democratising voice while challenging PR professionals to master digital ethics, active listening, and adaptive responsiveness (Boamah, 2023).

Nevertheless, challenges persist, with many Nigerian PR practitioners lacking formal digital training, resulting in inconsistent engagement and reactive communication (Nwosu & Udeze, 2021). Misinformation, algorithmic opacity, and political manipulation further undermine

credibility and trust. The necessity for theoretical grounding thus becomes clear. Revisiting *Excellence Theory* highlights the importance of mutual understanding and bidirectional communication, while *Dialogic Communication Theory* reinforces the ethical imperative of sustained, open-ended interaction. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting social media as both a managerial and participatory tool for PR.

This theoretical review employs a qualitative synthesis approach, integrating scholarly research, industry reports, and practitioner surveys from 2019 to 2025. It examines how Nigerian PR professionals strategically employ social media within institutional, technological, and cultural contexts to enhance dialogue and reputation management. The review interrogates the interplay between organisational objectives, platform affordances, and audience agency in shaping authentic engagement.

By situating Nigerian PR within global discourse, this study argues that social media, when analysed through the dual lenses of excellence and dialogic theories, transcends its instrumental role as a publicity mechanism. Instead, it represents an ethical and relational sphere for trust-building and co-created meaning in the digital public domain. In a nutshell, this paper contributes to advancing digital PR scholarship by proposing a culturally contextualised theoretical model that unites strategic intent with participatory communication. It bridges the theory–practice divide and positions Nigerian PR as a vital participant in global debates on the evolution of strategic communication in the digital age.

Conceptual Clarifications

Evolution of Social Media in Public Relations Practice

The rise of social media has transformed public relations (PR) from a traditional, media-centred discipline into an interactive process of co-creation between organisations and their publics. Globally, social media has disrupted hierarchical communication by shifting influence from institutional gatekeepers to audience gatewatchers (Bruns, 2018). Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become indispensable tools for reputation management, crisis response, and stakeholder engagement. According to the Global Communications Report (2023), nearly 90% of PR professionals worldwide now integrate social media into daily practice, reinforcing its strategic centrality to organisational legitimacy and visibility.

Social media has democratised communication in Nigeria,, expanding participation beyond elite-controlled legacy media (Olatunji, 2023). These platforms allow the public to shape narratives, challenge institutions, and co-construct brand meaning, transforming PR into a dialogic rather than a persuasive endeavour. However, this participatory openness introduces vulnerabilities such as misinformation, polarisation, and reputational volatility. Boamah (2023) notes that instantaneous virality magnifies reputational risk, while Adebisi and Lawal (2023) emphasise that Nigeria's politically charged digital environment requires ethical vigilance and communicative transparency.

Strategic Communication and Engagement Logic

Strategic communication theory situates PR as a managerial function aligning organisational objectives with stakeholder expectations (Hallahan et al., 2007). In digital contexts, this has evolved into a model emphasising engagement, responsiveness, and audience

analytics. Social media enables real-time listening, segmentation, and adaptive communication strategies. Dwivedi et al. (2023) argue that algorithmic analytics now permit precision persuasion, allowing communicators to track sentiment and recalibrate campaigns dynamically.

In Nigeria, this strategic potential manifests across sectors, from banks like GTCO using X for customer relations to civic groups such as BudgIT and Enough Is Enough (EIE) Nigeria employing Instagram for advocacy and public accountability. These examples illustrate how PR increasingly integrates corporate goals with social purpose. However, as Hutchins and Tindall (2023) caution, effective digital engagement depends on *strategic authenticity*—the ability to combine institutional intent with human sincerity and empathy.

Dialogic Communication in Digital PR

Kent and Taylor's (1998) Dialogic Communication Theory provides an interpretive framework for understanding PR in the social media era. It identifies five dialogic principles: mutuality, empathy, propinquity, risk, and commitment, as essential for sustaining authentic, ethical relationships. Social media operationalises these principles through interactivity and openness, transforming monologic persuasion into genuine dialogue (Kent, 2022). Empirical findings reinforce this view: Saffer et al. (2020) found that sustained dialogic engagement enhances trust and loyalty, while Liu and Saffer (2020) linked it to organisational transparency. In Nigeria, hierarchical and collectivist communication norms sometimes constrain symmetrical dialogue (Nwosu & Udeze, 2021). Nonetheless, cases such as Access Bank's transparent engagement during the #EndSARS protests illustrate how empathy-driven communication fosters relational capital and credibility (Akinbile & Omolayo, 2022). Thus, social media

redefines PR as a participatory space where reputation is co-created through dialogue rather than dictated through messaging.

Ethical and Cultural Considerations in the Nigerian Context

Ethics form the backbone of PR practice, yet digital platforms heighten dilemmas involving misinformation, privacy, and authenticity. Saura (2024) warns that algorithmic personalisation fosters echo chambers, complicating fairness and accountability in digital communication. In Nigeria, where misinformation flourishes amid weak oversight, ethical integrity is essential for sustaining public trust (Adebayo, 2023).

Cultural sensitivity also underpins effective PR. Nigerian communication values collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and communal storytelling (Ojebode, 2021). Adesina and Sulaiman (2022) argue that strategies aligned with indigenous values: mutual respect, empathy, and solidarity, generate stronger resonance. MTN Nigeria’s “We Move” campaign exemplifies how culturally grounded engagement builds trust and participation. Ultimately, as Olatunji (2023) observes, the sustainability of PR in Nigeria depends not merely on digital adoption but on the ethical and cultural stewardship of online influence.

Overview and Rationale for Theoretical Integration

The digital transformation of public relations (PR) has redefined how organisations communicate, manage reputation, and build stakeholder relationships. Traditional one-way communication has evolved into participatory frameworks that emphasise dialogue, collaboration, and ethical engagement. This study integrates Grunig’s Excellence Theory and Kent and Taylor’s Dialogic Communication Theory to explain how social media operates both as

a strategic management instrument and a relational platform within Nigeria's socio-cultural context.

Excellence Theory and Its Strategic Relevance

Excellence Theory (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) conceptualises PR as a research-based, strategic function that enhances organisational effectiveness through mutual understanding and ethical communication. The theory's four models: press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical, illustrate PR's evolution from persuasion to reciprocity (Grunig, 2009). In the digital era, social media provides the infrastructure for symmetrical communication through interactivity and feedback. Verčič and Zerfass (2021) argue that analytics now enable PR professionals to transition from message control to strategic listening. However, in Nigeria, PR practice remains asymmetrical mainly. Olatunji (2023) notes that most organisations employ social media for publicity rather than dialogue. Applying the Excellence model necessitates reframing social media as a participatory space for transparency and stakeholder inclusion.

Dialogic Communication Theory and Digital Engagement

Dialogic Communication Theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998) reframes PR as relationship management grounded in mutuality, empathy, and commitment. Digital media amplify these principles by enabling real-time, reciprocal interaction (Kent, 2022). Studies by Saffer et al. (2020) and Taylor and Perry (2021) show that empathetic, dialogic engagement enhances loyalty and credibility. In Nigeria's collectivist context, such approaches align with indigenous values of reciprocity and respect (Nwosu & Udeze, 2021). Together, both theories converge on three principles: strategic alignment, dialogic engagement, and ethical accountability, demonstrating

that effective digital PR combines strategic intent with authentic dialogue to build trust and co-create meaning.

Challenges of Using Social Media as a Tool for Public Relations

The rapid integration of social media into public relations (PR) practice has transformed how organisations communicate, manage crises, and engage stakeholders. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become indispensable tools for visibility and dialogue. However, this digital transformation has introduced significant ethical, strategic, and operational challenges that threaten the integrity and credibility of PR practice. These challenges are particularly acute in Nigeria where social media use continues to expand amid widespread misinformation, political polarisation, and infrastructural limitations,

A significant challenge is the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. The participatory nature of social media enables unverified content to circulate rapidly, often eclipsing official communication. Statista (2024) reports that more than 70% of Nigerian internet users encounter false information weekly, mainly on political or corporate issues. This erodes organisational credibility and public trust, as reputational damage spreads faster than corrective responses.

Algorithmic bias and visibility constraints also undermine strategic communication. Social media algorithms prioritise sensational or emotionally charged content while suppressing factual, corporate messaging. This forces PR professionals to compete for attention in an engagement-driven ecosystem. The lack of transparency surrounding algorithms tempts

practitioners to exaggerate or sensationalise content to gain traction, undermining professionalism and ethical standards.

Ethical dilemmas further complicate PR practice. The pressure for instant response often conflicts with the duty to verify information, leading some agencies to prioritise virality over accuracy (Olatunji, 2023). The rise of influencer marketing blurs boundaries between authentic advocacy and paid promotion, with undisclosed sponsorships and manipulative endorsements compromising transparency and fairness. Crisis communication has also become more volatile. Digital crises can escalate within minutes through viral posts, leaving organisations with little time to strategise. Adeyemi and Olatunji (2021) found that over 60% of Nigerian brands experienced social media-induced crises between 2019 and 2023. Combined with user-generated amplification, these crises intensify reputational risks.

Furthermore, skill gaps and infrastructural weaknesses hinder effective digital engagement. Many Nigerian PR professionals lack data analytics expertise and advanced digital literacy, while poor connectivity and erratic power supply impede timely communication.

Finally, cultural and contextual factors shape PR challenges. Nigeria's linguistic diversity and collectivist traditions require nuanced messaging, yet most online communication remains urban-centric and hierarchical. The politicised, emotionally charged nature of Nigeria's digital landscape further complicates corporate engagement, as seen during the #EndSARS movement, where brands faced scrutiny over authenticity and ethical alignment.

Enhancement Strategies for Effective Use of Social Media in Public Relations Practice

Maximising social media's potential as a strategic communication tool in public relations (PR) requires deliberate, ethical, and contextually grounded strategies, particularly in Nigeria, where infrastructural limitations, digital inequality, and cultural diversity shape communication practices. PR professionals must integrate technological competence with ethical accountability to foster credible engagement.

A key strategy is capacity building and digital literacy. As social media evolves rapidly, practitioners must master analytics, storytelling, and audience engagement. Since many Nigerian PR professionals are trained in traditional communication, institutions such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) and the Public Relations Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN) should establish continuous digital training and certification programmes focused on strategy, ethics, and online reputation management.

Ethical governance is equally vital. The open nature of social media heightens risks of misinformation and manipulation. Localising professional codes like the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Code of Conduct can enhance transparency and accountability. Disclosure of sponsorships, transparent influencer collaborations, and partnerships with fact-checking organisations such as Dubawa and Africa Check will help preserve message credibility.

In line with Dialogic Communication Theory, PR practitioners should prioritise responsiveness, empathy, and mutual respect to replace one-way dissemination with meaningful dialogue. Brands like Airtel and Access Bank demonstrate the power of humour and culturally resonant storytelling to humanise communication. Finally, data-driven engagement and cultural

adaptation, through analytics, indigenous languages, and communal values—ensure authenticity. Collectively, these strategies can transform social media into a sustainable platform for dialogue, trust, and organisational legitimacy.

Recommendations

This review recommends several measures to strengthen the strategic use of social media in Nigerian public relations practice. PR practitioners should pursue continuous digital training and analytics-driven strategies to ensure responsiveness and data-informed decision-making. Professional bodies like the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) must establish and enforce ethical guidelines to promote transparency and accountability. PR firms should adopt dialogic communication principles, emphasising empathy, openness, and sustained conversation, to build authentic stakeholder relationships. Policymakers should address misinformation through stronger regulatory frameworks and nationwide digital literacy initiatives. Collectively, these strategies will reposition social media as a credible, ethical, and participatory communication tool, enhancing trust, dialogue, and democratic engagement in Nigeria's evolving digital public relations landscape.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media has redefined the landscape of public relations, transforming it from a unidirectional information process into a dynamic, interactive, and participatory practice. For Nigerian PR professionals, this evolution offers both unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges. Effective utilisation of social media requires not only technological competence but also adherence to ethical standards, cultural sensitivity, and

strategic intent. The integration of dialogic and excellence principles provides a pathway for achieving mutual understanding, credibility, and organisational trust. As digital communication continues to evolve, PR practitioners must embrace continuous learning, accountability, and inclusivity to remain relevant. Ultimately, social media's actual strategic value lies in its capacity to foster authentic relationships and sustain meaningful dialogue between organisations and their publics.

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