



Social Media and Stakeholders Engagements: A Study of Select Universities in Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: As institutions of higher learning increasingly adopt digital communication strategies, understanding how these platforms influence relationships with stakeholders, students, staff, alumni, media, and the general public has become imperative.

Objectives: This study investigated the role of social media platforms in shaping stakeholder engagement and perception within three universities in Rivers State: Rivers State University, University of Port Harcourt, and PAMO University of Medical Sciences.

Method: The research adopted a descriptive survey design, and gathered data from public relations and communications personnel in the select universities.

Results: While the universities actively use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to disseminate information and interact with stakeholders, they often lack cohesive policies and adequate staff capacity to maximize these tools effectively. Challenges also exist in integrating social media with traditional media for coherent communication.

Conclusion: A strategic, well-managed approach to social media significantly enhances stakeholder trust, participation, and institutional reputation.

Unique Contribution: The study offers insights for institutional leaders and communication practitioners striving to build more responsive, transparent, and inclusive universities.

Recommendations: The development of institutional social media policies, continuous training for communication staff, and the adoption of an integrated media strategy that combines traditional and digital platforms for comprehensive stakeholder engagement are recommended.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Media Platforms, Stakeholder Engagement, Media Relations



INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, social media has emerged as a critical communication tool for organizations seeking to engage with diverse stakeholders. Higher education institutions, including universities, are increasingly integrating social media platforms into their communication strategies to foster interaction, transparency, and stakeholder involvement (Ogbaeja & Nwafor, 2017). These platforms offer real-time, two-way communication channels that surpass the limitations of traditional media, making it easier for institutions to share information, build relationships, and influence public perception (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Universities, by virtue of their multifaceted roles, interact with various internal and external stakeholders such as students, faculty, staff, alumni, prospective students, parents, employers, and government agencies. Engaging these stakeholders effectively is crucial for sustaining institutional reputation, enhancing student recruitment and retention, and promoting academic excellence (Maringe, 2006). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube have therefore become essential tools in higher education, allowing universities to communicate strategic messages, publicize events, respond to inquiries, and create communities of interest (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Nwafor & Odoemelum, 2016).

In Nigeria, the adoption of social media within university systems has gained momentum over the past decade, particularly as internet penetration and mobile technology usage have increased (Aligwe, et al., 2017). Universities in Rivers State, located in the South-South region of Nigeria, have also begun to embrace social media for institutional branding, stakeholder communication, and academic support. However, the extent to which these platforms are being used strategically to influence stakeholder perceptions and enhance engagement remains underexplored. Many institutions still struggle to balance traditional communication methods—such as press releases, bulletin boards, and radio—with the immediacy and interactivity of digital platforms (Ezeah et al., 2013).

Existing studies outside Nigeria have shown that while social media provides opportunities for engagement, its effectiveness depends largely on the presence of a coherent digital communication strategy, adequate technical know-how, and a clear understanding of stakeholder needs (Lovejoy et al., 2007). In contexts where these elements are lacking, social media use may be superficial, with limited impact on engagement or institutional image. Furthermore, studies such as Ayish (2005) have noted that public relations and communication professionals in some institutions often retain a traditional mindset, limiting their ability to fully leverage online platforms for strategic engagement.

There is a dearth of studies on social media use and stakeholder engagement in Nigeria-based universities. It is against this backdrop, this study investigated how three select universities in Rivers State (Rivers State University, University of Port Harcourt, and PAMO University of Medical Sciences) utilize social media platforms to engage their stakeholders and shape public perceptions. Our major aims are to identify the specific platforms in use, understand the



challenges these institutions face in integrating traditional and digital media, and assess the overall impact of social media use on stakeholder engagement. By exploring these dimensions, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital communication in higher education and offers insights for institutional leaders and communication practitioners striving to build more responsive, transparent, and inclusive universities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions that guided the study:

- 1) What specific social media platforms are employed by the select universities to engage their target audiences?
- 2) What challenges do the select universities face in balancing the use of traditional media and social media platforms?
- 3) How does the use of social media platforms by the select universities influence stakeholders' perceptions and engagement levels?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms are digital environments designed to facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of user-generated content through interactive and networked technologies. These platforms provide virtual spaces where individuals and organizations can connect, communicate, and collaborate in real time across geographical boundaries (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Each social media platform offers distinct functionalities, user interfaces, and communication styles tailored to specific purposes, audiences, and content types (Nwonyi et al., 2024). Popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and TikTok represent different categories of social media based on their primary use cases. For instance, Facebook is widely used for general social networking and community building; Twitter for microblogging and real-time updates; LinkedIn for professional networking and career development; YouTube for long-form video sharing; Instagram for visual storytelling; and TikTok for short-form, creative video content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These platforms enable asynchronous and synchronous interactions, making them versatile tools for communication and engagement.

The architecture of social media platforms is built around the concept of profiles, feeds, followers/friends, likes, comments, and shares, which promote visibility and interaction. These features enhance social connectivity and foster both personal and organizational branding. For organizations, including educational institutions, social media platforms serve as strategic communication tools to reach stakeholders, publicize events, promote achievements, and gather feedback (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Importantly, social media platforms also serve as digital ecosystems where stakeholders co-create value through active participation. They enable two-way communication, breaking the traditional top-down communication model. This is particularly relevant in educational contexts, where platforms like Twitter and Facebook



facilitate informal learning, community engagement, and enhanced interaction between universities and their stakeholders (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

Despite their advantages, social media platforms also pose challenges. Issues such as information overload, privacy concerns, cyberbullying, algorithmic bias, and the spread of misinformation remain prevalent (Van Dijck, 2013). Therefore, users and organizations must adopt responsible social media practices, including clear policies, ethical communication, and digital literacy initiatives. Social media platforms are powerful tools that have revolutionized how individuals and institutions communicate and engage. Their multifaceted features and global reach make them indispensable for fostering relationships, enhancing visibility, and facilitating participatory dialogue in the digital age.

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement refers to the process by which organizations involve individuals, groups, or organizations that are affected by or can affect their decisions and operations. It is a strategic approach to relationship-building that emphasizes open dialogue, trust, mutual understanding, and shared goals between an organization and its stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders may include employees, customers, investors, students, community members, government bodies, and other interest groups whose support or opposition can influence the success of an organization. The concept of stakeholder engagement has evolved from passive information dissemination to an interactive, participatory process where stakeholders are considered partners in value creation. According to Greenwood (2007), genuine stakeholder engagement involves more than communication—it encompasses consultation, involvement in decision-making, and ongoing relationship management. This participatory model encourages organizations to listen, respond, and adapt based on stakeholder inputs, thereby fostering legitimacy, transparency, and accountability.

In the context of higher education institutions, stakeholder engagement is increasingly critical. Universities engage with a wide array of internal and external stakeholders, including students, faculty, alumni, regulatory bodies, employers, and the broader society. Engaging these groups effectively ensures better alignment of institutional goals with stakeholder expectations, enhances the quality of education, and supports sustainable development (Bryson, 2004). For instance, student engagement in policy formulation or alumni participation in institutional fundraising activities exemplifies how inclusive practices can yield mutual benefits.

The use of digital tools—particularly social media—has expanded the scope of stakeholder engagement by enabling real-time interaction and broader participation. Through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, institutions can communicate directly with stakeholders, solicit feedback, and foster a sense of community. This technological mediation of stakeholder relationships enhances responsiveness and promotes dialogue that transcends geographical boundaries (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Effective stakeholder engagement also contributes to organizational resilience and reputation management. When stakeholders feel heard and valued, they are more likely to support institutional initiatives and advocate for the organization in public



forums (Eskerod & Jepsen, 2013). However, engagement must be sustained and authentic to be meaningful. Tokenistic or one-off consultations may breed skepticism and disengagement. Stakeholder engagement is a critical component of strategic management and organizational sustainability. In today's interconnected world, organizations that invest in meaningful stakeholder relationships are better positioned to innovate, adapt, and thrive amid changing societal expectations and competitive pressures.

Media Relations

Media relations is a strategic communication function focused on building and maintaining positive relationships between an organization and the media. It involves the deliberate and planned interaction with journalists, editors, broadcasters, and other media professionals to ensure the accurate and favorable dissemination of information about the organization (Wilcox et al., 2013). The primary goal of media relations is to secure earned media coverage—news stories, interviews, or features—rather than paid advertising, thereby enhancing credibility and public trust. Effective media relations is grounded in mutual understanding and respect between the organization and the media. This relationship is often facilitated through activities such as press releases, media briefings, interviews, press conferences, and media kits (Newsom et al., 2010). By proactively providing timely, relevant, and accurate information, organizations can shape public perception, manage reputational risks, and reinforce their messages to key stakeholders.

In the contemporary digital media environment, media relations has expanded beyond traditional news outlets to include online news platforms, bloggers, influencers, and citizen journalists. This evolution reflects the convergence of media and technology, requiring communication professionals to adapt their strategies to the preferences of diverse audiences and channels (Fawkes, 2014). Social media platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn are increasingly used to share official statements, connect with journalists, and respond to public discourse in real-time. In institutional contexts such as higher education, media relations plays a pivotal role in promoting research breakthroughs, institutional achievements, student and alumni success stories, and policy advocacy. By engaging the media strategically, universities can amplify their visibility, attract funding, boost student enrollment, and influence public policy (Waters et al., 2010).

Moreover, strong media relations are critical in crisis communication. In moments of organizational uncertainty or controversy, an established relationship with the media enables quicker, more accurate dissemination of information, helping to manage narratives and maintain public confidence (Coombs, 2015). Conversely, poor media relations can result in misinformation, reputational damage, and diminished stakeholder trust. Media relations is a vital component of public relations and organizational communication. Its effectiveness depends not only on the content shared but also on the quality of relationships built over time with media professionals. In a rapidly changing media landscape, organizations must be agile, transparent, and strategic in managing these relationships to achieve long-term communication goals.



EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Mohamed (2007) conducted a study titled Promoting Online Media Relations: Public Relations Departments' Use of the Internet in the UAE, which explored how public relations (PR) departments in the United Arab Emirates utilize online tools to engage with the media. The study was guided by several key objectives. First, it sought to examine the patterns of Internet usage among PR departments in the UAE. Second, it aimed to assess the types of media materials, news, information, and data that these departments make available on their official websites. Third, the study investigated whether PR units employ the Internet and online newspapers to conduct research and monitor their organization's corporate image in digital spaces. Finally, the research evaluated the existing policies and strategies of PR departments, particularly focusing on how effectively and rationally they utilize online communication to enhance and develop their relationships with the media through web-based platforms.

The findings revealed a concerning reality: PR departments in the UAE generally lack a clear policy or strategy for leveraging the Internet to foster strong, healthy relationships between organizations and their publics. Many corporate websites examined in the study were found to be deficient in media relations strategies and lacked vital information and data that would be of value to journalists, news agencies, and other key stakeholders. This shortfall highlights a significant gap in the use of digital communication for public relations purposes. These results reinforce the earlier observations of Ayish (2005), who, in his study of 20 UAE organizations, noted a similarly troubling trend. He observed that there is a generally low level of appreciation for the role of public relations in virtual communication environments. PR practitioners in the UAE tend to maintain their conventional roles in face-to-face, real-world interactions, yet their involvement in online communication remains limited. As a result, the content presented on organizational websites often does not align with the strategic communication objectives pursued in offline settings. This disconnect suggests that PR departments may not have significant control over the digital narratives concerning their organizations, thereby weakening their overall communication effectiveness in the online sphere.

Odimabo and Wagbara (2018), in their study on new media use by public relations practitioners in the Rivers State University and University of Port Harcourt concludes that the use of new media has not been embraced in totality by public relations practitioners in both the Rivers State University and the University of Port Harcourt, respectively, this finding is contrary to what Pamell and Parmley (2009) mean when they say that the PR offices in higher education play a major role in boosting enrolment, rankings and publicity; so it is vital for them to understand and use best practices and social media to accomplish their communications goals.

The study add that most Public Relations Practitioners are cyber phobic which results to technophobia. The resultant effect leads to the non-incorporation of the use of new media in the routine duties of these information experts. New media have been meagerly practiced, in the disseminating of information, retrieving of feedbacks, conflict management/institutional development, the achievement of mutual understanding between the corporate publics and herself, at the same time, maximizing corporate goals and aspirations. Russell (1991) suggests



that while the new media have technical capabilities to pull in one direction, economic and social forces pull back in the opposite direction. Russell added that we are witnessing the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video and electronic text communications that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication, allow forms of communication that were previously separate to overlap and interconnect

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

System Theory

Systems Theory, as advanced by Bertalanffy (1968), posits that an organization is an open system made up of interrelated and interdependent components that interact with each other and with the environment. This theory emphasizes that the behavior of each part affects the whole, and the system must adapt continuously to changes in its external environment to maintain equilibrium and achieve its goals. The theory has since been applied extensively in organizational studies, including in understanding communication flows, stakeholder interactions, and feedback mechanisms. In the context of universities, the institution itself can be viewed as a system comprising various subsystems such as administration, academics, students, alumni, and external communities. These subsystems interact dynamically through multiple channels of communication, one of which is social media. Social media platforms function as boundary-spanning tools that connect the university (as a system) with its environment comprising internal and external stakeholders facilitating the exchange of information, feedback, and expectations (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

The relevance of systems theory to the current study lies in its ability to provide a theoretical lens through which stakeholder interactions via social media can be analysed. Through this lens, universities' social media engagement strategies can be seen as feedback mechanisms that allow them to sense stakeholder perceptions, respond to concerns, and align institutional messaging with stakeholder interests. This interconnectedness reflects the systems view of communication as a two-way process that fosters adaptation and sustainability (Skyttner, 2005).

Furthermore, Systems Theory highlights the importance of input, throughput, and output processes. In this study, stakeholder feedback (input) gathered via social media informs communication strategies (throughput), which in turn influences stakeholder engagement and perception (output). When universities respond to stakeholder feedback effectively, it strengthens institutional legitimacy and stakeholder trust, reinforcing the continuous cycle of system interaction (Luhmann, 1995). Systems Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how universities interact with their stakeholders via social media, emphasizing the dynamic, adaptive, and integrative nature of communication in organizational contexts.



Social Network Theory

Social Network Theory (SNT) provides a conceptual framework for understanding the relationships and interactions among actors within a network. Originally developed in sociology and later extended to communication, organizational studies, and information systems, the theory emphasizes the importance of nodes (individuals or entities) and ties (relationships or interactions) in shaping behaviour, influence, and information flow within a social structure (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The central premise of Social Network Theory is that actors do not operate in isolation but are embedded within a web of social relationships that influence their actions and perceptions. These networks can significantly impact the spread of information, trust-building, social capital, and the formation of communities (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labianca, 2009). In the digital era, social media platforms have become key environments where such networks manifest and evolve rapidly.

In relation to the study, social network theory offers a useful lens to analyze how universities interact with their stakeholders through digital platforms. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram enable universities to establish and maintain complex networks involving students, alumni, staff, prospective students, and external partners. These platforms facilitate both direct and indirect communication, creating opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and the diffusion of institutional messages. The relevance of Social Network Theory to this study lies in its capacity to explain how the structure and dynamics of these social networks affect stakeholder engagement. For example, highly connected stakeholders (central nodes) can serve as key influencers who amplify the university's messaging or contribute to shaping public perception (Scott, 2017). Moreover, the strength and frequency of ties between the university and its stakeholders can determine the level of trust, loyalty, and advocacy among the audience.

Furthermore, Social network theory highlights the importance of network position and social capital. Universities that actively nurture their online networks can leverage these relationships to enhance stakeholder participation in institutional activities, receive feedback, and promote a sense of community (Kapucu, 2006). This theoretical framework supports the notion that effective use of social media can deepen stakeholder engagement by enabling more inclusive, interactive, and decentralized communication patterns. Social network theory provides a robust foundation for understanding the relational dynamics enabled by social media in higher education settings. It underscores the strategic value of social connectivity in shaping stakeholder engagement and institutional outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to conduct a comprehensive examination of the online media relations techniques implemented by three specific institutions in Rivers State: Rivers State University, University of Port Harcourt, and PAMO University of Medical Sciences using focus group discussion with 30 participants, ten from each university. The participants consisted of Communication and Public Relations Officers, as well as students and alumni who



actively engage with the institutions' online media. This size was chosen purposively. Secondary data was collected from several sources, including publications, journal articles, textbooks, bulletins, observations, statistics reports, and online resources. Narrative analysis was mostly used to examine the qualitative data gathered from the in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observational field notes.

RESULTS

RQ1: What specific social media platforms are employed by the select universities to engage their target audiences?

The focus group discussions indicate that Facebook is the primary medium used by the selected colleges for announcements and information distribution. Its intuitive layout attracts a broad audience, making it a comfortable option for both younger and older users. The extent of Facebook and other platforms' use differs across institutions, indicating varying strategies and financial allocations. Rivers State University (RSU) uses Facebook to disseminate institutional information and interact with the community. Furthermore, RSU has been investigating Instagram as an auxiliary medium, using its capacity for visually captivating material. Staff members observe that Instagram is especially adept at displaying high-quality photographs and brief video snippets from events. Nevertheless, despite this investigation, RSU has no substantial presence on X (previously Twitter), so forfeiting potential for immediate contact and wider involvement.

The University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) mostly uses Facebook for its online communication. Although the platform functions as a principal medium for announcements and event marketing, UNIPORT's engagement on X and Instagram is still inadequate. Stakeholders and alumni indicate that this restricted diversity hampers the university's capacity to engage successfully with younger, visually-oriented demographics and professional networks. PAMO University primarily utilises Facebook for its media engagement and information distribution. Alumni, stakeholders, and IT/communication personnel express concern over the platform's ineffective utilization of its full potential.

RQ2: What challenges do the select universities face in balancing the use of traditional media and social media platforms?

The focus group discussions with alumni, stakeholders, and staff from the select universities reveal a common struggle to balance traditional media and social media platforms effectively. This challenge stems from a combination of resource constraints, strategic gaps, and entrenched institutional practices that prioritize traditional methods over digital innovation. At PAMO University of Medical Sciences, stakeholders and IT staff highlight that limited resources, particularly funding and personnel, significantly hinder the ability to manage both traditional and social media. In Rivers State University, the discussions reveal a different set of challenges. While the university has made some progress in exploring social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, there is no formal strategy to align these efforts with traditional media campaigns.



Discussants in the focus group pointed out that the absence of a coordinated approach leads to ad hoc communication efforts that fail to leverage the strengths of each medium. At the University of Port Harcourt, the focus group discussions revealed similar challenges, compounded by inconsistent execution. While traditional media remains a trusted channel for official announcements and academic publications, the university's social media presence is described as sporadic and reactive. Alumni and stakeholders expressed concern over the lack of synergy between the two media forms.

RQ3. How does the use of social media platforms by the select universities influence stakeholders' perceptions and engagement levels?

The focus group discussions provide nuanced insights into how the use of social media platforms by the select universities influences stakeholders' perceptions and engagement levels. While all three institutions leverage social media to varying extents, their approaches and effectiveness significantly impact how they are perceived by alumni, students, and external stakeholders. Alumni and stakeholders of PAMO University repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the institution's limited online engagement. Alumni perceive the institution as unresponsive, and the absence of consistent communication undermines trust and loyalty. Focus group participants further noted that PAMO's reliance on Facebook, without effectively tapping into other platforms like Instagram or X, contributes to a perception of the university as outdated and out of touch with modern communication trends.

In contrast, Stakeholders of Rivers State University (RSU) acknowledged that the university's visually engaging posts, particularly on Instagram, positively influence perceptions among younger audiences. However, this positive perception is limited by a lack of depth and consistency. Respondents from the IT team admitted that posts are often sporadic, and the content, while aesthetically appealing, lacks the storytelling and interactivity needed to foster stronger engagement. Alumni and students appreciate the effort but feel that the university could do more to include their voices and experiences in its content: "We want our voices heard on our University's social media platform," some discussants demanded. The University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) similarly relies on Facebook and Instagram for its online presence, but its inconsistent activity undermines its ability to shape stakeholder perceptions effectively.

DISCUSSION

The study reveals that select universities use various social media platforms to engage their target audiences, but these platforms present both opportunities and challenges. PAMO University heavily relies on Facebook for communication, catering to a straightforward audience. However, this approach limits its ability to connect with diverse demographics, particularly younger ones who prefer more visually dynamic platforms. Rivers State University (RSU) uses both Facebook and Instagram as main channels for engagement, offering a slightly expanded reach to younger, visually oriented audiences. However, RSU struggles to fully capitalize on these platforms due to a lack of creative, interactive, and consistent content. The University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) moderately uses Facebook and Instagram, focusing on



event promotion and student life. These platforms help highlight the institution's vibrant campus culture and foster a sense of community among students. However, UNIPOINT's reliance on a narrow range of platforms limits its overall effectiveness. RSU exhibits a marginally better platform diversification strategy than PAMO and UNIPOINT, but all three universities struggle to effectively engage their diverse audiences.

PAMO University, Rivers State University (RSU), and the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPOINT) face challenges in managing traditional and social media due to resource limitations, strategic inconsistencies, and a lack of integration. PAMO faces challenges in maintaining an active presence across platforms due to limited staff and funding, while RSU shows potential in leveraging social media for event promotion. However, RSU lacks a formalized strategy to integrate these forms, resulting in ad hoc and reactive communication efforts. UNIPOINT also struggles to balance traditional and social media, with inconsistencies across platforms reflecting broader strategic gaps. While UNIPOINT uses social media for event promotion, its limited integration with traditional media weakens its overall communication impact. RSU shows the most promise in utilizing social media, but its efforts are still hampered by the lack of integration with traditional media. PAMO and UNIPOINT are the most affected by resource constraints and strategic limitations, with PAMO hindered by its limited perception of social media's importance.

Social media significantly impacts stakeholders' perceptions and engagement levels across three universities. PAMO's reliance on Facebook limits its ability to connect meaningfully with stakeholders, leaving them feeling detached and outdated. RSU's broader use of social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, moderately improves stakeholder perceptions, but lacks creative storytelling, interactivity, and two-way communication. UNIPOINT's Instagram content positively impacts stakeholder perceptions, but inconsistent engagement across other platforms creates a fragmented communication experience. This inconsistency is perceived as a lack of inclusivity in the university's outreach strategy. RSU exhibits the strongest influence on stakeholders' perceptions due to its diverse platform usage and visually engaging content, but its lack of creativity and interactivity limits its ability to stand out as a leader in stakeholder engagement. UNIPOINT excels in creating a positive impression among younger audiences through Instagram but suffers from inconsistent platform usage, weakening its overall impact. PAMO lags significantly behind, with a narrow focus on Facebook and a lack of engaging content that leaves stakeholders feeling disconnected and undervalued. In sum these institutions are not able to tap in full the potentials of the new media in engaging their various public as reported by Odimabo and Wagbara (2018). In contrast, Pamell and Parmley (2009) argue that PR offices in higher education play a major role in boosting enrollment, rankings and publicity; and therefore, it is vital for PR practitioners to understand and use best practices and social media to accomplish their communications goals.



CONCLUSION

The study concludes that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube offer powerful, real-time, and interactive communication tools that can significantly enhance stakeholder relationships when used strategically. However, these universities still underutilize social media due to institutional constraints such as lack of technical capacity, absence of structured digital communication strategies, and reliance on traditional media relations approaches. Yet the study shows that social media remains a viable platform for transparency, responsiveness, and dialogue, which are critical in today's stakeholder-driven academic environment. The study also highlights the relevance of social network theory as a theoretical lens for understanding and optimizing the interconnectedness and relational dynamics between universities and their stakeholders. To remain competitive, credible, and responsive, universities in Rivers State and beyond need to institutionalize robust social media strategies, invest in digital skills development, and cultivate a culture of openness and engagement across all levels of administration.

The study suggests several recommendations to improve the effectiveness of social media in stakeholder communication and relationship-building. These include developing comprehensive social media policies aligned with institutional goals, investing in continuous capacity building for public relations and communication personnel, and adopting an integrated communication strategy that harmonizes traditional and digital media platforms. These recommendations will enhance reach, engagement, and ensure key messages resonate with all segments of the university's audience, contributing to stronger institutional branding and reputation management in an increasingly digital academic environment.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Rosemary O. Okafor: Conceptualization of the study, manuscript development, data collection and analysis, discussion of findings, corresponding author. Richard N. Amadi: Supervision of



research work, structural adjustments, refinement of manuscript. Harcourt W. Dike: Supervision of research work, refinement of manuscript, structural adjustments. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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