



## Research Article

# Reframing Community Relations in the Digital Age: Public Perceptions of Social Media Use in Tertiary Institutions in North Central Nigeria

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**Abstract-** This study explores the role of social media in community relations management within selected tertiary institutions in North Central Nigeria, emphasizing public perceptions of its effectiveness. Guided by dialogic communication and public sphere theories, the study employed a cross-sectional survey of 500 respondents drawn from federal universities, state universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, findings reveal that social media platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, are perceived as vital tools for fostering engagement, enhancing transparency, and strengthening trust between institutions and their stakeholders. Regression analysis further shows that social media utilization significantly predicts positive community relations outcomes ( $\beta = .62, p < .001$ ), underscoring its strategic value. However, challenges such as misinformation, inadequate digital literacy, and limited internet infrastructure constrain its full potential. The study concludes that social media, when strategically integrated, can reframe institutional communication into a more participatory and accountable process. Recommendations include developing institutional policies, enhancing digital literacy, investing in ICT infrastructure, and adopting dialogic engagement strategies. This research contributes to ongoing debates on digital communication and offers actionable insights for tertiary institutions seeking to optimize social media in community relations

## Graphical Abstract



## Article Key Information

**Keywords:** Social media, community relations, tertiary institutions, dialogic communication, public perception, Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

In the digital era, social media platforms have become powerful tools for communication, reshaping how institutions, governments, and organizations engage with their stakeholders. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, and Instagram have not only accelerated the speed of information dissemination but have also facilitated two-way, interactive communication that challenges the traditional one-to-many broadcast model (McQuail, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For institutions whose survival and reputation depend on stakeholder trust, particularly tertiary institutions, social media provides new avenues for community relations management, enabling more participatory forms of engagement with students, staff, alumni, host communities, and policymakers (Kent & Taylor, 2016).

Globally, social media has redefined the practice of public relations. Unlike traditional media channels, which often limit the participation of stakeholders to passive roles, social media enables dialogic, real-time engagement, an approach consistent with the dialogic theory of public relations advanced by Kent and Taylor (1998). According to this theory, organizations are expected to use communication platforms not merely for dissemination, but to foster relationships based on dialogue, mutuality, and trust. Similarly, the relationship management theory of public relations emphasizes that the central task of communication professionals is to cultivate and maintain quality relationships with their publics (Ledingham, 2003). In the context of tertiary institutions, these theories highlight how digital platforms can enhance legitimacy, build goodwill with host communities, and manage crises more effectively.

In Nigeria, the rapid adoption of social media has brought both opportunities and challenges. As of 2023, the country had over 34 million active social media users, with young people and students representing a significant proportion of this demographic (DataReportal, 2023). Studies have documented how Nigerian universities increasingly rely on social media for branding, reputation management, student recruitment, and crisis communication (Agha, 2017; Omowale & Adelabu, 2021). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions leveraged WhatsApp and Facebook groups to sustain learning and maintain relations with stakeholders (Onyebadi & Alawode, 2021). However, despite its potential, social media usage by tertiary institutions in Nigeria often remains underutilized, inconsistent, and poorly integrated into formal community relations strategies (Garba et al., 2022).

The situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1984; Kim & Grunig, 2011) provides further insight into this challenge. The theory suggests that publics are not uniform; rather, they vary in levels of awareness and activity depending on their recognition of problems, involvement in issues, and perceived constraints. Applied to social media in Nigerian tertiary institutions, this theory implies that different stakeholders, students, staff, local communities, and policymakers may interpret and engage with institutional messages in diverse ways. Understanding public perceptions of how institutions use social media for community relations is, therefore, crucial in tailoring communication strategies that resonate with different audiences.

Empirical evidence underscores these theoretical insights. In South-East Nigeria, Agha (2017) found that while universities use social media for information dissemination, they seldom apply it as a platform for mutual engagement with their host communities. In Edo State, Inobemhe (2023) reported that social media significantly influenced political awareness and civic engagement, illustrating its broader role in shaping perceptions of institutions and governance. Conversely, Erubami (n.d.) noted that while social media expanded access to information in Delta State, it also facilitated the spread of hate speech, fueling distrust and conflict in some communities. These findings highlight the dual character of social media as both an enabler and disruptor of effective community relations.

In North Central Nigeria, where tertiary institutions coexist with diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious communities, effective community relations are especially critical. The region has experienced tensions arising from competition over scarce resources, land use conflicts, and political instability (Audu, 2020). In such contexts, tertiary institutions play not only educational but also social roles, often serving as anchors of development and mediators between state and community interests. The adoption of social media in this environment raises important questions: How do publics perceive the use of these platforms for fostering institutional–community trust? Do stakeholders see social media as effective, credible, and inclusive? Or do they regard it as superficial, one-sided, and inadequate for addressing real concerns?

Addressing these questions requires bridging both theoretical and empirical gaps. Much of the existing literature on social media and public relations in Nigeria has focused on government agencies (Garba et al., 2022), political campaigns (Inobemhe, 2023), or general youth engagement (Ekwenchi & Okoyeocha, 2022). Relatively fewer studies have examined the intersection of public perception, community relations management, and tertiary institutions, particularly in the North Central region. This study, therefore, draws upon relationship management theory, dialogic theory, and situational theory of publics to analyze how the public perceives social media utilization in managing community relations within selected tertiary institutions.

By situating the study within these theoretical frameworks, the research contributes not only to Nigerian scholarship but also to global debates on how digital communication technologies are reframing the dynamics of community relations in institutional contexts. Ultimately, understanding these perceptions is vital for designing strategic, dialogic, and culturally sensitive community relations practices that strengthen institutional credibility and foster sustainable partnerships in the digital age.

## 2.0 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon three major perspectives in public relations and communication research: relationship management theory, dialogic theory of public relations, and the situational theory of publics. These frameworks are particularly useful for explaining how institutions engage with their publics in the digital age, and how publics, in turn, perceive such engagement. Anchoring this study within these theories enhances its explanatory power and situates it within broader scholarly debates on digital communication and community relations.

### 2.1 Relationship Management Theory

The relationship management theory posits that the core purpose of public relations is not merely to disseminate information, but to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Ledingham, 2003). Unlike early functionalist perspectives that regarded communication as a linear process of message transmission, relationship management theory emphasizes interaction, trust, and reciprocity as fundamental components of effective communication (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

In the context of tertiary institutions, this theory is highly relevant. Universities and colleges are not only educational centers; they are also social institutions that depend on healthy relationships with a wide array of stakeholders,

including students, parents, staff, alumni, host communities, and government bodies (Ki & Hon, 2007). Social media provides a critical avenue through which these institutions can engage stakeholders beyond traditional, one-way information flows. By creating spaces for dialogue, responding to concerns, and showcasing institutional values, social media enables institutions to cultivate goodwill, build credibility, and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

However, perceptions of these efforts matter greatly. Publics who view institutional social media communication as genuine, responsive, and transparent are more likely to trust the institution and support its initiatives. Conversely, perceptions of manipulation, propaganda, or neglect can undermine community relations. The relational quality outcomes, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality, outlined by Hon and Grunig (1999) provide useful benchmarks for evaluating public perceptions of institutional social media use in North Central Nigeria.

## 2.2 Dialogic Theory of Public Relations

The dialogic theory of public relations, advanced by Kent and Taylor (1998), complements relationship management theory by emphasizing that communication should be dialogic rather than monologic. In other words, communication is not effective when organizations dominate the conversation; it is effective when they create opportunities for dialogue, interaction, and co-creation of meaning. Kent and Taylor (2016) argue that dialogic communication builds mutual respect and enhances long-term organizational–public relationships.

Social media, in principle, embodies dialogic potential because of its interactive affordances. Institutions can use platforms such as Facebook or Twitter to listen, respond, and engage in real-time conversations with stakeholders. However, empirical research shows that organizations often use these platforms primarily for one-way information dissemination rather than genuine dialogue (Waters & Jamal, 2011; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

In the Nigerian context, this challenge is particularly pronounced. While tertiary institutions frequently use social media to announce events, publish press releases, or share achievements, fewer efforts are made to solicit feedback, address community concerns, or engage in sustained dialogue (Agha, 2017; Omowale & Adelabu, 2021). This raises questions about whether publics perceive institutional social media usage as dialogic, participatory, and inclusive, or whether they view it as simply another channel for top-down messaging.

Dialogic theory is therefore critical in analyzing public perceptions in this study. By assessing how stakeholders evaluate the dialogic qualities of institutional communication, such as responsiveness, interactivity, and openness, the study provides insights into whether social media is truly reframing community relations in North Central Nigeria.

## 2.3 Situational Theory of Publics

The situational theory of publics, originally developed by Grunig (1984) and later extended by Kim and Grunig (2011), offers another lens through which to understand public perceptions of institutional communication. The theory classifies publics based on their levels of problem recognition, involvement, and constraint recognition. It identifies four types of publics: nonpublics, latent publics, aware publics, and active publics.

Applied to the current study, the theory suggests that stakeholders' perceptions of social media use by tertiary institutions will vary depending on their awareness of institutional–community issues, their level of involvement in such issues, and the constraints they perceive in engaging with institutions online. For instance, students and alumni who frequently interact with university social media platforms may constitute active publics, while local community members with limited internet access or low trust in digital platforms may remain latent or nonpublics.

By examining how different publics interpret and respond to social media communication, the situational theory allows for a more nuanced analysis of public perceptions. It also underscores the importance of tailoring communication strategies to diverse audiences rather than assuming a homogenous public.

## 2.4 Integrating the Theories

Together, these three frameworks provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing public perceptions of social media utilization in community relations management. Relationship management theory highlights the importance of building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships; dialogic theory stresses the need for genuine two-way communication; and situational theory explains why publics differ in their levels of engagement and perception.

By integrating these perspectives, the study not only contributes to local debates about institutional communication in North Central Nigeria but also extends global scholarship on how digital technologies are transforming organizational–public relationships. The theoretical framework thus positions the study to make both empirical and conceptual contributions, demonstrating how public perceptions in a specific regional context can inform broader theories of communication in the digital age.

## 3.0 Literature Review

The use of social media for community relations management has attracted significant scholarly attention globally, with growing interest in how these platforms are reshaping organizational–public interactions. For tertiary institutions, social media has become integral to communication strategies, yet research reveals significant variations in utilization patterns, effectiveness, and public perceptions. This review synthesizes existing literature across three thematic areas: (1) social media and public relations practice, (2) social media in higher education institutions, and (3) empirical studies from the Nigerian and African context.

### 3.1 Social Media and Public Relations Practice

The integration of social media into public relations practice represents one of the most profound transformations in organizational communication. Traditionally, public relations relied heavily on mainstream media channels for one-way dissemination of information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). However, the advent of digital platforms has enabled organizations to bypass gatekeepers and communicate directly with their publics (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Waters et al. (2009) found that nonprofit organizations increasingly use social networking sites not only to provide information but also to foster dialogue and build community. Similarly, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) documented how social media enables information sharing, community-building, and mobilization of collective action.

Despite these potentials, empirical evidence suggests that many organizations still employ social media in a broadcasting mode, rather than exploiting its dialogic potential (Saffer et al., 2013). Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles usefulness of information, generation of return visits, dialogic loop, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors, are often underutilized in practice. Institutions may adopt social media for visibility but fail to cultivate meaningful dialogue that enhances long-term relationship quality (Kent & Taylor, 2016). This gap underscores the importance of examining how publics perceive social media use, especially in contexts where institutional communication has historically been top-down.

### 3.2 Social Media in Higher Education Institutions

In higher education, social media has been widely adopted for diverse purposes: marketing, student recruitment, alumni relations, crisis communication, and community engagement (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Research from the

United States and Europe highlights that universities use platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to build institutional brands, connect with stakeholders, and foster transparency (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). For instance, Graham (2014) observed that higher education institutions use Twitter to share achievements and engage in public discourse, though the level of interactivity varies significantly.

However, scholars caution that mere adoption does not guarantee effectiveness. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2016) argue that universities often replicate traditional communication practices on digital platforms, thereby underutilizing the dialogic affordances of social media. Instead of fostering engagement, social media may be reduced to an information-dissemination tool. Moreover, public perceptions of institutional social media practices differ: while students may appreciate accessibility and transparency, other stakeholders may remain skeptical about sincerity, responsiveness, or inclusivity (Neier & Zayer, 2015).

### 3.3 Social Media and Community Relations in Africa

Within the African context, the adoption of social media in higher education has grown rapidly, yet scholarship is still emerging. Studies highlight both opportunities and challenges. Mutsvairo and Ragnedda (2019) argue that social media in Africa has created new public spheres for dialogue but remains constrained by infrastructural and digital divides. In South Africa, Bosch (2016) found that students actively use Twitter and Facebook for civic and academic engagement, demonstrating how social media can enhance participation in institutional and societal debates.

In Nigeria, research reveals a mixed picture. Agha (2017) observed that universities in South-East Nigeria primarily use social media to disseminate information rather than engage publics in meaningful dialogue. Similarly, Omowale and Adelabu (2021) reported that although public relations officers in Nigerian higher institutions are increasingly adopting social media, usage remains skewed toward visibility and branding rather than genuine stakeholder engagement. Onyebadi and Alawode (2021) highlighted the reliance on social media for maintaining communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet also noted challenges related to accessibility, misinformation, and weak institutional strategies.

Broader Nigerian studies confirm these limitations. Garba et al. (2022) found that government agencies' social media accounts are often underutilized, with low levels of interactivity and citizen participation. Inobemhe (2023) demonstrated that social media facilitated political awareness and community engagement in Edo State, but also underscored the persistence of misinformation and selective participation. Likewise, Erubami (n.d.) warned that while social media expands information access, it can also deepen polarization and conflict. These findings highlight the dual nature of social media in Nigeria: as both a tool for empowerment and a potential source of division.

### 3.4 Gaps in the Literature

Several gaps emerge from this body of research. First, while the literature acknowledges the potential of social media to transform organizational–public relationships, many studies focus on its functional use without adequately addressing public perceptions. This is a critical omission, as perceptions shape the legitimacy and effectiveness of communication strategies. Second, although global scholarship has extensively examined universities' adoption of social media, there is relatively limited research on how tertiary institutions in Africa and Nigeria in particular leverage these platforms for community relations management. Existing Nigerian studies often emphasize student recruitment, crisis communication, or branding, with less attention to broader community relations. Third, much of the research has concentrated on Southern or South-Eastern Nigeria, leaving the North Central region underexplored, despite its unique socio-cultural dynamics and history of institutional–community interactions.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating public perceptions of social media use in community relations management within tertiary institutions in North Central Nigeria. By integrating relationship management theory,

dialogic theory, and the situational theory of publics, it contributes to understanding how digital communication reshapes institutional–community relationships in a region marked by both opportunities for engagement and challenges of diversity, inequality, and infrastructural deficits.

## 4.0 Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine public perceptions of social media utilization in community relations management within tertiary institutions in North Central Nigeria. The choice of survey design was informed by its suitability for collecting standardized information from a large population, enabling statistical analysis of patterns and associations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### 4.2 Study Area and Institutional Context

The study was conducted across five tertiary institutions in North Central Nigeria, strategically selected to reflect diversity in ownership and structure:

- i Two federal universities,
- ii One state university,
- iii One polytechnic, and
- iv One college of education.

This typological spread ensured that the findings captured variations in institutional mandates, student demographics, and administrative structures within the region. North Central Nigeria was chosen because it hosts a mix of urban and semi-urban tertiary institutions, where social media penetration is growing rapidly (Pate, 2020).

### 4.3 Population of the Study

The target population comprised students, academic staff, and non-academic staff across the five institutions. Collectively, these institutions serve approximately 78,000 students and employ about 9,200 staff members (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2023). This diverse population was considered appropriate, as all stakeholder categories are engaged in institutional community relations either as implementers or as recipients.

### 4.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

To determine an appropriate sample size, Yamane’s (1967) formula for finite populations was adopted:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:

- $n$  = sample size,
- $N$  = population size,

- $e$  = margin of error (0.05).

For a combined population of approximately 87,200, the formula yielded a minimum sample size of **398**. To strengthen representativeness and account for potential non-responses, the sample was increased to 500 respondents.

A multistage sampling technique was employed:

- Stage 1 – Institutional Selection: Five institutions were purposively selected to represent different categories (federal, state, polytechnic, and college of education).
- Stage 2 – Stratification: Within each institution, respondents were stratified into students, academic staff, and non-academic staff.
- Stage 3 – Random Sampling: Simple random sampling was used to select respondents proportionally from each stratum.

## 4.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed in four sections:

- Section A: Demographic information,
- Section B: Patterns of social media use,
- Section C: Perceptions of social media in community relations,
- Section D: Challenges and prospects of digital engagement.

The instrument was developed from validated scales used in previous studies (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Men & Tsai, 2016), and modified to suit the Nigerian higher education context.

## 4.6 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured through expert review by three scholars in communication and media studies, who assessed clarity, relevance, and alignment with research objectives. A pilot test was conducted among 30 respondents from a university outside the study area. Using Cronbach's alpha, the overall instrument reliability was 0.84, exceeding the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978).

## 4.7 Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were administered both physically (hard copies) and electronically (via Google Forms) to improve response rates. Data collection lasted for six weeks (March–April 2025), assisted by trained research assistants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board, and informed consent was sought from all participants.

## 4.8 Data Analysis

Collected data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) summarized demographic characteristics and usage patterns. Inferential statistics included:

- Chi-square tests to assess associations between demographic factors and perceptions,
- ANOVA to examine institutional differences, and

- iii Regression analysis to determine predictors of positive perceptions of social media in community relations.

Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to enrich quantitative findings.

## 5.0 Results and Findings

### 5.1 Response Rate

Out of the 500 questionnaires distributed across the five institutions, 462 were returned, yielding a 92.4% response rate. This high rate can be attributed to the combined use of electronic and physical administration, as well as follow-up reminders. After screening for incomplete responses, 450 valid questionnaires were analyzed.

### 5.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Respondents represented students (68%), academic staff (20%), and non-academic staff (12%). The gender distribution was 52% male and 48% female, with the largest age group being 18–29 years (61%), followed by 30–44 years (29%), and 45 years and above (10%).

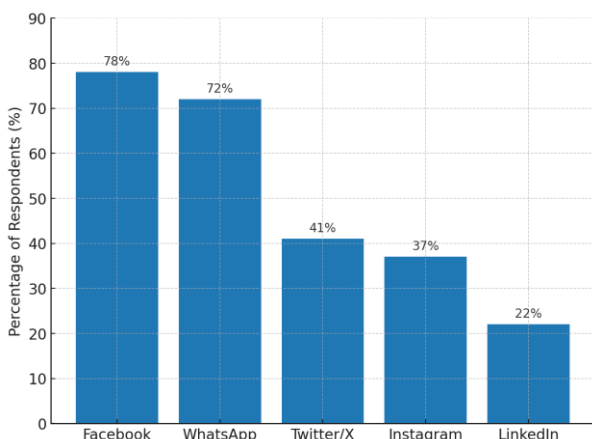
**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Institutional Category**

<b>Institutional Category</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Federal Universities	180	40.0
State University	90	20.0
Polytechnic	100	22.2
College of Education	80	17.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>100</b>

This distribution ensured adequate representation of the different institutional types in North Central Nigeria.

### 5.3 Patterns of Social Media Use

Respondents were asked about the platforms they used most frequently for engaging with institutional or community-related issues.



**Figure 1: Frequency of Social Media Platforms Used for Community Relations**

Facebook and WhatsApp were dominant across all categories, especially among students, whereas Twitter/X usage was higher in federal universities, reflecting a younger, urban-oriented demographic. LinkedIn was more popular among academic staff, particularly in the state university.

### 5.4 Perceptions of Social Media in Community Relations

To assess perceptions, respondents rated statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

**Table 2: Mean Perception Scores on the Role of Social Media in Community Relations**

Perception Dimension	Federal Univ.	State Univ.	Polytechnic	College of Educ.	Overall Mean
Enhances institutional image	4.2	4.0	3.8	3.6	3.9
Strengthens communication with host communities	4.3	3.9	4.0	3.7	4.0
Promotes transparency and accountability	4.0	3.7	3.6	3.4	3.7
Encourages student/staff engagement	4.4	4.1	3.9	3.6	4.0
Spreads misinformation and conflicts (negative aspect)	3.6	3.4	3.8	3.7	3.6

Overall, perceptions were positive, with mean scores above 3.5 for most dimensions. Respondents particularly agreed that social media enhances image and communication with host communities. However, concerns about misinformation and conflict escalation were also noted.

### 5.5 Institutional Differences in Perceptions

An ANOVA test was conducted to determine whether perceptions differed significantly across institutional categories.

- $F(3, 446) = 4.28, p < 0.01 \rightarrow$  Significant differences exist among institutional categories.

- Post-hoc (Tukey HSD) revealed that federal universities had significantly higher positive perceptions than colleges of education ( $p < 0.05$ ).

This suggests that institutional capacity and digital infrastructure influence how stakeholders perceive the utility of social media in community relations.

## 5.6 Predictors of Positive Perceptions

A multiple regression analysis was run to determine predictors of positive perception of social media use in community relations. Independent variables included age, role (student/staff), frequency of social media use, and institutional category.

- Frequency of social media use ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) emerged as the strongest predictor.
- Institutional category also significantly predicted perceptions ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with federal universities showing more positive outlooks.
- Age was a negative predictor ( $\beta = -0.18$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that younger respondents tend to perceive social media more favorably.

The regression model explained 37% of the variance in perception scores ( $R^2 = 0.37$ ).

## 5.7 Qualitative Insights

Open-ended responses revealed two key themes:

- a. Empowerment and Voice: Students emphasized that social media allows them to “speak up” on institutional issues without bureaucratic bottlenecks.
- b. Trust and Credibility Challenges: Staff members cautioned that unchecked use of platforms sometimes spreads misinformation that strains relationships between institutions and their host communities.

## 5.8 Summary of Findings

- i Social media is widely used across tertiary institutions, with Facebook and WhatsApp dominating.
- ii Stakeholders perceive social media as a valuable tool for image management, transparency, and engagement.
- iii Significant institutional differences exist, with federal universities leading in positive perceptions.
- iv Frequency of use is the strongest predictor of positive attitudes, while age negatively moderates perception.
- v While overall perceptions are positive, concerns about misinformation persist.

## 6.0 Discussion

This study set out to examine how stakeholders in tertiary institutions within North Central Nigeria perceive the use of social media in community relations management. The findings, when situated within broader theoretical and empirical debates, provide critical insights into the role of digital platforms in reframing institutional–community interactions.

## 6.1 Social Media as a Digital Public Sphere

The results affirm Habermas' (1989) Public Sphere Theory, which conceptualizes communication platforms as arenas for dialogue, participation, and contestation. Social media in the studied institutions functions as an alternative sphere of engagement where students, staff, and host community members bypass traditional gatekeepers to voice concerns and negotiate institutional accountability.

The finding that students overwhelmingly perceive social media as empowering and giving them a voice resonates with Castells' (2012) idea of networked publics, where individuals harness digital tools to shape discourse and influence institutional behavior. However, the concerns about misinformation and conflict reflect critical debates that digital platforms, while democratizing communication, can also fragment discourse and amplify tensions (Papacharissi, 2010).

Thus, the study underscores a dual role of social media: it simultaneously empowers marginalized voices while creating vulnerabilities that may undermine institutional credibility if left unmanaged.

## 6.2 Dialogic Communication and Relationship Building

The study's findings strongly align with Dialogic Communication Theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Stakeholders' perception that social media enhances institutional image, transparency, and engagement indicates that when institutions deploy dialogic principles (openness, mutuality, and responsiveness), they foster trusting and reciprocal relationships with their publics.

Federal universities, which recorded the highest positive perceptions, likely reflect stronger institutional capacity to implement dialogic strategies such as dedicated social media teams, more frequent updates, and responsiveness to concerns. Conversely, the relatively lower scores from colleges of education point to challenges of underfunding, infrastructural limitations, and limited professionalization of communication practices.

This supports the notion that dialogue is not merely technological but institutional: its effectiveness depends on the willingness and resources of institutions to sustain authentic two-way communication rather than adopting social media for one-way broadcasting (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

## 6.3 Excellence Theory and Strategic Community Relations

From the lens of Excellence Theory in public relations (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), the study demonstrates that institutions embracing two-way symmetrical communication are more likely to cultivate legitimacy and mutual understanding with stakeholders. The regression analysis showing that frequency of social media use significantly predicts positive perceptions suggests that strategic integration of these platforms into institutional communication routines enhances community relations outcomes.

Importantly, the variation across institutional categories emphasizes that excellence in digital communication is not evenly distributed. Federal universities' advantage reflects their comparatively stronger funding, broader audiences, and pressure to maintain global visibility. For state universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education, however, excellence in community relations may remain aspirational unless digital adoption is accompanied by policy, training, and resource investment.

## 6.4 Age, Generational Shifts, and Digital Literacy

The negative effect of age on perception highlights the generational divide in digital literacy and acceptance of social media as a legitimate institutional tool. Younger stakeholders perceive platforms as natural extensions of institutional-community engagement, while older staff may remain skeptical of their credibility or may be less adept at navigating them (Ng, 2012).

This finding has implications for capacity building and digital inclusion. For institutions to maximize social media's potential, communication strategies must bridge these generational gaps through training programs, clear guidelines, and inclusive engagement practices.

## 6.5 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings carry several implications:

- i Institutional Credibility Management: While social media enhances transparency, unchecked misinformation can erode trust. Institutions need robust monitoring and fact-checking mechanisms to mitigate risks.
- ii Strategic Integration: Social media must be mainstreamed into official communication policy rather than treated as ad hoc or optional.
- iii Community-Centered Approaches: Engagement should extend beyond students and staff to include host community voices, particularly in contexts where institutional-community conflicts are frequent.
- iv Resource Allocation: Colleges of education and polytechnics require capacity-building investments to narrow the digital gap with universities.

## 6.6 Contribution to Scholarship

This study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by showing how global theories of digital communication translate into the Nigerian higher education context, where resource asymmetries and socio-political challenges shape digital adoption. It enriches the literature by demonstrating that while social media fosters a Habermasian public sphere, its effectiveness is mediated by institutional type, generational divides, and infrastructural realities.

## 6.7 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias. Moreover, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time, which may shift rapidly given the dynamic nature of social media.

Future studies should consider longitudinal designs to track evolving perceptions, as well as comparative studies across geopolitical zones in Nigeria to uncover regional variations. Additionally, qualitative ethnographic approaches could illuminate the lived experiences of institutional stakeholders navigating digital community relations.

## 6.8 Summary

Overall, the discussion reveals that social media is reshaping community relations management in North Central Nigerian tertiary institutions by fostering dialogic engagement, transparency, and empowerment, while simultaneously posing challenges related to credibility and inclusivity. The findings affirm and extend major communication theories while highlighting the importance of institutional capacity and context in shaping digital engagement outcomes.

## 7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1 Conclusion

This study examined public perceptions of social media utilization in community relations management across selected tertiary institutions in North Central Nigeria. The findings reveal that social media platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, are increasingly integrated into institutional communication strategies, facilitating real-time engagement, information dissemination, and participatory dialogue between management and stakeholders. The results also highlight that while a majority of respondents perceive social media as enhancing transparency and trust, challenges such as misinformation, digital divides, and varying levels of digital literacy remain significant.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the relevance of the dialogic communication framework (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and public sphere theory (Habermas, 1989), which together underscore the capacity of social media to reshape institutional communication into a more participatory and collaborative process. However, effective implementation depends not only on institutional adoption but also on broader structural and cultural contexts, such as internet penetration, policy frameworks, and digital literacy levels in Nigeria.

Overall, the study concludes that social media, when strategically managed, holds transformative potential for strengthening community relations in tertiary institutions, making them more open, accountable, and connected to their diverse stakeholders.

### 7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i Institutional Policy Development: Tertiary institutions should develop clear policies and guidelines for social media use in community relations, ensuring consistency, accountability, and alignment with institutional objectives.
- ii Capacity Building: Regular training and digital literacy workshops should be organized for staff, students, and community stakeholders to promote responsible use of social media platforms and to minimize risks associated with misinformation.
- iii Interactive Engagement: Institutions should go beyond information dissemination by adopting dialogic strategies encouraging feedback, fostering conversations, and co-creating solutions with their stakeholders.
- iv Infrastructure and Accessibility: Given persistent digital divides in the region, government and institutional management should invest in ICT infrastructure to expand reliable internet access, especially in underserved areas.
- v Crisis Communication Frameworks: Institutions should establish proactive social media-based crisis communication mechanisms to ensure timely, accurate, and transparent information sharing during emergencies or controversies.
- vi Further Research: Future studies should adopt longitudinal or comparative designs to examine changes in perceptions across regions, and also explore qualitative insights into how cultural and institutional dynamics influence the adoption of social media in community relations.

### Declarations

#### Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board of the participating institutions. All respondents provided informed consent prior to participation. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

**Consent for Publication**

All participants consented to the publication of the findings in aggregated form with no identifying information.

**Availability of Data and Materials**

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Author Contributions**

Aondo Jonathan conceived the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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