

ASSESSMENT OF DIGITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES IN SELECTED TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the use of digital public relations in Southeast tertiary institutions and the challenges encountered in the use of these digital tools. This work was anchored on Media Ecology theory. This study adopted the in-depth interview and observational research methods. The institutions selected include: Imo State University, Owerri (IMSU); Federal University of Technology (FUTO); Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN); Ebonyi State University, Abakiliki (EBSU); and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (UNIZIK). The population and sample size of this study was 20 public relations personnel from these selected institutions. The data gotten from the in-depth interview was presented using discussion building technique. Findings got from the study showed that the selected institutions use digital gadgets in the public relations endeavour. Further findings stated that the tertiary institutions public relation departments are confronted with some challenges like high cost of data, the presence of employed analogue personnel, finance, insufficient and less productive technologies; student usage of subscription. The study concludes that southeast tertiary institutions in Nigeria use digital technologies in their day to day public relations practices.

Keywords: Assess, Digital, Public Relations, Practices, and Corporations.

Introduction

Since the advent of the internet in 1960's by the US defense department. It was used as an extension of the ARPANET, then grew to be named NSFNET. With time the internet spread rapidly across the globe and grew to one million users in 1992 (Giovannetti, Kagami& Tsuji, 2003). The Internet has become a useful tool for impact on lives. The Internet has been used extensively to broaden the digital sphere. It has been used for accessing instantaneous information and communicating across geographical boundaries. Due to its characteristics of speed, efficiency and economy, the Internet began to be applied increasingly across industries ranging from retail and banking to the media (Giovannetti et al.,2003).

In past years public relations has grown as a body which focuses on balancing work-life. The industry as well seen the rise of the social media which is now used daily in public relation practices as it is strategic, efficient and cost-effective. The practice of public relations is one such profession that has considerably been affected by online revolution

(Wickman, 2015). The new technologies have therefore made the job of public relation practitioners very effective, interesting, easy, cheaper, faster, more reliable and perhaps most profitable. Social media is an extension of traditional word of mouth networks, which is always the most effective tool of disseminating information and with the enablement of technology; the social media allows anyone with internet connection to access and voice through the social media (Sajithra, & Rajindra, 2013). PR practitioners have re-examined the traditional communication methods and consider how they may apply their work to the online world through the common use of social media and other digital media.

The advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has brought tremendous innovations in all spheres of human endeavours. The landscape of communications industry has undergone a major shift over the years due to this innovations taking place in technology. Social media in the society is getting stronger day by day where the public's are no longer passive in receiving information from traditional media since social media allows the public's to have more control of what they read, hear and watch (McLennan, & Howell, 2010). The Internet is a computer mediated communication (CMC) network that enables consumers to have unprecedented information and power. A collaboration by Holtz (2002) and Lattimore, (2004), has argued that institutions now operate in an information economy as opposed to an industrial one, and this causes a change in the traditional public relations practices that were rooted in a top-down approach. Southeast tertiary institutions are not left out in providing a good informative image for their institutions.

Initially, Public Relation agencies have been into media releases, client management and media relations. With new media and digital inventions, public relations practices have moved from the conventional practices to a world of digitalization therefore giving birth to the world of Digital Public Relations practices (Nwafor, 2010).

As a result of the Internet, people across the globe have become part of a networked society whereby time and distance have lost their meaning. This indicates that communication has shifted from the "one-to-many" to the "many-to-many" concept where the underlying assumption is that the information is no longer controlled by the organisation but easily accessible and readily shared. Tertiary institutions like IMSU, UNN, FUTO, UNIZIK, EBSU, ESUT now have an online portal in which their students can grab information at their various distance. These portals as well tries to project their school to be in line with the technological trends thereby creating a good and acceptable image in the mind of their students and prospective students anywhere in the world.

This study therefore aims to note the presence of digital public relations in Southeast tertiary institutions as well as examining the challenges encountered as they use digital tools for the growth of Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Statement of the Problem

The invention of social media and technologies has brought with it good and bad depending on how the recipient manipulates it. The Internet has made it inevitable for the Public relation practitioners to focus on the quality of their content as well as assuring their publics that the information being disseminated is honest, accurate and credible.

Most tertiary institutions on daily and weekly basis use the internet as a digital tool through which they create a good image and impression on the minds of their students. They even concentrate more in creating more targeted and well-placed messages and strategic

information. Even at these development their seem to be a lapse on these institutions timely update of information using their portals, this leads to clustering and unattended messages send without reply. In some cases their seem to be less managers of the site through which they create an acceptable image of their institutions, these are what this study tries to bridge.

This study therefore aims to examine and note the presence of digital public relations in southeast tertiary institutions as well as examining the challenges encountered as they use digital tools for the growth of Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Research Questions

The following research question was raised:

1. Is there a digital presence of Public relation in selected southeast tertiary institutions?
2. To what extent do these institutions use digital technologies in creating a good image of their institutions?
3. What are the challenges affecting Digital Public Relations practices in selected southeast tertiary institutions?

Definition of Digital Public relations

Renee Blodgett and Magic Sauce Media in defining digital public relations states that it is the use of social media, branding and marketing to elevate the people and products that are changing the world. Mark Burgess from Blue Focus Marketing adds that digital PR focuses on experts building good relations with the company's various publics by obtaining favorable publicity, building a good corporate image, and handling crisis management issues using the social media (Prowly, 2019).

Lisa Buyer from the Buyer Group defined digital PR is the use of direct messages, editorial media in prints, broadcast, radio, video or social media in contributing to a company's image, reputation, brand, perception and its public community. Steve Stratz from Illuminate Public Relations as well explained digital PR is the use of press, bloggers, analysts, and influencers expertise through not only speaking but through articles, thoughts and social media engagement to provide a third-party perspectives about an industry (Cohen, 2011).

Empirical Review

Bhargava (2010) did a study which explored the trends in the application of various Internet tools in the public relations practice of New Zealand and the impact these have on certain key aspects of the practice such as skills, encroachment, gender balance and ethics. A mixed methods approach including an online survey and semi-structured in-depth interviews has been followed. An attempt has been made to answer the research questions with the aid of the data collected from 133 survey respondents and ten interview participants. The findings revealed that there are considerable variations in the use and application of the different online tools in the New Zealand public relations practice. This discrepancy was found to have been influenced by the area of work and experience of the practitioners along with their knowledge of the Internet and the organizational environment they operated in. Further, it appears that practitioners do not have a full grasp of the nature of online tools and their scope

of utilization in the practice. Areas of further investigation have been highlighted and recommendations have been made for the future researchers to help aid a better understanding of online public relations.

Adlmaier-Herbst (2014) conducted a research which was based on the central research question: How can digital media and technologies contribute to a company's global relationship management? Stemming from the general question I have three more research-related questions: 1. How can social media communities contribute to corporate relationship management? 2. What are the key questions for global relationship management? 3. What are the organizational prerequisites for global relationship management? Conclusion: Digital media and technologies can contribute in a unique way to global relationship management. These peculiarities comprise the "big four": integration, accessibility, connectivity and interactivity. Connectivity and interactivity are the two most important for global relationship management. Social media channels have opened up new opportunities for companies to benefit from platforms in recent years, where users meet, communicate, exchange ideas and even create products. The problem for global relationship management is that these platforms are very different worldwide, their users and the culture of the communication within these channels are equally different. As a consequence for global relationship management, organizations have to set up a systematic and long-term process of analysis, planning, creation and control to professionally manage the organization's communication. This process includes not only the communication itself but also the organization of communication within the company. Expert global relationship management is tied to requirements: they concern the involved personnel, roles, responsibilities, processes, structures, the appointed information technology as well as the culture of the communications.

Similar study was undertaken by Mustafa(2017) which looked at digital technologies as an extensions of digital innovations that changes institution' and organization' structure, way of business and function in an innovative direction. In this study customer' communication behaviours were reviewed in accordance to the changing direction and new business models emerging according to their behaviours. The study tried looking at effects of digital innovations to Public Relations and the rationale on why public relation should adapt to new technologies and even design their projects and services in a way that it will be up-to-date at all time. In this study, sikayetvar.com as a site for e-complain was examined: this is a site the customers share their complaints about a brand, a product or service. This site serves as a public relations tool for e-complain.

Another study was done by Oyemike, Udo-Anyanwu, & Onuoha,(2016). This study was carried out to identify the strategies used in marketing information, products and services in academic libraries in Owerri Imo State, Nigeria. Study adopted the survey research design. Three objectives and three research questions were formulated to guide the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 100 library and information professionals working in different academic libraries in Imo state. Instruments for data were the questionnaire. Data collected through the use of questionnaire was analysed using simple descriptive statistics. The result of the findings revealed that use of library notice board, face-to-face interaction with user community, seminar/workshop, use of institutional websites, networking among professional colleague are the most dominated form of strategies used in marketing information products and services. It also indicated that inadequate funding, low level of awareness on use of ICT in marketing information

products and non-collaborative effort among librarians and libraries are the factors affecting marketing of library and information products and services.

Shen and his colleagues in 2015 did a published study examining new survey data from PRSA members and exploring practitioners' perspectives on work-life conflict and personal coping strategies. Their studies showed that negative work environments can increase levels of work-life conflict, while strong identification with the profession and involvement with a professional association (i.e., PRSA) can help to mitigate work-life conflict. They also presented updated survey research on PRSSA members and their anticipation of work-life conflict issues within their future careers.

Recently Jiang, Luo and Kulemeka (2017) did a survey study which studied 458 communications professionals about how social media use influences their work, leadership, and perceptions of work-life conflict. Their findings showed that using social media technologies can have both positive (e.g., updated ability while doing one's job) and negative (e.g., increased workload) outcomes, and found evidence of both. The study on one hand used YouTube as a communications channel that has always had positive effect on professionals' work. For example, those who specialized in areas such as media relations and internal communication reported more flexibility in work hours, increased productivity, and a better ability to communicate ideas with coworkers. On the other hand, those who used Twitter extensively, particularly for crisis communications, experienced increased workload and stress.

According to Perlow (2012), Harvard Business School as well conducted a spectacular study on work-life balance solutions in the field of business consulting, which is an industry with many parallels to public relations. A year ethnography was done at a management consulting firm to examine how their work is been done. From the ethnography it was revealed that for the consultants working with clients, the unpredictability and lack of control over their schedules was a source of frustration inherent in their work lives, this has led many to eventually leave the firm. This study proposed a follow up experiment at the firm, starting with a simple step: giving consultants which comprised mainly of those working an average of 65 hours per week at a predictable night off per week, with other colleagues covering that person's work responsibilities and unexpected client needs. This initiative led to greater growth from the teams participating at the management consulting firm.

Theoretical Framework

This work was anchored on Media Ecology theory. Marshall McLuhan is a known figure who can't be forgotten easily for his theory that explains on the influence of modern technology in our lives. It is certain that existing commerce will increase towards modern railway. The founder of this theory believes that peoples' way of life would be changing due to media evolution (McLuhan, 1964). The future of communication media will influence our life as many industries currently transform their own communication system to a whole new level such as video conferencing with people in the other parts of the world. According to the profounder of this theory, new media has allowed "users become consumers and producers". Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube now serves as a platform to transform predictions into reality. Therefore, consumers have more way to share their, opinion and interaction with others. In conclusion, PR practitioners must be able to control the flow of communication in

order to engage consumers and employees effectively and as well achieve their set goals.

According to McLuhan and Power (1989) as cited in Macnamara, (2005), during McLuhan's time, as he had predicted, people are now both producers and consumers of information when using the new media. Recent studies found that the social media can deliver information or message much more easily and efficiently than traditional media, therefore PR practitioners have changed their way of distributing. Thus, the flows of communication are altered from one way communication to two-way communication to interact with the public.

From this point of view, McLuhan's theory can explain why and how the lives of PR practitioners, consumers and organisations will be changed by social media and how media's evolution will continue controlling the flow of communication. However, his theory has also shown that this is why PR practitioners, organisations in particular, must learn how to use digital devices like the social media in communicating with strategic audiences effectively (Mulhern, 2009).

The relevance of this theory is that it has helped to prepare peoples mind on the change in technology which as well can be utilized properly through social media, blogs, portals, twitter etc. This is what a current public relation practitioner utilizes effectively, using any visible and modern means in communicating and informing their target consumers/fans on their beliefs and services. This is the next level in public relations growth which should be planned towards and used adequately.

Methodology

This study adopted in-depth interview and observational research methods to gather relevant information from the selected tertiary institutions in southeast. In-depth Interview method was used to gather qualitative data relevant for the study. This study covered tertiary institutions in southeast Nigeria. These institutions include: Imo State University, Owerri (IMSU); Federal University of Technology (FUTO); Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN); Ebonyi State Univeristy, Abakiliki (EBSU); Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (UNIZIK). The population and sample size of the study was the 20 PR personnels from these selected institutions. Three PR personnels were purposively selected from each of the selected institutions. The instrument for data collection was the interview guide and observer's diary, which was used to seek answers to the study's research questions. The data gotten from the in-depth interview was presented using discussion building technique.

Presentation and Analysis of Date

Research Question One: Is there a digital presence of Public relation in selected southeast tertiary institutions?

“...yes of course there is digital presence in my work in here, we use tons of digital appliances to communicate timely information to our students as well as boosting our image in the eyes of all who care to see”. Interviewee 3.

.....which institution in Nigeria that does not use digital appliances as a means of boosting their image and prestige in the minds of our students”

.....we use many digital appliances plus the internet in boosting our organizational

image, without these we won't have gone far communication wise here". Interviewee 9.

.....everybody knows we use digital appliances in today's public relations, we are not left behind on this issue". Interviewee 6.

....we use computers, social media handles created by us and used by our students, we as well use our school portal to communicate and advertise our institution to the whole world".

.....of course we use our school portals, twitter handles to boost the image of our institutions...". Interviewee 1

...we often use the computer/laptops as the primary digital tool through which information can be constantly conveyed to reach our target audience which are students and parents". Interviewee 19.

....my institution uses the internet and the social media to perform our public relation practice here in the institution". Interviewee 14.

....we are the ones who manage our school portals and we use that portal to weekly upload informations, articles, pictures, news, and happenings taking place in the school". Interviewee 2

There is digital presence of public relations in all the institutions studied. These institutions use computers/laptops, blogs, portals, good graphics, Facebook and Twitter pages etc in carrying out their public relations work thereby boosting the image of these students in many ways. They as well use soothing words to boost their academics: well soothing words that has boosted our images from other academic institutions".

Research Question Two: To what extent do these institutions use digital technologies in creating a good image of their institutions?

"I and my organisation use digital appliances frequent/to a large extent in constantly uploading mind blowing updates that change our students thought for good about us". Interviewee 10

...we use digital appliances that often as in twice a week this helps us to update and inform our students better on what is happening and what they should expect".

....we virtually use digital devices more than once weekly. Its not a thing the institution can leave without so we try our best to be up and doing in it".

....we of course use these devices almost every day, we not only use it to aid students we as well use it for our self service and a means of uplifting the PR department of the institution".

...we work with the presence of digital PR at all times because it is faster and speculates faster to a larger student audience, so I can boldly say we use these things more than once weekly".

....we use these digital PR tools at a very large extent, the department cannot go back to the analogue means of communication and informing larger student audience".

....we use these devices to a large extent and very frequently for informing and interacting with our students thereby correcting wrong assumptions in their mind".

.....we use these gadgets and tools to a large extent which has as well made us to use it at all times”.

....we use this appliances more than moderately, so we use them at a large extent”.

.....we have been blessed in this generation with these easier and faster tools for communication, this we utilize more than once a week. So I can boldly say we use them at a large extent”.

The interviewed PR personnels disclosed that they use digital PR tools at large extent, as they frequently use them almost daily for their constant uploads, self-service and for a better interactive section with their students.

Research Question Three: What are the challenges affecting Digital Public Relations practices in selected southeast tertiary institutions?

...finance has always been a big challenge to every organisation in Nigeria, my institution is not an exemption”. Interviewee 7

....the use of not-up-to date computer appliances in our departments, and employment of outdated and obstinate personnels”. Interviewee 18.

.....Money is a challenge. The employment of analogue PR practitioners who are unwilling to change with the current digital trend is as well another challenge”. Interviewee 4.

....the monthly update of our data subscription sometimes serves as a challenge to our department”. Interviewee 10.

...Short lasting of data which are eventually been overused by our students tapping into our work Wi-Fi connection has been a challenge we are confronting here”. Interviewee 3.

....The high cost of data which on some occasions we are the ones providing it in emergency situations when there is no provision for that”. Interviewee 14.

.....Our institution has always had finance challenges for using all ready strategies in boosting our image more than it has been”. Interviewee 8.

....We have insufficient and less productive technologies for boosting our works. This is another challenge we encounter”. Interviewee 19.

....willingness to readily assist the department finance wise towards our daily uploads in some occasions are challenges hindering us to an extent”. Interviewee 6.

High cost of data, the presence of employed analogue personnels, finance, insufficient and less productive technologies; student usage of subscription; etc are all challenges encountered in our usage of these digital PR gadgets.

Discussion of Findings

The Presence of Digital Public relation in selected tertiary institutions

Findings got from PR practitioners in the selected institutions showed that institutions use computers/laptops, blogs, portals, good graphics, Facebook and Twitter pages etc in carrying out their public relations work thereby boosting the image of their students in many ways. They as well use soothing words to boost their academics”.

This above finding is in line with Bhargava (2010) study which revealed that there are considerable variations in the use and application of the different online tools in the New Zealand public relations practice. This discrepancy was found to have been influenced by the area of work and experience of the practitioners along with their knowledge of the Internet and the organizational environment they operated in. Mustafa (2017) findings, which adds that most public relation organisations use sikayetvar.com as a site for e-complain, this site serves as a public relations tool from customers to share their complains electronically about a brand, product or services. Oyemike, Udo-Anyanwu, & Onuoha, (2016) findings agrees that use of library notice board, face-to-face interaction with user community, seminar/workshop, use of institutional websites, networking among professional colleague are the most dominated form of PR strategies used in marketing information products and services. The implication of the above findings is that southeast tertiary institutions use digital appliances in the institutional boosting department.

Extent of using digital appliances by southeast selected tertiary institutions

It was disclosed that they use digital PR tools at large extent, as they frequently use them almost daily for their constant uploads, self-service and for a better interactive section with their students. This is in line with a study undertaken by Adlmaier-Herbst (2014), which revealed that Digital media and technologies contributes in a unique way to global relationship management. This has made organisations to set up a systematic and long-term process of analysis, planning, creation and control to professionally manage their organization's communication. From the above findings we can trace the extent of using digital public relations to be high and used at large extent.

Challenges affecting GLO Nigeria and Imo state University while using Digital Public Relations practices.

Findings from these selected tertiary institutions revealed that High cost of data, the presence of employed analogue personnels, finance, insufficient and less productive technologies; student usage of subscription; etc are all challenges encountered in their usage of digital PR gadgets. Oyemike, Udo-Anyanwu, & Onuoha, (2016) study is in-line with this finding, in that it also found that inadequate funding is one of the factors affecting products and services of organisations. Although findings from Adlmaier-Herbst (2014) disagrees that the problem for global relationship management of organisations is that the platforms used are different worldwide, their users and the culture of the communication within different organisation public relations channels varies too. From the above findings it can be concluded that finance is the main factor militating against the use of digital appliances for public relation purposes.

Conclusion

It is safe to conclude that southeast tertiary institutions in Nigeria use digital technologies in their day to day relations. This is visible in these selected institutions studied. The usage of public relations appliances are now like a new normal in most tertiary institutions. This they use at a large extent. Not forgetting to add that the usage of digital devices are not without challenges which disturbs its constant usage. Insufficient fund or inconsistent funding of the practitioners using these devices are the main challenge discovered from this study in their consistent use of these technologies in undertaking their public relations function.

Recommendations

- Since there is a presence of digital public relations in these selected institutions, it is recommended that the institution should look in and work more with new technologies should there be any.
- The extent these selected institutions use digital public relation tools is recorded to be at a large extent, so we recommend that the good work should be upheld as it is a good development that shouldn't slack.
- It is recommended that tertiary institutions should look into and invest more on their public relations department, giving them the fund and support they need to boost their institutional image and yield profit.

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