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Digital Public Relations and Crisis Management: Evaluating Social Media Crisis Communication and Public Perception Among Students of Federal Polytechnic Bida, Niger State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examined digital public relations and crisis management, focusing on social media crisis communication and students' perceptions at Federal Polytechnic Bida, Niger State, Nigeria. It was guided by three objectives: assessing social media use for crisis communication, examining students' perceptions of its effectiveness, and identifying challenges affecting digital public relations and crisis management in the institution. A survey research design was adopted, and data were collected using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. Out of 174 distributed questionnaires, 173 were retrieved and analyzed. The study was grounded in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Image Repair Theory. Findings showed that the institution uses platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (Twitter) for crisis communication. Students generally viewed social media communication as effective, particularly in terms of speed, clarity, reliability, and usefulness during emergencies. However, several challenges were identified, including poor internet connectivity, delayed official responses, misinformation from unofficial sources, weak management of official accounts, and inadequate digital communication strategies. The study concluded that social media plays an important role in crisis communication and positively shapes students' perceptions during emergencies, though its effectiveness is constrained by infrastructural and managerial limitations. It recommended strengthening digital public relations strategies, improving response speed and consistency, better managing official social media platforms, upgrading internet infrastructure, and training communication personnel on effective crisis communication practices.

Keywords: Digital Public Relations, Crisis Management, Social Media Crisis Communication, Public Perception.



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1. Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the practice of public relations, particularly in the context of crisis management. Digital public relations (PR) now operates within highly interactive and decentralized communication environments driven by social media platforms, where information spreads rapidly and public opinion is continuously shaped in real time. According to Saad and Ahmad (2026), the rise of social media, algorithmic communication, and data-driven engagement has altered how organizations manage reputation and respond to crises, shifting PR from a traditional, controlled communication process to a dynamic, participatory system involving multiple stakeholders. This transformation underscores the growing importance of digital PR in influencing public perception during crisis situations [1].

Crisis communication has long been a central concern in public relations scholarship, with foundational theories such as the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) guiding organizational responses based on perceived responsibility and reputational threat. However, the digital era has introduced new complexities, including the speed, emotional intensity, and viral nature of online interactions. Research indicates that crises in digital environments are no longer linear events but evolving phenomena shaped by user-generated content, online discourse, and “affective publics”. Consequently, organizations must adopt more adaptive, transparent, and engaging communication strategies to maintain trust and credibility [2].

Previous studies have highlighted the critical role of social media in crisis communication and public perception. For instance, Zamani, Giaglis, and Kasimati (2015) found that social media platforms shift communicative power from organizations to audiences, enabling stakeholders to influence crisis narratives and organizational reputation in real time. Similarly, Wigley and Zhang (2011) observed that public relations practitioners increasingly integrate social media into crisis planning and response strategies, recognizing its importance for timely information dissemination and stakeholder engagement. More recent research by Larisu and Zulham (2024) emphasizes that effective social media crisis communication enhances public trust and helps organizations maintain reputational stability during crises [3].

In addition, contemporary studies have explored how digital PR strategies influence crisis outcomes in institutional contexts. Alsharairi et al. (2026), in their study of Jordanian universities, demonstrated that strategic use of digital platforms guided by SCCT improves crisis response effectiveness and stakeholder perception. Likewise, Oluwagbade (2025) argues that digital PR practices such as real-time listening, transparency, and audience engagement play a crucial role in shaping public perception and mitigating misinformation during crises. These findings collectively suggest that the success of crisis management increasingly depends on how well organizations leverage digital communication tools [4].

Despite the growing body of literature on digital PR and crisis communication, there remains a gap in empirical studies focusing on students’ perceptions, particularly within Nigerian tertiary institutions. Most existing studies are either Western-centric or focus on corporate and governmental organizations, with limited attention to educational settings in developing countries. This gap is significant because students represent a digitally active population whose perceptions are heavily influenced by social media interactions and institutional communication strategies [5].

Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate digital public relations and crisis management by examining social media crisis communication and public perception among students of Federal Polytechnic Bida, Niger State, Nigeria. By focusing on this context, the study contributes to existing literature by providing localized insights into how digital PR strategies affect crisis communication effectiveness and stakeholder perception within Nigerian higher education institutions [6].

Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has significantly altered how organizations manage crises, particularly through social media platforms. While digital public relations (PR) provides opportunities for immediate engagement and real-time response, it also

presents serious challenges due to the speed and unpredictability of online information dissemination. According to Coombs (2007), ineffective crisis communication can intensify reputational damage, especially when stakeholders perceive an organization as unresponsive or irresponsible. In the digital age, this problem is magnified as crises evolve quickly and are shaped by public discourse across multiple online platforms [7].

Despite the recognized importance of social media in crisis communication, many organizations still struggle to effectively utilize digital PR strategies during crises. Wigley and Zhang (2011) found that although public relations practitioners acknowledge the value of social media, its integration into crisis planning remains inconsistent and often underdeveloped. Similarly, Jin, Liu, and Austin (2014) argue that emotional reactions and public engagement on social media significantly influence crisis outcomes, yet many organizations fail to adequately monitor or respond to these dynamics. This gap between awareness and effective implementation creates vulnerabilities in managing public perception.

Furthermore, the issue of misinformation and uncontrolled narratives poses a major challenge in digital crisis communication. Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011) note that social media environments enable the rapid spread of unverified information, which can escalate crises and distort public perception. Without timely and transparent communication, organizations risk losing credibility and trust among stakeholders. This problem is particularly relevant in educational institutions, where students rely heavily on social media for information and are active participants in shaping institutional narratives [8].

In the Nigerian context, research on digital public relations and crisis management remains limited, especially within tertiary institutions. Studies such as Ojebode, Onekutu, and Adegbola (2018) highlight that Nigerian institutions are still adapting to the demands of digital communication, with many lacking structured strategies for managing online crises. Additionally, Adekunle and Olorunnisola (2020) emphasize that poor communication practices in Nigerian public institutions often lead to misinformation, distrust, and negative public perception during crises. These challenges suggest that digital PR practices in Nigeria are still evolving and require empirical investigation [9].

More specifically, there is a scarcity of studies examining how students who constitute a major stakeholder group perceive and respond to crisis communication on social media. Existing literature has largely focused on corporate organizations or government agencies, neglecting the perspectives of students in higher institutions. This gap is critical because students are not only consumers of information but also active contributors to online discussions that shape institutional reputation.

Therefore, the problem this study addresses is the lack of empirical understanding of how digital public relations strategies influence crisis communication effectiveness and public perception among students of Federal Polytechnic Bida, Niger State. Without such understanding, institutions may continue to apply ineffective communication strategies, thereby risking reputational damage and loss of stakeholder trust during crises [10].

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the extent to which Federal Polytechnic Bida uses social media for crisis communication during emergencies.
2. To examine students' perception of the effectiveness of social media crisis communication by Federal Polytechnic Bida.
3. To identify the challenges affecting effective digital public relations and crisis management in Federal Polytechnic Bida.

Literature Review

Concept of Digital Public Relations

Digital Public Relations (Digital PR) refers to the use of digital platforms and social media to manage communication, build relationships, and enhance reputation. It represents an evolution of

traditional PR from one-way communication to interactive engagement. Digital PR is characterized by interactivity, speed, wide reach, and data-driven communication.

Social media is central to Digital PR, enabling real-time communication, crisis management, and audience engagement. It is especially important in crisis situations where speed, transparency, and consistency are required. However, challenges such as misinformation and loss of message control remain significant.

Crisis Communication in the Digital Era

Crisis communication involves managing information during emergencies to protect organizational reputation. In the digital era, crises spread rapidly through social media, making communication faster but more complex (Nguyen, 2022).

Social media removes traditional media gatekeeping, allowing direct communication with the public. However, it also increases risks such as misinformation and emotional reactions that can damage reputation.

Key theories guiding crisis communication include SCCT, Image Repair Theory, and the SMCC model, all emphasizing the importance of timely, transparent, and strategic responses.

Role of Social Media in Crisis Communication

Social media plays a key role in crisis communication by enabling real-time updates, public engagement, and crisis monitoring. It allows organizations to interact directly with stakeholders and correct misinformation quickly.

However, it also amplifies crises, as false information spreads faster than official messages. Public emotions and influencer content also strongly shape perception during crises.

Social Media and Public Perception

Public perception refers to how people interpret information about organizations or events. On social media, perception is shaped by user-generated content, emotions, influencers, and online interactions.

Misinformation, emotional content, and peer influence strongly affect how audiences view crisis messages. Agenda-setting and framing also influence what people think and how they interpret issues.

Empirical Studies

Empirical research shows that:

- Social media improves speed, engagement, and access to crisis information.
- Timely and transparent communication builds public trust.
- Misinformation spreads rapidly and affects credibility.
- Emotional and peer-generated content strongly influences perception.
- Students rely heavily on social media for crisis information, increasing both awareness and misinformation risks.

Digital PR and crisis communication have evolved due to social media, making communication faster, more interactive, and more complex. While social media improves engagement and information flow, it also increases challenges such as misinformation, emotional influence, and reputational risks. These theories and studies provide a strong foundation for examining social media crisis communication and public perception among students of Federal Polytechnic Bida [11].

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs (2007), which explains how organizations manage communication during crises based on the level of responsibility attributed to them. The theory emphasizes that public perception of responsibility determines reputational damage and the appropriate communication response. It classifies crises into victim, accidental, and preventable clusters and suggests response strategies such as denial,

reduction, rebuilding, and bolstering. SCCT is highly relevant to social media crisis communication because digital platforms increase the speed and visibility of crises, shaping public opinion quickly.

The study also adopts the Image Repair Theory (IRT) by Benoit (1995), which focuses on how organizations restore their reputation after a crisis. It identifies strategies such as denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and apology (mortification). In the social media era, these strategies are more complex due to rapid public reactions and user-generated content.

Both SCCT and IRT are relevant to this study as they explain how crisis communication strategies influence public perception and how students interpret organizational responses on social media at Federal Polytechnic Bida [12].

2. Materials and Methods

Research design is the overall plan that guides how a study is conducted, including data collection and analysis. It ensures the research problem is systematically addressed. Creswell (2014) and Saunders et al. (2016) describe it as the framework linking research questions to data collection and analysis. This study adopts a descriptive survey design because it allows the researcher to describe respondents' opinions on social media crisis communication without manipulating variables.

The population of the study consists of all HND I and HND II students in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Federal Polytechnic Bida, totaling 309 students (141 HND I and 168 HND II). This group was chosen because of their relevance to media and communication studies.

Sampling involves selecting a representative portion of the population. This study uses stratified random sampling to ensure both HND I and HND II students are fairly represented. This reduces bias and improves accuracy.

The sample size of 174 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, ensuring the sample is manageable and representative. It is proportionately shared between the two groups.

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire divided into sections covering demographics, social media use, crisis communication, and public perception. It will use a Likert scale for easy response and analysis.

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency tables and percentages to summarize and interpret responses clearly.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

SECTION B: LIKERT SCALE ON THE EXTENT OF USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION AT FEDERAL POLYTECHNIC BIDA (N = 173)

Table 1. Extent of Use of Social Media for Crisis Communication at Federal Polytechnic Bida (N = 173).

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total
1	Management uses social media to communicate during emergencies	72 (41.6%)	68 (39.3%)	20 (11.6%)	13 (7.5%)	173 (100%)
2	Official social media accounts provide timely crisis updates	65 (37.6%)	70 (40.5%)	25 (14.5%)	13 (7.5%)	173 (100%)
3	Students receive crisis information via WhatsApp/Facebook/X	80 (46.2%)	60 (34.7%)	20 (11.6%)	13 (7.5%)	173 (100%)
4	Social media is the fastest crisis communication channel	78 (45.1%)	62 (35.8%)	20 (11.6%)	13 (7.5%)	173 (100%)

5	Social media reduces confusion and misinformation during crises	70 (40.5%)	65 (37.6%)	25 (14.5%)	13 (7.5%)	173 (100%)
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Table 1 shows respondents' views on the use of social media for crisis communication at Federal Polytechnic Bida.

Most respondents agreed that management uses social media during emergencies (80.9%), provides timely updates (78.1%), and communicates through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (80.9%). They also agreed that it is the fastest communication channel (80.9%) and helps reduce confusion during crises (78.1%).

The findings show that social media is widely used and generally considered an effective and fast tool for crisis communication in the institution, despite some concerns about misinformation and consistency.

Table 2. Students' Perception of the Effectiveness of Social Media Crisis Communication by Federal Polytechnic Bida (N = 173).

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total
1	Social media crisis communication is effective in keeping students informed	76 (43.9%)	65 (37.6%)	20 (11.6%)	12 (6.9%)	173 (100%)
2	Information shared during crises is clear and easy to understand	70 (40.5%)	68 (39.3%)	25 (14.5%)	10 (5.8%)	173 (100%)
3	Social media crisis updates are reliable and trustworthy	68 (39.3%)	70 (40.5%)	25 (14.5%)	10 (5.8%)	173 (100%)
4	The Polytechnic responds quickly to crises via social media	75 (43.4%)	60 (34.7%)	25 (14.5%)	13 (7.5%)	173 (100%)
5	Social media helps students make informed decisions during emergencies	78 (45.1%)	62 (35.8%)	20 (11.6%)	13 (7.5%)	173 (100%)

Table 2 shows respondents' perception of social media crisis communication at Federal Polytechnic Bida.

Most respondents agreed that social media is effective in keeping students informed (81.5%), provides clear information (79.8%), is reliable (79.8%), supports quick responses (78.1%), and helps students make informed decisions during emergencies (80.9%).

3. Results

The findings indicate that students generally perceive the Polytechnic's social media crisis communication as effective, reliable, and useful during emergencies, although a small number still express concerns about clarity and response time.

Table 3. Challenges Affecting Effective Digital Public Relations and Crisis Management in Federal Polytechnic Bida (N = 173).

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total
1	Poor internet connectivity affects crisis communication effectiveness	85 (49.1%)	60 (34.7%)	18 (10.4%)	10 (5.8%)	173 (100%)
2	Delay in official responses reduces crisis management effectiveness	90 (52.0%)	55 (31.8%)	20 (11.6%)	8 (4.6%)	173 (100%)
3	Poor management of official accounts leads to misinformation	82 (47.4%)	58 (33.5%)	23 (13.3%)	10 (5.8%)	173 (100%)

4	Students rely on unofficial sources due to weak communication	88 (50.9%)	55 (31.8%)	20 (11.6%)	10 (5.8%)	173 (100%)
5	Inadequate digital PR strategies affect crisis communication	92 (53.2%)	50 (28.9%)	20 (11.6%)	11 (6.4%)	173 (100%)

Table 1 shows respondents' views on challenges affecting digital PR and crisis management at Federal Polytechnic Bida.

Most respondents agreed that poor internet connectivity (83.8%), delayed responses (83.8%), poor management of official accounts (80.9%), reliance on unofficial sources (82.7%), and weak digital PR strategies (82.1%) all hinder effective crisis communication.

The findings indicate that major challenges include poor internet access, slow response time, misinformation, and weak communication strategies, which reduce the effectiveness of crisis management in the institution [13].

4. Discussion

This section presents the major findings based on Tables 1–3 in line with the study objectives, theoretical framework, and previous studies.

Findings from Table 1 show that Federal Polytechnic Bida uses social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (Twitter) for crisis communication. This supports crisis communication theories like SCCT and previous studies that emphasize the importance of social media for timely information sharing.

Findings from Table 2 indicate that students generally perceive the communication as effective, noting that messages are clear, timely, and helpful during emergencies. This aligns with Image Repair Theory and SCCT, which stress that effective communication builds trust and reduces uncertainty [14].

Findings from Table 3 reveal key challenges such as poor internet access, misinformation, delayed responses, and weak digital PR strategies, which reduce the effectiveness of crisis communication. This is consistent with studies showing that misinformation and poor communication systems weaken trust during crises.

Social media improves crisis communication at the Polytechnic; its effectiveness is limited by technical and strategic challenges that need to be addressed [15].

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that social media plays an important role in crisis communication at Federal Polytechnic Bida, with platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and X helping to deliver timely and useful updates.

Students generally view these channels positively, as they keep them informed during emergencies. However, challenges such as poor internet access, misinformation, delayed responses, and weak communication strategies reduce effectiveness.

Social media has improved crisis communication in the institution, stronger and more structured digital public relations practices are still needed for accurate and reliable information sharing.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Federal Polytechnic Bida should develop a strong digital PR strategy for effective crisis communication.

2. The institution should ensure faster responses during emergencies to reduce misinformation.
3. Official social media accounts should be managed by trained personnel for accurate and timely updates.
4. Internet connectivity on campus should be improved to enhance access to information.
5. The institution should monitor and correct misinformation on social media promptly.
6. Staff handling digital communication should receive regular training in crisis communication and digital PR.

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