

**PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A MANAGEMENT FUNCTION: ASSESSING THE ROLE OF
THE DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION AND UNIVERSITY RELATIONS,
UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA**

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Abstract

This study examines the role and position of the Directorate of Information and University Relations (DIUR) at the University of Abuja in reputation and identity management, focusing on its integration within the university's management structure. Findings reveal that while DIUR performs key advisory and communication roles, its non-involvement in the decision-making processes is inconsistent with global best practices that position public relations as a core management function. The study also evaluates DIUR's PR strategies, such as social media, media relations, and crisis communication, and identifies significant challenges, including delays in communication, inadequate resources, and insufficient staff training. Recommendations include granting DIUR representation on the university's management board, improving resource allocation, and investing in staff development to optimise its effectiveness. Future research should explore PR functions across other universities in Nigeria especially in the North Central to provide a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities in higher education public relations practice.

Key words: Public Relations; Role; Management Function; UniAbuja DIUR.

Introduction

Public relations has evolved into a vital strategic function within the modern landscape of business and relationship management. This elevated role is underscored by research from Edelman (2023), which positions businesses as the most trusted institution expected to solve societal problems. This assertion places an immense responsibility on public relations

professionals, who serve as reputation managers, strategic counsellors, and architects of trust through tangible actions that go beyond traditional communication.

In fulfilling this expanded mandate, PR professionals have become indispensable across diverse sectors from government agencies and non-profits to educational institutions by driving critical initiatives in stakeholder engagement, reputation

management, crisis communication, and strategic decision-making. The practice in the 21st century is, however, simultaneously navigating some unprecedented challenges. As noted by Haliti (2019), forces such as globalisation, the proliferation of social media channels, and the increasing centrality of reputation have created an environment where effective public relations is fundamentally dependent on navigating a complex, data-driven ecosystem.

Globalisation, technological advancements (including artificial intelligence), and the influx of information have created a convergent landscape, making it much more difficult to identify and target specific audiences, craft compelling messages that resonate, engage meaningfully with stakeholders, among others. Even though public relations is considered by professionals and communication scholars as a strategic managerial activity that aims at establishing and sustaining mutually advantageous connections between an organisation and the general public (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023), the results of its efforts may be less impactful, in this era, on the overall performance of an organisation if poorly managed and executed. For any organisation to achieve its corporate goals, all employees must recognise public relations as a shared responsibility especially the management board. This requires being consistently attentive and responsive to the needs of their target publics at all times by understanding what works as dictated by practice direction.

Michael (2022) points out that the increasing PR style in today's business world is the establishment of an office for corporate communications with a view to facilitating the transmission of the organisation's mission and vision with a task across departments for the purpose of maintaining a persistent connection with the publics or

stakeholders. This shows that the operations of public relations office vary from one organisation to another because of the variations in vision, mission, objectives, goals, values, and the services that an organisation is meant to provide to the publics (Michael, 2022; Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). The Public Relations Society of America (2023) contends that the overall strategic plan that an organisation needs is to integrate public relations creativities within the short/long term planning to avoid any form of communication mishaps. Quantifying its importance, moreover, Michael (2022) argues that even some institutions go by a decentralised PR department that is completely independent of a central coordinating body. Knowing the importance of public relations, some organisations run public relations activities indirectly while some run a one-man show PR activity. Put differently, Emmanuel (2024) citing Dayo (2006) notes that for every institution to have a successful operation, it needs to create a favourable image for itself before its external publics and this is known as a corporate image which is considered an asset that gives an organisation a chance to differentiate itself, maximise their market share and profits, attracting new customers, retaining existing ones, neutralising the competitors' actions for its success and survival in the market (Lee & Zhang, 2023). This is why the foundational work of James Grunig (a father figure of PR) established public relations as a vital strategic management function for building reputation and fostering mutual understanding. This framework stands robust, as evidenced by recent global studies that confirm the strategic counsel of PR as the most effective when it is integrated into senior leadership role of an organisation (Zerfass et al., 2023a; Cheng et al., 2024).

In the contemporary higher education setting, universities are faced with

unprecedented challenges such as escalating stakeholder expectations, and increasing scrutiny from the ever-increasing overzealous public. As such, effective management of reputation and identity has become pretty imperative for universities especially when it comes to maintaining competitive edge, attracting top talents, securing funding, and fostering stakeholder engagement (Chen, 2024). The tertiary institution system in Nigeria especially universities, despite being the foundation for research, expertise and excellence, is on daily basis troubled with by many industrial crises, both within and beyond (Nein et al., 2018). With such challenges, the question of reputation and identity is at stake. Hence, reputation and identity management are critical components of university administration. This point is intensely validated by existing study, demonstrating that a university's reputation has a direct impact on its ability to attract and retain students (Aula et al., 2020), secure funding and stakeholder support (Supratak & Dang, 2023), and enhance its overall institutional credibility and ranking locally and globally (Cheng, 2022). Ultimately, a strong reputation is a strategic asset that fosters vital engagement from all stakeholders, from prospective students to donors (Sung & Yang, 2020). Like many public institutions in the country, University of Abuja has, at various times, found itself entrapped in one disorder or the other, snowballing into a lot of multi-dimensional problems some of which required effective and strategic public relations efforts to surmount.

Scholarly literature has long argued that the effectiveness of public relations is contingent on its strategic integration. As Berger and Meng (2022) note, PR experts have specifically, posited that for public relations to truly contribute to building a corporate reputation for a university, the PR professionals must be included in the

organisation's governing council. This inclusion allows communication handlers to directly inform and shape strategic development from the highest levels of management (Berger & Meng, 2022). A recent Europe-wide study confirms that communication departments gain influence in the inner circle of management precisely when they contribute to strategic decision-making and intangible value creation like reputation (Zerfass et al., 2022). Underscoring this importance, Michael (2022), among many other scholars, submits that public relations is a management function that helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communications. This integral role of public relations in organisational management is well-established in many western and Asian countries (Ghorzang, 2021). However, does this paradigm hold true in Nigeria especially in government institutions where they are supposed to be the first adopter of what is researched and taught?

The primary aim of this study is twofold: first, to determine if the University of Abuja's Directorate of Information and University Relations (DIUR) is positioned as a key member of the management board, and second, to analyse the strategies it uses to manage the University's reputation and identity.

Objectives of the Study

1. Determine the position of University of Abuja's Directorate of Information and University Relations (DIUR) within the institution's administrative hierarchy;
2. Assess the extent of the Directorate's involvement in the university's strategic planning processes including crisis management and key decision-making;
3. Evaluate the perceptions of the stakeholders on the effectiveness of the Directorate's communication and relationship management efforts;

4. Identify the primary challenges preventing the Directorate from functioning more strategically as a management function;
5. Make recommendations for enhancing the strategic role of the Directorate in building and managing the corporate reputation of the University of Abuja.

Literature and Conceptual Review

Public Relations

Public relations is simply the business of creating public goodwill for a person, firm or an institution. The term has been seen as a channel, an enabler, and a handler of communication, carrying out research, demystifying problems, and making good meaning by fostering communication among group or groups of people in society. (Ghorzang, 2021). It is also considered as a strategic conversation, as a transient, wide-ranging calling, often misconstrued, and because of the pocket of message control embedded in Public relations, it is challenging to understand and even difficult to pin (Ghorzang, 2021).

Public relations is fundamentally concerned with managing relationships between an entity and the publics critical to its survival, a view famously echoed by pioneer Edward Bernays. This foundational idea has been refined into definitions that places emphasis on its strategic and symbiotic nature. According to Theunissen and Wan Noordien (2020), contemporary scholarship continues to frame public relations as a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort to promote goodwill, mutual understanding and build relationship between organisations and their stakeholders.

The discipline, in addition, is widely recognised as a strategic management function. It uses research, principled communication approach to manage relationships, direct the information environment, and address issues emerging through the strategic counsel of organisational leadership (Cheng et al., 2021). This responsibility, as a strategic advisor, is critical and highly decisive for aligning the actions of an organisation with public interest and, by extension, the broader social context (Ghorzang, 2021).

Notwithstanding, the historical convergence of international thought on this matter, such as the similarity between the 1978 "Declaration of Mexico" and the subsequent Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) definition, underscores a long-standing professional consensus. This consensus positions PR as a vital practice in our complex, pluralistic society. By facilitating dialogue and understanding between diverse groups and institutions, public relations helps to harmonise private and public policies, thereby enabling more effective societal functioning (Ciszek & Lim, 2021). In essence, it is a profession committed to building and maintaining the social legitimacy of an organisation through responsible and responsive communication strategies.

In other words, the role of public relations is, essentially, to achieve and create understanding between organisations and its public through successful communication in order to promote the organisation's image, services, products, and policies in the eyes of the general public, hence, professionals must be aware of public opinion trend regarding an organisation (Ghorzang, 2021; Justine, 2023).

In effect, efficient utilisation of public relations strategies and techniques, can lead organisation to numerous benefits such as:

increased patronage, reliability, improved brand recognition, and enhanced customer loyalty, therefore establishing a better connection with their audience and gain their trust and confidence (Pranashree, 2019). All these in turn add up to the organisation's reputation which the success or otherwise of the organisation depends on. In today's competitive marketplace, reputation is an organisation's most valuable asset because it potentially singularises it and affords it a competitive edge (Justine, 2023). This signifies that successful public relations, no doubt, helps an organisation to create and manage its reputation, as well as promote improved communication and interactions with the organisation's publics (Haliti, 2019).

Public Relations as a Management Function

A review of contemporary public relations literature provides several definitions within the context of management functions. The Public Relations Society of America (2023) defines public relations as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. According to Wilcox et al. (2020), public relations emerged as a twentieth-century American phenomenon, with its central components that are meant to inform, persuade, integrate and strengthen people of the society inherent to early humanities and organisations which it maintains till today. The main features which aim to inform, persuade, among others, highlight public relations as an effective tool for examining and managing public opinion through robust practices in any organisation.

In any organisation, the function of public relations is an integral part or element in cultivating relationships between organisations, be it public or private, and their internal or external publics. It is indispensable for organisations across all

service industries (Cheng et al., 2021). As such, public relations professionals are, generally, viewed as communication managers who organise and integrate communication activities, or as communication specialists who primarily compose messages targeting the publics of the organisations they serve (Ghorzang, 2021). These roles capture the advisory and executive functions that public relations managers may assume within an organisation. Each of these roles potentially sways public relations activities in a distinctive way, though a blended approach is optimal for public relations managers.

Pang et al. (2021) submit that several studies in the recent times have affirmed that successful public relations demands recognition of public relations specialists' advisory role to top management on communication matters and that for optimum performance of deliverables, public relations leaders should hold a management-level position and participate in decision-making processes of the organisation. The point is that public relations professional of any organisation remains the cynosure of the entity - reputational stewards, strategic advisors, and key integrators of stakeholder relationships, effectively positioning them as focal figures for communication and success (Zerfass et al. (2023b)). This positioning allows involvement in high-level counseling and problem-solving, beyond merely disseminating information after decisions are made. Ultimately, public relations effectiveness depends on its strategic organisational position.

Educational Public Relations Practice in Universities

Educational public relations is a strategic management function designed to foster understanding and support for an institution's mission and goals. In the context of higher education, this involves a planned, systematic

process of managing communication and relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. According to Barnes (2023), the main objective is to build mutual understanding, manage the institution's reputation, and secure the support necessary for its advancement.

The value of public relations to universities is multifaceted and critical in the modern media landscape. The following points outline its key contributions, supported by contemporary analysis:

- i. Navigating the Complex Information Ecosystem: The chaotic, multi-channel communication ecosystem orchestrated by digital age has given much to worry about the reputation of an organisation. To that end, public relations experts have, as a response, become essential in assisting universities to navigate this obvious complexity. According to Cheng and Anatshana (2024), their job in this context, among numerous others, is to manage an integrated communications strategy across all media whether paid, earned, shared, and/or owned in order to protect and enhance the institution's reputation, build relationships, and ensure consistent messaging.
- ii. Managing Reputational Risk and Crisis: Institutions, especially universities have become much more susceptible to public scrutiny and online criticism in the most recent time. This, more than ever, has potentials of quickly escalating the situation into a full-blown crisis. In such context, Zerfass et al. (2023a) content that a proactive public relations function is potentially vital for monitoring the public sentiment, identifying potential issues, and implementing strategic communication plans to mitigate reputational damage and manage crises effectively.
- iii. Promoting Stakeholder Engagement and Loyalty: One critical determinant of

successful community and stakeholder involvement is strategic communication (Pranashree, 2019). Lee and Zhang (2023) argue that there is a demonstrated link between effective communication that fosters strong relationships and increased support from families, alumni, and the broader community, which indirectly contributes to a positive academic environment.

iv. Promoting Institutional Goals: Daily strategic communication plays crucial role in promoting successful relationship between an organisation and its publics (Pranashree, 2019). Beyond daily communication, however, Pang et al. (2021) contend that public relations provides institutions, especially universities, with the capability to enhance brand visibility, making institutional information easily accessible to a global audience. In addition, it is instrumental in supporting fundraising and development efforts, disseminating important messages about admissions and events, and facilitating international academic collaborations. According to The Economist Group (2024), these collaborations, which include student exchange programmes and joint research initiatives, are essential for providing global exposure and maintaining institutional competitiveness in the international education market.

Empirical Review

Recent studies have continued to affirm the inevitability of public relations operating as a strategic management function within universities. Zerfass et al. (2023b), in their study titled *Moving to the inner circle: An update on the roles and evaluation of communication in the C-suite* found that communication department gain a "seat at the table" when they are involved in strategic issues like change management and data analytics, moving beyond mere technical dissemination. This is crucial for directing what Cheng (2022) describes as a "chaotic,

multi-channel communication landscape," where universities must integrate messaging across paid, earned, shared, and owned (PESO) media to protect their reputation. This function is no longer optional but central to institutional survival and competitiveness, requiring direct counsel to the vice-chancellor's office.

Besides, the dichotomy between the PR professional as a strategic manager versus a technical writer remains a noticeable area of study. A study by Werder et al. (2023) with the title "The influence of the communication function on organizational outcomes: A test of the mediating role of communication" demonstrates that the impact of communication function on organisational output is considerably higher when it reports straight to the dominant coalition (top management). Nonetheless, many public relations professionals, particularly in public institutions, have found themselves trapped in a technical role, focusing substantially on writing press releases and managing social media feeds without strategic input. This gap between the ideal strategic role and the operational reality is a critical point of investigation.

On the digital platform and stakeholders' engagement, studies have highlighted the efficiency of social media and websites for stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and brand building. For instance, research by Lee and Zhang (2023) titled *Building the ivory tower's bridge: University-stakeholder engagement through digital communication* has shown that interactive and responsive communication on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and Instagram directly links with positive student sentiment and engagement. In addition, the study by Garcia and Lee (2023) shows that the use of university websites as a primary "digital front door" for publishing press releases, showcasing

research, and managing admissions information is well-documented as a critical tool for transparency and reputation management.

Whereas these global trends are clear, a significant research gap exists regarding the empirical assessment of PR as a management function within the specific context of Nigerian universities. Many of the literature from this part of the African continent is largely conceptual that focus only on what should be done rather than providing data-driven analysis of what is currently being practiced. The exclusive challenges faced by these institutions like funding, political interference, infrastructural deficits, among others have the capacity to shape how public relations is structured and practiced in ways that are in consistent with what the theories or literature of public relations practice profess.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Systems Theory, a conceptual framework that posits that the components of a system are best understood by their interrelationships with each other and with their broader environment, rather than in isolation. Monge and Contractor (2023) posit that a core tenet of the theory is that the entirety is greater than the sum total of its parts, with the complex system showing "emergent properties", features as well as attitude that remain unpredicted by merely examining the components in isolation.

By application, Systems Theory provides an important lens for understanding the function of public relations. It perceives an organisation as an open system that must consistently interact with and adapt to its environment for the purpose of surviving and thriving. Public relations works as a critical "boundary-spanning" function that facilitates crucial exchange of information and resources between the organisation and its

target publics (Cheng & Jiang, 2024). This function involves scanning the environment for opportunities and threats, interpreting public opinions for management, and communicating the organisation's positions and actions back to the public.

The key principles of Systems Theory directly applicable to public relations in a university setting include:

1. **Interconnectedness:** A university does not operate in a vacuum. Public relations manages a complex web of relationships, where the actions and perceptions of one group (e.g., students) can directly influence another (e.g., regulators, donors). Strategic communication is, therefore, critical according to Zerfass et al. (2023a) for navigating the ecosystem of interconnectedness.
2. **Interdependence:** The effectiveness of a university's public relations is interdependent with its political, economic, and social context. A shift in government policy or a social media crisis necessitates an adaptive communication strategy. This reciprocal relationship means that public relations must be responsive to both environmental changes and work to shape them for the purpose of supporting institution's goals.
3. **Holism:** A holistic perception is required to manage a university's reputation. The reputation of a university, according to Global Alliance (2023) is a growing property of the entire system as it arises from the joint effect of academic quality, student experiences, staff conduct, alumni activities, and communication efforts. Public relations must recognise how all these elements interplay to contribute to the overall perception and sustainability of the organisation.

Through the lens of Systems Theory, therefore, this study assesses the role of the Directorate of Information and University

Relations of the University of Abuja. It investigates whether the Directorate functions as an integrated, strategic subsystem that enables the university to comprehend its environment, build a resilient reputation, and sustainably manage its interactions with the stakeholders on which its success depends.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to assess the role of the Directorate of Information and University Relations (DIUR) of the University of Abuja. Creswell et al. (2023) posit that the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches enables a more robust understanding of the research problem by counterbalancing the limitations inherent in using either method alone. The quantitative component provides broad, generalisable data on stakeholder perceptions, while the qualitative component offers in-depth, contextual insights into the strategic function of the Directorate.

The study population was defined as the key stakeholder groups of the University of Abuja. This includes registered students, academic and non-academic staff and alumni. A purposive sampling technique was used for both phases of the study. Etikan and Bala (2020) posit that a non-probability technique is deemed most appropriate because it allows researchers to purposely select participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest. In this case, individuals with direct experience of the University's communication outcome and the Directorate's activities.

The data collection was conducted in two concurrent phases. First, the quantitative phase where an online survey questionnaire was developed using the Google Forms platform and distributed via communication channels primarily dedicated WhatsApp

platforms for students, alumni, and staff. A total of 430 survey invitations were distributed. From this, 408 completed responses were returned, yielding a 95% response rate. This final dataset (n=408) constituted the quantitative sample for analysis. This high response rate is considered excellent for survey research and enhances the reliability of the findings (Taherdoost, 2021).

To complement the survey data, in-depth, semi-structured interview was conducted to gather rich, contextual insights from the principal officers of the Directorate. Initially, the research design planned interviews with five key participants from the Directorate of Information and University Relations of the university. Due to shortage of personnel in the Directorate, however, interview was successfully completed with one of the two (2) principal staff members of the Directorate. Her availability for the interview was based on the recommendation of the Director who was out of the country at the time of the interview. The interview which was typed by the respondent was thematically analysed. In a situation where the pool of relevant, information-rich participants is inherently limited, it is methodologically sound for a researcher to engage all available and accessible interviewee(s) who meets the study's criteria such as being a senior member of the Directorate and having a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

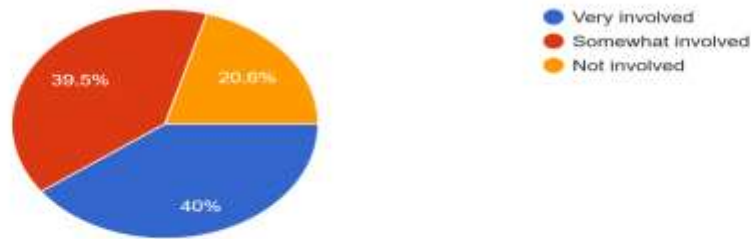
The data from the two phases were analysed separately and then integrated to provide a complete picture. The quantitative data from the 408 completed surveys were processed and initially analysed using the built-in analytics of the Google Forms platform. This involved generating descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, which were visualised through tables and pie charts. The in-depth interview which was typed by the respondent and sent was thematically analysed. The combination of these allowed for triangulation, in that quantitative results from the broad stakeholder base could be expanded by the in-depth interview, thereby validating the outcome of the study's findings and conclusions.

Discussion of Findings

Position of DIUR in University Management

The study strikingly finds out from the in-depth interview that the Director of Directorate of Information & University Relations (DIUR) is not included in the university's management board and, therefore, lacks direct involvement in strategic decision-making. While DIUR performs an executive role, that purveyor of information on decision taken and communicates decisions to target audience. His exclusion from the decision-making process therefore, limits its effectiveness.

How involved do you think DIUR is in university decision-making processes at management board level?
 408 responses



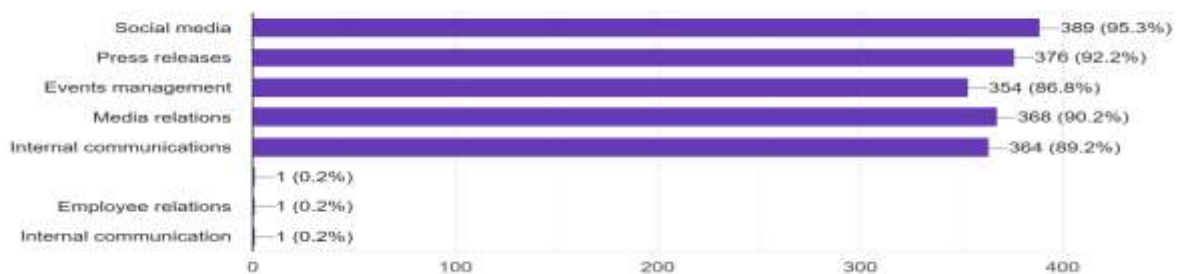
Source: Field Survey (2024)

Corroborating this finding, the survey report indicates that forty percent (40%) of respondents felt that PR was involved in decision-making because the university DIUR’s director is expected to communicate with top management. However, the interview with the personnel of the Directorate revealed their primary role is executive rather than strategic.

PR Strategies and Tactics

The study also finds out that the university’s DIUR employs a range of PR strategies to achieve its objectives, with social media ranking as the most utilised platform (95.3% of respondents acknowledged its importance). As indicated by the survey, other tactics include media relations, press releases, event management, and collaboration with the ITMS unit to optimise the university’s website. This truly indicates that the DIUR occupies the role of disseminator of the university information.

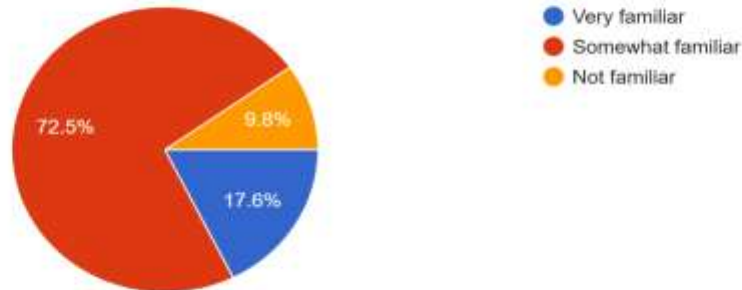
What means does DIUR use to communicate with you ? (Select all that apply)
 408 responses



Source: Field Survey (2024)

How familiar are you with the Directorate of Information & University Relations (DIUR) of University of Abuja?

408 responses



Source: Field Survey (2024)

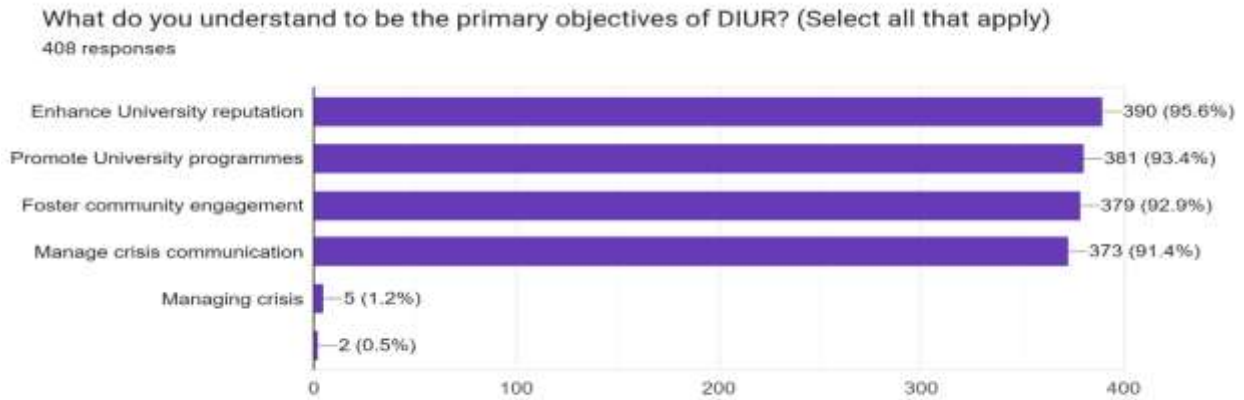
The data collectively reveals a strategic and effective reliance on social media by the University of Abuja for stakeholder engagement. The survey, based on the above pie chart, establishes the empirical foundation, identifying Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) as the primary communication channels, with a significant majority (72.5%) of stakeholders being very familiar of the Directorate's activities on these platforms.

The Primary Objectives of DIUR

The study also finds out (based on the table below) that the primary objectives of DIUR include enhancing the university's reputation

(95.6%), promoting its programs (93.4%), fostering community engagement (92.9%), and managing crises (91.4%). Although, we did not find out how these primary objectives are arrived at; that is who decides or determines what to do, how to do it, but this finding corroborates the above assertion that the Directorate of Information and University relations plays merely an executive role - meaning that somebody is somewhere deciding and dictating to the DIUR what to send out as information.

Participants highlighted reputation management as the most critical objective which was corroborated by the interview data.

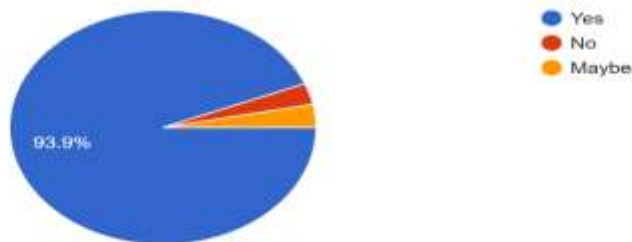


Source: Field Survey (2024)

Stakeholder Perception of DIUR's Effectiveness

The study discovers that the stakeholders of the university expressed positive perceptions of DIUR's PR efforts, with 93.9% acknowledging their impact as indicated in the pie chart below. The high engagement rates on social media platforms reflects the DIUR's success in creating a visible and interactive presence on the digital platform. On perception index, the PR personnel (in-depth interview) rated stakeholder satisfaction at 95%, citing strong social media engagement and visibility as key contributors to the university's positive image. Despite these successes, however, DIUR's lack of inclusion in the management board limits its capacity to address issues preemptively.

Do you think DIUR's activities positively impact your perception of the university as a stakeholder?
408 responses



Source: Field Survey (2024)

Challenges Facing DIUR

The study discovers that the university's Directorate of Information and University Relations (DIUR) (based on the in-depth interview data) faces the following challenges:

1. **Delay in Communication:** Decisions are often communicated to DIUR late, resulting in ineffective messaging. Some decisions are time bound and with little delay, they may render a whole PR effort useless.
2. **Inadequate Resources:** Limited equipment, office space, and the absence of a utility vehicle hinder operational efficiency. This is one of the major challenges being faced by the Directorate which negatively impacts its capacity to adequately deliver.
3. **Brand Non-Compliance:** Disregard for the university's corporate identity guidelines undermines branding efforts. This challenge contradicts the systems theory which postulates that individual components within a system are best understood through their interconnections and relationships with other systems. In other words, it is considered an interdisciplinary study of systems as they relate to one another within a bigger, more complex system.
4. **Staff Development:** The lack of training and professional development opportunities limits staff capacity to deliver optimal results. The Directorate staff have not undergone training to boost their productivity.

Discussion of Findings

This study set out to assess the role of the Directorate of Information and University Relations (DIUR) of University of Abuja, with a specific focus on its position as a management function. The findings reveal a complex situation of a directorate that is highly effective in tactical execution and stakeholder engagement but is technically sidelined from the strategic decision-making

processes that would maximise its efficiency. This discussion synthesises the key findings, interpreting them through the lens of Systems Theory and contrasting them with contemporary public relations scholarship.

The most striking finding of this study is the technical exclusion of the DIUR Director from the university's management board. This positions the directorate as an executive, technical unit rather than a strategic management function. This finding is in direct contrast with the assertions of scholars like Ghorzang (2021) and Michael (2024), who posit that for public relations to be truly effective, its leaders must be part of senior management to provide high-level counselling to management board. The consequence of this exclusion is a critical communication gap. As reported, decisions are often communicated to DIUR late, leading to ineffective messaging. This creates a fundamental disconnect: the unit responsible for managing the university's reputation and stakeholder perceptions is not involved in shaping the very decisions that will impact that reputation. This supports the survey insight where only 40% of stakeholders felt PR was involved in decision-making, primarily because they see its communications output. However, the internal reality, as revealed in the interviews, is that this role is reactive, not proactive. This aligns with the Systems Theory principle of interdependence; the DIUR is dependent on the management board for inputs (decisions, information), but this relationship is not reciprocal, creating a systemic weakness. The directorate cannot effectively counsel on the public implications of policies if it is not present during their formulation, thereby limiting the system's overall ability to adapt to its environment.

Despite this inadequacy, the study finds that the DIUR is highly proficient in its strategic execution. The heavy reliance on social media, with 95.3% of respondents

acknowledging its importance and 72.5% being very familiar with the university's activities on these platforms, proves a successful adaptation to the digital communication environment. This practice is strongly supported by contemporary research. As Justine (2023) and Amber (2024) note, a proactive and visible presence on platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) is crucial for modern stakeholder engagement. This strategic prioritisation of digital platforms is a calculated institutional response to the global paradigm shift. It aligns with the views of Yuen et al. (2024), who posit that establishments leverage social media for its unparalleled capacity to foster real-time communication and build digital communities. The high familiarity rate among stakeholders directly validates the functionality of this strategy which demonstrates that the DIUR is effectively utilising these channels to maintain visibility and foster a sense of connection, thereby successfully managing one aspect of the university's reputation.

The data clearly shows that the DIUR's primary objectives such as enhancing reputation (95.6%), promoting programs (93.4%), and managing crises (91.4%) are perfectly aligned with established public relations best practices and scholarly emphasis on reputation management (Amber, 2024). However, a critical gap emerges in how these objectives are determined and pursued. The study could not establish that the DIUR sets these objectives strategically; rather, the evidence suggests they are handed down from the management board. This strengthens the finding of the DIUR's executive role. The directorate is tasked with achieving strategic ends without being granted the strategic means - a voice in policy-making. This creates a performance gap where the DIUR might be held accountable for outcomes over which it has limited control, as its ability to shape the

foundational elements of reputation is constrained.

The identified challenges like delay in communication, inadequate resources, brand non-compliance, and lack of staff development are not isolated issues but symptoms of the DIUR's weak position within the university's system. The holistic understanding principle of Systems Theory dictates that the reputation of the University of Abuja is an emergent property of the entire system, not just the DIUR. The findings show that the system is not functioning holistically as the DIUR's efforts are being downplayed by other parts of the system that do not recognise its role in the collective reputational outcome.

The discussion reveals that the Directorate of Information and University Relations of the University of Abuja is a technically competent and tactically effective unit that has successfully leveraged digital tools for stakeholder engagement. However, its potential is severely limited by its technical position outside the university's management board. The challenges it faces are systemic, stemming from this fundamental misalignment. For the DIUR to function as a true management function, as advocated by modern PR scholarship, a structural integration into the university's management board is highly imperative.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Optimising the performance of the public relations personnel of the Directorate of Information and University Relations is crucial to the continued and improved deliverables of University of Abuja. The Directorate faces significant limitations in its performance for not acting at the university's management level. For this reason, it is recommended that the Directorate be granted a seat on the university's management board, beyond its current advisory role. This integration would greatly enhance the Directorate's involvement in the decision-

making process, ultimately benefiting both the Directorate and the institution as a whole. By doing so, the university would be better equipped to define and position its reputation and identity within the competitive tertiary education landscape. In addition, providing the DIUR with necessary working equipment, including a utility vehicle, to facilitate efficient operations and regular offering of training and re-training opportunities for DIUR staff through conferences, workshops, and other professional development programmes will aid the DIUR's performance.

Furthermore, this move would emphasise the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders, particularly the internal public. Currently, there is a notable disconnection between the internal public and the university's corporate identity. As a member of the Management board, the Directorate should be better positioned to proactively manage challenging situations and uphold stakeholder trust in the institution.

Suggestion for Future Research Direction

Further research should explore the role of Public relations in other universities across North-Central Nigeria, focusing on both public and private institutions. This comparative approach would provide deeper insights into the challenges and best practices of PR in the region's higher education sector.

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