

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ELECTORAL CREDIBILITY: AN EVALUATION OF INEC'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN THE 2023 NASARAWA STATE ELECTIONS

Isa Rahina Bello, Anthony. I. Igyuve & K.S. Akpede

Department of Mass Communication
Faculty of Social Sciences
Nasarawa State University, Keffi
raheeynahbelisa@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the public relations (PR) strategies employed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in managing the 2023 general elections in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Anchored in Systems Theory and Grunig and Hunt's Two-Way Symmetric Communication Model, the study adopted a descriptive survey research design using a census of 320 INEC staff across the state's 13 Local Government Areas. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's Rank Correlation. The correlation analysis examined the relationship between PR strategy deployment and perceived public trust in INEC, producing a moderate positive relationship ($p = 0.54$, $p < .05$). Findings revealed that INEC demonstrated substantial awareness and application of PR strategies, particularly media relations, voter education, and community outreach, which contributed to improved transparency and voter sensitisation. However, the effectiveness of these strategies was constrained by limited digital communication infrastructure, weak stakeholder feedback mechanisms, inconsistent media collaboration, and inadequate funding. The study concludes that although INEC's PR framework contributed moderately to electoral credibility, communication practices remain insufficiently institutionalised. The study recommends the professionalisation of PR operations, sustained stakeholder engagement, and increased investment in digital communication technologies to strengthen electoral transparency, public trust, and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Public Relations, Electoral Credibility, Electoral Management, INEC, Communication Strategies, Nasarawa State.

Introduction

Democracy as a system of governance thrives on transparent and credible electoral processes that reflect the will of the people. In emerging democracies like Nigeria, the credibility of elections has remained a recurrent concern due to persistent irregularities, administrative lapses, and public distrust (Norris & Grömping, 2020). Electoral management bodies (EMBs) are therefore expected to adopt innovative communication and management approaches that ensure inclusiveness,

transparency, and trust in the democratic process. According to Fallon and Winters (2021), EMBs occupy a central position in sustaining democratic institutions by managing elections that are both procedurally fair and publicly perceived as legitimate.

Existing studies have acknowledged that effective communication and stakeholder engagement are critical to electoral credibility (Aina & Lewis, 2020; Omotola, 2020). Public relations (PR), as a strategic management function, plays a significant role in shaping public perception and fostering trust between institutions and citizens. The Public Relations Society of America (2012) defines PR as a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort aimed at establishing mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Within electoral administration, PR facilitates voter education, crisis communication, and transparency, thereby minimising misinformation and enhancing institutional reputation (Macnamara, 2021). In politically sensitive environments, effective PR strategies are essential for maintaining electoral legitimacy and reducing post-election tensions.

Despite the acknowledged importance of PR in governance, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to its practical application within election management in developing democracies. Most studies on Nigerian elections concentrate on electoral violence, fraud, logistics, and institutional independence (Cheeseman, 2018; Weghorst & Lindberg, 2021), with comparatively few examining communication management and reputation-building strategies within EMBs. This gap is significant because weak communication and poor stakeholder engagement have historically contributed to distrust in electoral institutions. As Jega (2019) observed, ineffective communication frameworks and inconsistent public engagement have repeatedly undermined confidence in INEC, even where administrative reforms were introduced.

Furthermore, although some scholars have assessed INEC's performance in previous elections, empirical studies focusing specifically on PR strategies during the 2023 general elections remain

limited, particularly at the subnational level. Nasarawa State presents a compelling case for such an investigation due to its politically competitive environment, ethno-religious diversity, and recurring electoral tensions. The state has experienced closely contested elections, voter mobilisation challenges, and periodic disputes over electoral outcomes, making public trust and communication especially important during electoral processes. In addition, Nasarawa's mixture of urban and rural communities provides a suitable context for evaluating both traditional and digital PR strategies adopted by INEC. Examining the Commission's communication approach within this environment therefore offers valuable insights into how PR strategies influence electoral credibility in politically diverse settings.

Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the existing gap in knowledge by empirically evaluating the public relations strategies adopted by INEC during the 2023 general elections in Nasarawa State. Specifically, the study examines the extent of INEC's understanding and application of PR strategies, identifies the communication approaches employed, and evaluates their effectiveness in promoting electoral transparency and public trust. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing discourse on electoral communication and provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening institutional communication frameworks that support credible elections and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding numerous institutional reforms, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) continues to face widespread public scepticism regarding its transparency, neutrality, and overall effectiveness in managing elections in Nigeria. Although democratic governance has been sustained through regular elections since 1999, concerns over electoral credibility remain persistent due to allegations of logistical failures, delayed result transmission, voter intimidation,

and administrative inefficiencies (Cheeseman, 2018). Beyond procedural shortcomings, public distrust has also been fuelled by inadequate communication between INEC and critical stakeholders, including voters, political parties, civil society organisations, and the media. As Weghorst and Lindberg (2021) argue, democratic consolidation depends not only on the conduct of elections but also on citizens' confidence in the institutions responsible for administering them.

One of the major factors contributing to this distrust is the limited effectiveness of INEC's public relations and stakeholder engagement strategies. The increasing spread of misinformation, political propaganda, and unverified social media content has intensified confusion and weakened public confidence in electoral outcomes. In many instances, INEC has been criticised for responding reactively to controversies rather than proactively engaging the public through transparent and consistent communication. Omotola (2020) observes that weak communication structures within electoral management bodies undermine institutional legitimacy because citizens often perceive these institutions as inaccessible and unresponsive. Consequently, inadequate PR mechanisms have contributed to voter apathy, declining participation, and persistent doubts about electoral fairness, particularly during highly contested elections.

The 2023 general elections further exposed these communication challenges, especially in politically competitive states such as Nasarawa. The state's diverse ethnic composition, history of electoral contestation, and mixture of urban and rural communities make it a strategic setting for evaluating the effectiveness of electoral communication. Despite the growing relevance of PR in governance, there is limited empirical research examining how INEC's PR strategies influenced public perception, stakeholder trust, and electoral credibility during the 2023 elections in Nasarawa State. This gap in scholarship creates uncertainty regarding the extent to which communication strategies can mitigate misinformation, improve transparency, and strengthen democratic

legitimacy. It is therefore necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of INEC's PR initiatives within this context in order to provide evidence-based insights for improving electoral communication and strengthening public trust in Nigeria's democratic institutions.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does INEC understand and apply public relations strategies in managing elections?
2. What specific PR strategies did INEC employ in the 2023 general elections in Nasarawa State?
3. How effective were these strategies in achieving electoral credibility and transparency?

Literature Review

INEC's Understanding and Application of Public Relations Strategies

The role of public relations (PR) in democratic governance has increasingly attracted scholarly attention due to its relevance in promoting transparency, accountability, and institutional legitimacy. The Public Relations Society of America (2012) defines PR as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. Within electoral administration, PR extends beyond information dissemination to include stakeholder engagement, reputation management, crisis communication, and public feedback mechanisms (Macnamara, 2021). Consequently, election management bodies (EMBs) such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) depend on effective PR strategies to maintain credibility and public trust. Hasan (2019) argues that PR in public institutions should function as a managerial process integrated into policy implementation rather than merely serving ceremonial or publicity purposes.

Despite this conceptual understanding, empirical studies on Nigerian elections reveal contradictions regarding the extent to which INEC strategically applies PR principles in practice. While some scholars argue that INEC has improved communication through media briefings, voter education campaigns, and stakeholder consultations (Aina & Lewis, 2020), others contend that the Commission's communication pattern remains largely reactive and crisis-driven (Omotola, 2020). Lan (2019) observes that INEC often intensifies communication only during electoral controversies, thereby limiting sustained stakeholder engagement and institutional trust-building. Similarly, recent Nigerian studies by Ejiofo and Ngong (2023) found that although INEC has adopted formal communication structures, weak coordination and inconsistent feedback mechanisms continue to undermine public confidence. This contradiction suggests that awareness of PR principles within INEC does not necessarily translate into strategic implementation. Existing studies therefore provide limited empirical explanation regarding whether INEC's PR framework is genuinely research-driven or merely operationally symbolic, particularly at subnational levels such as Nasarawa State.

Furthermore, much of the existing African literature focuses broadly on electoral administration while paying insufficient attention to communication management as a determinant of electoral credibility. Studies conducted in Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa emphasise electoral logistics and legal reforms but rarely examine how communication failures shape voter trust and institutional legitimacy (Cheeseman, 2018). This gap is significant because EMBs increasingly operate in environments shaped by misinformation, social media manipulation, and political distrust. Consequently, this study contributes to existing scholarship by critically examining whether INEC's understanding and application of PR strategies during the 2023 general elections reflected proactive stakeholder-centred communication or remained largely reactive and event-driven.

Public Relations Strategies Adopted by INEC during the 2023 General Elections

The stakeholder theory, developed by Freeman (1984) and later expanded by Freeman, Phillips, and Sisodia (2020), provides a theoretical basis for understanding the communication strategies adopted by INEC during the 2023 general elections. The theory posits that institutional legitimacy depends on balancing the interests of all stakeholders through transparent and reciprocal engagement. Within electoral contexts, stakeholders include voters, political parties, civil society organisations, election observers, security agencies, and the media (Wall et al., 2018). Effective communication with these groups is therefore fundamental to electoral transparency and democratic participation. Public relations strategies such as voter education, media engagement, stakeholder consultations, and digital communication platforms are designed to facilitate these interactions and strengthen public confidence in electoral processes.

Existing studies show mixed outcomes regarding the effectiveness of these communication strategies in Nigeria and across Africa. Aina and Lewis (2020) argue that voter education campaigns significantly improve electoral participation and reduce misinformation, while Macnamara (2021) emphasises that media engagement enhances transparency by clarifying electoral procedures and institutional decisions. However, other scholars question the inclusiveness and consistency of these strategies. Omotola (2020) observes that INEC's communication has historically been urban-centred, leaving many rural communities inadequately informed. Similarly, recent studies on the 2023 elections suggest that although INEC increased its use of digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, these efforts were constrained by poor internet access, digital illiteracy, and inconsistent messaging (Berebon, 2023). This reveals a contradiction between institutional intention and practical effectiveness.

Moreover, African electoral studies increasingly caution against overreliance on one-way communication models. Wall et al. (2018) argue that communication strategies become ineffective when stakeholders are treated merely as message recipients rather than active participants in dialogue. This criticism is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where distrust in public institutions often requires continuous engagement and responsiveness rather than periodic information campaigns. Although INEC adopted multiple PR strategies during the 2023 elections, limited scholarship has critically assessed how these strategies functioned within politically competitive states such as Nasarawa. This study therefore fills an empirical gap by evaluating the extent to which INEC's PR strategies promoted inclusivity, transparency, and stakeholder trust during the elections.

Effectiveness of INEC's PR Strategies and Factors Influencing Their Outcomes

The effectiveness of public relations strategies in electoral management can be better understood through Reputation Management Theory, developed by Fombrun and Van Riel (2020). The theory argues that institutional reputation is built through consistent communication, transparency, responsiveness, and stakeholder trust. Reputation functions as a strategic asset that shapes public perception of legitimacy and competence. In electoral management, credibility depends not only on procedural fairness but also on how effectively institutions communicate their actions and respond to public concerns. Svendsen (2018) notes that trust remains the foundation of institutional legitimacy, particularly in politically polarised societies where misinformation and suspicion can easily undermine democratic processes.

Empirical evidence regarding INEC's PR effectiveness remains inconsistent. Fallon and Winters (2021) argue that reforms such as digital result transmission systems and media briefings have improved transparency and enhanced public confidence in Nigeria's electoral process. However,

other studies challenge this optimistic view. Omotola (2020) contends that communication inconsistencies, delayed responses to electoral controversies, and weak stakeholder engagement continue to damage INEC's credibility. Similarly, Ejiofo and Ngong (2023) found that although communication planning exists within INEC, inadequate technological infrastructure and poor implementation significantly reduce effectiveness. These contradictory findings suggest that while PR reforms may improve institutional visibility, they do not automatically guarantee public trust or electoral legitimacy.

Additionally, recent African studies reveal that the effectiveness of electoral communication is heavily influenced by contextual factors such as political interference, media bias, funding limitations, and technological inequality (Berebon, 2023; Weghorst & Lindberg, 2021). In many developing democracies, PR initiatives fail because institutions lack the resources and organisational culture necessary for sustained stakeholder engagement. This challenge is particularly evident in states with mixed urban-rural populations such as Nasarawa, where communication accessibility varies significantly. Despite growing scholarly attention to electoral transparency, there remains limited empirical research examining how these structural and contextual factors specifically influenced INEC's PR effectiveness during the 2023 elections. This study therefore addresses this gap by critically evaluating the extent to which PR strategies contributed to electoral credibility and identifying the factors that aided or hindered their effectiveness in Nasarawa State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Systems Theory developed by Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn (1978) and Grunig and Hunt's Two-Way Symmetric Model propounded by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984). These theories provide the conceptual

foundation for understanding how communication, stakeholder engagement, and feedback mechanisms influence the effectiveness of the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) public relations strategies during the 2023 general elections in Nasarawa State. The integration of both theories enables the study to examine not only how INEC interacts with its environment but also how communication practices shape public trust and electoral credibility.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory was developed by Katz and Kahn in 1978 within organisational psychology and later applied extensively in communication and management studies. The theory views organisations as open systems that continuously interact with their external environment through the exchange of information, resources, and feedback. Its major assumptions are that organisations cannot function in isolation, that survival depends on adaptation to environmental changes, and that feedback mechanisms are essential for maintaining organisational balance and effectiveness (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Thus, organisations must continuously respond to societal expectations and environmental pressures to sustain legitimacy and relevance.

The relevance of Systems Theory to this study lies in its explanation of how INEC operates within Nigeria's dynamic sociopolitical environment involving voters, political parties, civil society groups, security agencies, and the media. The theory helps explain how communication and stakeholder feedback influence electoral credibility and institutional trust. INEC's PR strategies can therefore be viewed as mechanisms through which the Commission exchanges information with its environment, manages public perception, and adapts to electoral challenges. However, the theory has been criticised for being largely descriptive and overly idealistic. Critics argue that it pays insufficient attention to power imbalances, political interference, and institutional manipulation that often shape communication processes in developing democracies (Pieczka,

1996). In Nigeria's electoral context, political actors may distort feedback systems, making genuine responsiveness difficult despite the openness proposed by the theory.

Grunig and Hunt's Two-Way Symmetric Model

The Two-Way Symmetric Model was developed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984 as one of the most influential models in public relations theory. The model is based on the assumption that effective communication should be mutual, dialogic, ethical, and feedback-oriented, rather than merely persuasive or propagandistic. Unlike earlier one-way communication models such as press agentry and public information models, the Two-Way Symmetric Model emphasises balanced communication where organisations and their publics engage in dialogue, negotiation, and mutual understanding (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Feedback is considered central to decision-making because it enables institutions to adjust policies and communication strategies in response to stakeholder concerns.

The model is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for evaluating whether INEC's communication strategies during the 2023 elections promoted transparency, participation, and stakeholder inclusivity. Through this lens, PR is not merely an image-management tool but a democratic mechanism for building trust and sustaining legitimacy. The model allows the study to assess whether INEC maintained genuine two-way communication with voters, political parties, and civil society organisations, especially in addressing misinformation and electoral concerns. Nevertheless, the model has attracted criticism for assuming ideal communication conditions that rarely exist in practice. Scholars such as L'Etang (2008) and Pieczka (1996) argue that true symmetry is difficult to achieve in politically charged environments where institutions often prioritise organisational interests over public concerns. In the Nigerian electoral environment, factors such as political influence, unequal access to communication

channels, and institutional bureaucracy may limit the effectiveness of symmetrical communication despite its theoretical appeal.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design using a census approach involving all 320 INEC staff across the 13 Local Government Areas of Nasarawa State who participated in the 2023 general elections. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to obtain quantitative and qualitative insights into INEC's public relations strategies. The questionnaire utilised nominal and Likert-type scales to measure awareness, effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, and electoral credibility, while respondents were allowed multiple responses where applicable. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, and Spearman's Rank Correlation through SPSS Version 25 ($\rho = 0.54$, $p < .05$), whereas qualitative responses were analysed thematically. Instrument validity and reliability were ensured through expert review and pilot testing ($r = 0.90$), while ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and interprets findings derived from 320 valid questionnaire responses obtained from staff of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nasarawa State. The analysis is organised around the three research questions guiding the study and is supported by qualitative insights from interviews with key officials. Respondents were allowed to select multiple response options where applicable; therefore, frequencies in some tables reflect aggregated responses. The findings are interpreted in relation to the study objectives, relevant literature, and theoretical frameworks.

To what extent does INEC understand and apply public relations (PR) strategies in managing elections?

Table 1: Level of Awareness and Application of PR Strategies by INEC

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High Awareness	262	82
Moderate Awareness	38	12
Low Awareness	20	6
Total (N)	320	100

Table 1 indicates that 82% of respondents had high awareness of INEC's PR strategies, 12% reported moderate awareness, and 6% indicated low awareness, suggesting substantial institutional knowledge of strategic communication and stakeholder engagement. Interview responses further showed that staff understood the role of PR in voter education, information dissemination, and reputation management; however, implementation remained inconsistent due to weak planning, limited feedback integration, and inadequate stakeholder dialogue. This finding supports Hasan (2019) and Systems Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), which emphasise that effective PR requires structured, feedback-driven communication systems rather than mere institutional awareness.

What specific PR strategies were adopted by INEC during the 2023 General Elections in Nasarawa State?

Table 2: Public Relations Strategies Adopted by INEC

PR Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Media Relations	96	30
Voter Education	86	27
Community Outreach	70	22
Stakeholder Dialogue	38	12
Digital Engagement	30	9
Total Responses	320	100

Table 2 shows that media relations (30%), voter education (27%), and community outreach (22%) were the major PR strategies adopted by INEC during the 2023 general elections in Nasarawa State, while stakeholder dialogue (12%) and digital engagement (9%) were less utilised. The findings indicate heavy reliance on traditional communication channels such as press briefings, radio programmes, and community sensitisation campaigns to improve voter awareness and reduce misinformation. However, limited digital engagement reflected infrastructural and technological constraints, including poor internet access and low digital literacy. This finding partly contradicts Macnamara (2021) and, from the perspective of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), suggests that INEC's communication remained largely one-way rather than fully participatory and feedback-driven.

How effective were INEC's PR strategies in achieving electoral credibility and transparency?

Table 3: Effectiveness of PR Strategies in Enhancing Electoral Credibility

PR Strategy	Frequency	Perceived Effectiveness (%)
Media Relations	208	65
Voter Education	195	61
Community Outreach	186	58
Stakeholder Dialogue	160	50
Digital Engagement	141	44

Table 3 indicates that media relations (65%) and voter education (61%) were perceived as the most effective PR strategies in enhancing electoral credibility, followed by community outreach (58%), stakeholder dialogue (50%), and digital engagement (44%). Spearman's Rank Correlation further revealed a moderate positive relationship between PR strategy deployment and public trust in INEC ($\rho = 0.54$, $p < .05$), suggesting that improved communication contributed to perceptions of transparency and credibility. However, interview findings showed that limited digital infrastructure, inadequate funding, weak media collaboration, and poor feedback systems constrained effectiveness. This supports Fallon and Winters (2021) and Reputation Management Theory (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2020), which emphasise that sustained transparency and continuous stakeholder engagement are essential for institutional trust and electoral legitimacy.

Discussion of Findings

To what extent does INEC understand and apply public relations strategies in managing elections?

The study revealed that INEC staff possessed substantial awareness and theoretical understanding of public relations principles, particularly in voter education, stakeholder communication, and information dissemination. However, the findings suggest that institutional awareness did not consistently translate into strategic application. While respondents acknowledged the existence of PR structures within the Commission, interview responses indicated that communication activities were often intensified only during electoral crises or periods of public criticism. This implies that PR within INEC remains largely reactive rather than preventive or research-driven. Such findings challenge the assumption that institutional knowledge automatically guarantees effective communication outcomes. Instead, they suggest that organisational culture, bureaucratic constraints, and political pressures may limit the practical implementation of strategic communication principles even where awareness exists.

This finding partly contradicts studies that portray INEC's communication reforms as evidence of institutional modernisation (Aina & Lewis, 2020). Although reforms have increased visibility, the absence of structured feedback mechanisms and systematic evaluation weakens the Commission's capacity to build relational trust with stakeholders. From the perspective of Systems Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), this indicates incomplete organisational adaptation because communication flows remain largely linear and insufficiently responsive to environmental feedback. Similarly, the limited application of two-way engagement reflects a deviation from Grunig and Hunt's Two-Way Symmetric Model, which emphasises dialogue and mutual understanding. An alternative explanation for this weakness may lie in the highly politicised nature of electoral administration

in Nigeria, where institutional communication is often overshadowed by crisis management and political contestation. Consequently, INEC's PR operations appear structurally constrained, functioning more as administrative support tools than as fully institutionalised strategic management mechanisms.

What specific PR strategies were adopted by INEC during the 2023 General Elections in Nasarawa State?

The findings showed that INEC primarily relied on media relations, voter education, and community outreach as its dominant PR strategies during the 2023 elections. These approaches contributed to public sensitisation and electoral awareness, particularly among rural populations where radio and community-based campaigns remained effective. However, the findings also reveal that INEC's communication strategy was predominantly informational rather than participatory. While stakeholders received electoral information, opportunities for dialogue, clarification, and feedback were limited. This suggests that communication was designed more to transmit official messages than to facilitate reciprocal engagement with citizens and other electoral stakeholders.

The limited effectiveness of digital engagement is particularly significant because it highlights a contradiction between contemporary communication realities and institutional practice. Despite the increasing importance of social media and digital communication in modern elections, INEC's digital presence remained weak and inconsistently coordinated. This finding differs from recent studies conducted in urban electoral contexts where digital mobilisation significantly enhanced voter interaction and transparency (Macnamara, 2021). A possible explanation for this disparity is Nasarawa State's mixed urban-rural structure, where digital access and internet penetration remain uneven. Additionally, bureaucratic limitations and inadequate technological capacity may have

restricted INEC's ability to deploy real-time digital communication effectively. From Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), the findings indicate that while INEC acknowledged the importance of stakeholder engagement, communication practices remained largely top-down, thereby limiting inclusivity and collaborative trust-building.

How effective were these strategies in achieving electoral credibility and transparency?

The study found a moderate positive relationship ($\rho = 0.54$, $p < .05$) between PR strategy deployment and public trust, indicating that INEC's communication efforts contributed to electoral credibility but did not produce optimal trust outcomes. Although media relations and voter education improved awareness and reduced misinformation, the moderate correlation suggests that communication alone could not fully overcome longstanding institutional distrust. This finding is important because it demonstrates that electoral credibility is shaped not only by communication strategies but also by broader political and structural realities such as electoral logistics, perceived neutrality, and institutional transparency. Thus, even effective PR strategies may have limited impact where public confidence in electoral institutions is historically fragile.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that structural barriers including inadequate funding, weak digital infrastructure, inconsistent stakeholder collaboration, and bureaucratic delays significantly reduced communication effectiveness. This supports Fallon and Winters' (2021) argument that electoral legitimacy depends on sustained relational trust rather than episodic publicity campaigns. However, the findings also suggest an alternative interpretation: public scepticism towards INEC may not solely stem from communication weaknesses but from wider dissatisfaction with Nigeria's political system and electoral outcomes. In this context, PR strategies may improve institutional visibility without necessarily transforming deeply rooted public perceptions. From the perspective of Reputation Management Theory (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2020), this indicates that

institutional credibility requires continuous ethical engagement, transparency, and responsiveness over time rather than isolated communication interventions during election periods. Consequently, strengthening electoral credibility in Nigeria requires not only improved PR strategies but also broader institutional reforms capable of reinforcing public confidence in democratic governance.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) made measurable progress in deploying public relations strategies such as voter education, media engagement, and community outreach to improve transparency and electoral credibility during the 2023 general elections in Nasarawa State. The findings demonstrate that these strategies contributed positively to voter awareness, stakeholder engagement, and public understanding of the electoral process. However, the study also reveals that the effectiveness of these communication efforts remained moderate due to structural, technological, and institutional limitations, including inadequate digital infrastructure, inconsistent stakeholder feedback systems, funding constraints, and weak coordination mechanisms.

Beyond communication deficiencies, the findings suggest that electoral credibility in Nigeria is shaped by broader political and institutional realities that PR strategies alone cannot fully resolve. While INEC's communication initiatives enhanced visibility and public sensitisation, they were insufficient to completely overcome entrenched public scepticism and distrust. Consequently, the study affirms that effective electoral communication must move beyond reactive publicity towards a fully institutionalised, research-driven, and participatory PR framework. Strengthening PR within INEC therefore requires continuous stakeholder dialogue, professional capacity development, digital innovation, and sustained institutional reforms capable of reinforcing democratic legitimacy and long-term public trust in Nigeria's electoral system.

Recommendations

- 1. Professionalisation of PR Operations:** In line with the first research question, the study recommends that INEC should strengthen and professionalise its public relations operations by establishing a dedicated PR department staffed with trained communication specialists. This will enhance strategic planning, feedback management, and the effective application of PR principles in election management.
- 2. Enhanced Stakeholder Collaboration:** Based on the second research question, INEC should institutionalise continuous engagement with key stakeholders including the media, civil society organisations, political parties, and community leaders through regular consultative forums and communication partnerships. This will improve inclusiveness, transparency, and public confidence in the electoral process.
- 3. Investment in Digital Communication Infrastructure:** Reflecting the third research question, the study recommends that INEC should invest in modern digital communication tools such as social media monitoring systems, interactive online platforms, and data-driven feedback mechanisms to improve voter education, crisis communication, and real-time stakeholder engagement during elections.

References

- Adefemi, A. (2019). *Electoral integrity and democratic consolidation in Nigeria*. Concept Press.
- Aina, L., & Lewis, K. (2020). Public relations and election communication in Africa. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 12(3), 245–263. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00024_1
- Cheeseman, N. (2018). *Institutions and democracy in Africa: How the rules of the game shape political developments*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108553566>
- Ejiofo, N. E., & Ngong, C. A. (2023). Effect of public relations planning on human resource management performance of the Independent National Electoral Commission in Nigeria. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 9(1), Article 2222571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2222571>
- Fallon, R., & Winters, M. (2021). Democratic consolidation and electoral credibility in Africa. *African Affairs*, 120(480), 305–325. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adaa052>
- Fombrun, C. J., & Van Riel, C. B. M. (2020). *Reputation and corporate communication*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000193>
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Pitman.
- Freeman, R. E., Phillips, R., & Sisodia, R. (2020). *Stakeholder theory: The state of the art* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108539508>
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Hasan, M. (2019). *Public relations principles and practices*. Oxford University Press.
- Jega, A. (2019). *Democratic governance and credible elections in Nigeria*. Centre for Democracy and Development Press.
- Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. (1978). *The social psychology of organizations* (2nd ed.). Wiley.
- Lan, S. (2019). Communication and credibility in election management. *African Communication Review*, 5(2), 54–72.
- L’Etang, J. (2008). *Public relations: Concepts, practice and critique*. Sage.
- Macnamara, J. (2021). *Beyond the spin: Public relations and the transformation of public communication*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b18072>
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Murray, S., & White, J. (2021). Public perception and trust in electoral commissions. *International Journal of Communication Studies*, 15(1), 33–49.
- Norris, P., & Grömping, M. (2020). *Electoral integrity worldwide*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674251310>
- Omotola, S. (2020). Electoral credibility and governance in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 119(474), 175–197. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adz018>

- Pieczka, M. (1996). Paradigms, systems theory, and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 22(3), 303–318. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(96\)90023-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(96)90023-6)
- Public Relations Society of America. (2012). *What is public relations?* <https://www.prsa.org/about/all-about-pr>
- Svendsen, L. (2018). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400830641>
- Wall, A., Ellis, A., & Macdonald, T. (2018). *Electoral management design: The International IDEA handbook*. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/electoral-management-design>
- Weghorst, K., & Lindberg, S. I. (2021). Elections and democratic accountability in sub-Saharan Africa. *Democratization*, 28(1), 112–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1763890>
- Yamane, T. (1967). *Statistics: An introductory analysis* (2nd ed.). Harper & Row.