



SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AMONG PUBLIC  
RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS IN LAGOS STATE,  
NIGERIA

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores the uses of social media in public relations practices among practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria. The study is based on the assumption that social media have changed the way public relations is being practised in contemporary times; the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The study is premised on the 'Uses and Gratifications' (U & G) Theory, a perspective that posits that individuals actively choose media or media content to satisfy their goals. Irrespective of the fact that the same theory has been applied in other countries, mostly Western (developed), this study provides an African i.e. Nigerian (developing country) perspective which differs in terms of its socio-cultural, political and economic status. In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 PR practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria, whose companies'/organizations' names were retrieved from a list of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations Practitioners (NIPR) to gather data for this study. Adopting a qualitative approach also helped to provide the practitioners' first-hand information on their experiences about social media usage in the profession. These practitioners were drawn from the government sector, an academic institution and private PR firms, all of whom actively use the social media in their PR practices. The study proposed four research questions: RQ1: How do PR practitioners in Nigeria use social media in their practices? RQ2: Why do PR practitioners in Nigeria use social media in their practices? RQ3: In what ways do social media gratify PR practitioners' needs in Nigeria? RQ4: How has social media usage shaped PR practices in Nigeria? The findings of the study affirm that public relations practitioners in Nigeria have largely incorporated social media usage in their practices and derive numerous gratifications therein. However, they have a number of downsides to the usage in regards to how it has shaped their practices. Practically, the study suggests that practitioners be educated on how to properly use these social media platforms to achieve maximum professional objectives, employers should not relegate all PR functions and duties to only those competent in social media usage as not all PR duties can be achieved using the social media. The study also suggests the need for further research on the same phenomenon in other parts of the country.

## ملخص البحث

تقوم هذه الدراسة باستكشاف استخدامات شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في ممارسة العلاقات العامة في ولاية لاغوس، نيجيريا. تعتمد الدراسة على فرضية أن شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي قد غيرت الطريقة التي تمارس بها العلاقات العامة في الأزمنة المعاصرة (القرن الواحد والعشرين). وترتكز الدراسة على نظرية "الاستخدامات والإرضاء (U&G)" التي تقوم على فرضية أن الأفراد يقومون باختيار شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي ومحتوياتها التي تلبي أهدافهم. وبغض النظر عن حقيقة أن النظرية قد طبقت في بلدان أخرى ومنها الدول الغربية المتقدمة، تقدم هذه الدراسة المنظور الأفريقي - النيجيري (من البلدان النامية) والتي تختلف من حيث وضعها الاجتماعي والثقافي والسياسي والاقتصادي. وقد أجريت مقابلات متعمقة مع أحد عشر ضيفاً من ممارسي العلاقات العامة في ولاية لاغوس، نيجيريا ممن تم استرجاع أسماء شركاتهم أو المنظمات التي يعملون بها من قائمة المعهد النيجيري لممارسي العلاقات العامة (NIPR) بغرض جمع بيانات هذه الدراسة. وقد ساعد اعتماد المنهج النوعي في هذه الدراسة على تقديم معلومات مباشرة عن تجارب ممارسي العلاقات العامة في استخدام شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي، واختيرت عينة البحث من القطاع الحكومي، والمؤسسات الأكاديمية، وشركات العلاقات العامة الخاصة وهم الذين يقومون باستخدام شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في أعمالهم المرتبطة بالعلاقات العامة. واقترحت الدراسة أربعة أسئلة بحثية: 1: كيف يستخدم ممارسو العلاقات العامة في نيجيريا شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في أعمالهم؟ 2: لماذا يستخدم ممارسو العلاقات العامة في نيجيريا شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في أعمالهم؟ 3: كيف تلبي شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي احتياجات ممارسو العلاقات العامة في نيجيريا؟ 4: كيف أثر استخدام شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي على شكل ممارسات العلاقات العامة في نيجيريا؟ أكدت نتائج الدراسة على أن ممارسي العلاقات العامة في نيجيريا أدرجوا إلى حد كبير استخدام شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في أعمالهم إلا أنهم أوضحوا أن هناك عدداً من الجوانب السلبية فيما يختص بالطريقة التي أثرت بها هذه الشبكات على طرق أدائهم لأعمالهم. عملياً، تقترح الدراسة أن يخضع ممارسو العلاقات العامة إلى تدريبات تعليمية عن كيفية استخدام هذه المنابر الاجتماعية الإعلامية بشكل صحيح لتحقيق أقصى قدر من الأهداف المهنية. كما تقترح على أصحاب العمل بالأخص تحويل جميع مهام العلاقات العامة إلى الأكفاء في استخدام شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي فقط لأنه من غير الممكن أن تتحقق جميع أهداف أعمال العلاقات العامة باستخدام شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي فقط. كما تشير الدراسة إلى الحاجة إلى المزيد من البحوث حول نفس الظاهرة في مناطق أخرى من البلاد.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

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Zeti Azreen Ahmad  
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

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.....  
Ibrahim Mohammed Zein  
Dean, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed  
Knowledge and Human Sciences

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degree at IIUM or other institutions.

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This dissertation is dedicated to:  
Allah for His unending guidance, protection and benevolence towards me,  
And my mum; Mrs Bolanle, Taibat Adedoyin, the best mom in the world, who is  
aware that knowledge rules the world, and have always encouraged me to pursue it.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Public relations, the act of building understanding and maintaining good relationship with organizations and individual stakeholders has been a media-dependent endeavour from its inception. While the emergence of organized public relations has been traced to the employment of communication strategies and tactics to woo stakeholders of corporate organizations in the United States (Halff & Gregory, 2014; Otubanjo & Amujo, 2009; Page & Adams, 2014), evidence reveals that the field has been practised before the advent of mass media (Bernard, 2010; Mogel, 2002). An example is Caesar's use of speeches to promote him and deride his competitors (Bernard, 2010). Page and Adams (2014) also document that the act and art of modifying public opinion, which was the initial basis of public relations, began even before the growth of corporations.

The advent of the printing press that facilitates mass production of print medium of communication was another milestone in building relationship with stakeholders. Pamphlets were used by various individuals and organizations to communicate messages that swayed the audience in favour of the sender (Bernard, 2010). Similarly, the electronic media (radio and television) as well as the cinema, gave public relations practitioners the opportunity of reaching out to numerous stakeholders (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006). By providing the distribution and linking systems, the media have become an important part of public relations practice. In addition, the mode and pattern of communication inherent in the media system

determine the form of organization-public relationships. Hence, the earlier forms of mass communication media were used for coercion and manipulation of the publics (Benard, 2010; Moloney, 2006) while the latter media allow for persuasive and responsible dialogical communication (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006).

The emergence of new information and communication technologies has brought significant impact on virtually every sphere of human and corporate endeavour including public relations practices (Avidar, Ariel, Malka and Levy, 2013; Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). This thus calls for organizations' pragmatic adjustment to maximize the benefits while minimizing the constraints. These technologies come with challenges that are unexpected in all facets of social, political and economic lives of individuals, groups, communities, and nations of the world (Baran & Davis, 2009; DeFleur, 2010). They have assumed notable positions in the conduct of individual and corporate relationships. The new technologies, with their tremendous functionalities, have great potentials for altering corporate communication structure. This thus calls for organizations' pro-active adjustment to maximize the benefits while minimizing the constraints. Like many fields struggling with the ever-evolving technological changes, public relations has been impacted as well (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). This, perhaps, results from the centrality of communication and information infrastructure to the practice of public relations. More importantly, the evolutionary nature of this technological advancement has led to the birth of functional offspring such as the Internet, e-mailing and a number of other communication outlets collectively known as the social media.

In public relations, the social media have been instrumental in facilitating and shaping relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig, 2009; Olasina, 2012; Lahav, 2013). Grunig (2009) asserts that the digital media have the potential to

make public relations more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible as envisaged by the two-way symmetrical model of the Excellence Theory. Furthermore, the term 'social media' is often used interchangeably with Web 2.0 has become a buzzword in the field of public relations, leading to a conception of public relations 2.0 (Macnamara, 2009). Unlike traditional media, there are several aspects of the social media which are perceived as important by PR practitioners such as creating conversations, dialogue, engaging stakeholders, listening and building community (Macnamara, 2009).

Hence, the use of social media in public relations has continued to attract the attention of researchers, scholars and public relations practitioners evidently based on a considerable number of research conducted on the relationship between social media and public relations (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012; Cockerill, 2013; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Luo & Jiang, 2012; Zerfass & Schramm, 2014). ). In effect, a lot of literatures on the relationship between social media and public relations have emerged, particularly from developed countries. However, the continuous evolvement of the social media makes it impossible to understand their absolute uses and gratifications. Therefore, researchers can only continue to study and document the growing impact of social media on public relations due to its established dialogic potential which aligns with the current relational and co-creational perspective of organization-public relations.

Thus this study intends to explore the uses of social media by public relations practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria. In addition, this study hopes to find the gratifications these practitioners derive from using the social media in their practices and how public relations practices specifically in Nigeria have been shaped by the use of social media.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Early research into the impacts of social media on public relations has focused on the use and misuse of the social media in actualizing organizations-public relationships (Khang, Ki & Ye, 2012). These studies either document the functional perspective of the social media for public relations practice or how the field is under-utilizing the new technologies. A few other studies equally critique the field of public relations for its inability to maximize the potentials of novel technologies (Avidar, 2009; Avidar, Ariel, Malka & Levy, 2013). A number of reasons have been given for the sub-optimal use of new and social media in public relations, ranging from lack of knowledge, and misunderstanding of power potential and organizational obstacles, among others. Grunig (2009), for example anchored poor embracement of social media among public relations practitioners due to the fear or poor knowledge of innovation. Bernard (2010) extends the argument, stating that experience on the use of the Internet as a whole and social media in particular accounts for sub-optimal utilization of social media in the field of public relations. Similarly, Macnamara (2010) offers that the uses of social media in a one-way transmission mode like the traditional media deters its maximal usage in public relations.

There seems to be an agreement among scholars that public relations practitioners are not maximizing the communicative prowess of the social media to achieve best practice. Grunig (2009), for example, holds that the dialogical, interactive, relational and global properties of the social media that are suitable for strategic public relations functions have not been well-exploited. He laments that communicators tend to import the old ways of doing things into the new media environment, thus maintaining the traditional one-way, message-oriented organization-public relations. Providing theoretical justification for the use of new and

social media in public relations, Grunig offers that approach to the practice of public relations has significant influence on the patterns of use of social media. He suggests that strategic management/behavioral paradigm, rather than the interpretive/symbolic paradigm, would facilitate advantageous embracement of social media. Although a number of studies have documented the under-utilisation of social media among public relations practitioners, there is no disagreement as to its embracement among practitioners. However, while these practitioners subscribe to varying types of social media platforms on a personal basis, they hardly deploy the tools in their professional work (Macnamara, 2010).

Wright and Hinson (2010) also submit that while there are a number of published articles that have examined the huge impact new communication media are having on the practice of public relations, there are far fewer studies looking at why and how public relations practitioners are actually using these new media. This shows that studies on social media among public relations practitioners have largely focused on personal usage rather than professional-specific usage (see for example, Avidar, 2009).

‘Uses and Gratifications’ studies of the social media and public relations have mostly been on the exploration of the effects, most of which focused on Grunig and Hunt’s two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig, 2009; Macnamara, 2010). The two-way symmetrical model explains a form of public relations that builds constructive relationship between the organisation and its numerous public. The limiting of social media use to effects rather than motive for, and gratifications from, using social media limits the theoretical basis of social media in the field of public relations. Scholars are more concerned about what the social media can be used for rather than asking what the social media are being used for, and why, in public

relations. Hence, there is a need to know why public relations practitioners use the social media in their profession and what they are being used for.

The use of quantitative methods in PR and social media studies limit the ability to understand underlying beliefs, assumptions and values in research findings. It thus becomes very difficult to gain a full appreciation of PR and social media usage without an understanding of the reason(s) underlying the practitioners' usage. In a study examining social media use in advertising, communication, marketing and public relations, Khang, Ki & Ye (2012) found that over 80% of studies on public relations adopted quantitative methods. Qualitative methods which allow researchers to explore the views of both diverse and homogenous sections of the society are therefore necessary to understand what motivates the practitioners to use the social media and the gratifications derived from its use in Lagos state, Nigeria. Qualitative methods help to aggregate and analyze differing perspectives. (Choy, 2014: 99). To gain a full appreciation of social media usage in PR practices in Nigeria, it is necessary to understand the values, norms and culture surrounding the use of social media for PR practices from a natural perspective of the practitioners.

In addition, substantial number of studies on public relations and social media has been predominantly conducted in developed nations like the United States of America, Canada and countries in Europe (Cockerill, 2013; Kent, 2013; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011; Zeffass and Schramm, 2014). The differences in cultural, social and political realities requires that while carrying out studies on public relations and social media, political and socio-cultural realities of the relevant PR environment must be given utmost consideration.

Although embracing new media is becoming a norm in all facets of human interactions globally, developing countries lag behind in this flight into the

information superhighway. Using *Global Public Relations Handbook* as reference, Grunig (2009) affirms that research reveals many idiosyncrasies in public relations practice around the world that reflect cultural differences. Ikpe and Olise (2010), for instance, argue how factors such as cyber crisis, low penetration of information and communication technologies and poor funding of public relations, among others cause Nigeria to lag behind in the use of social media for several activities, including public relations. This reveals the need to examine social media use in public relations from different cultural contexts rather than apply a generic formula for the development in the field. It calls for the exploration of this development in other parts of the world, particularly developing countries, with differing cultures yet enveloped in similar patterns of life with the developed nations via the currents of globalization.

Hence, this study is carried out to reflect the realities and perspectives of PR practitioners in Nigeria and their use of the social media in their profession. Being Africa's largest economy, Nigeria offers a model of what could represent public relations in the African context. Besides, Nigeria houses several multi-national corporations, including many international public relations firms and/or their affiliates. These organizations have organized public relations departments that provide job opportunities for numerous Nigerians and expatriates thus contributing significantly to the nation's GDP.

Research on public relations and social media that is gaining currency in recent times has received negligible interest in developing countries as a whole, Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Thus, this study intends to fill the gap in the literature.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of this study is to explore the uses of social media in public relations practices by public relations practitioners in Nigeria. This study is premised on the Uses and Gratifications Theory.

The specific objectives however are:

1. To investigate how PR practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria use social media in their practices.
2. To determine the motivations for using social media in PR practices in Lagos state, Nigeria.
3. To explore the gratifications derived from using social media among PR practitioners in pursuing PR practices in Lagos state, Nigeria.
4. To investigate how the use of social media is shaping PR practices in Lagos state, Nigeria.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In view of the above, this study will be guided by the following research questions.

1. How do PR practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria use social media in their practices?
2. Why do PR practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria use social media in their practices?
3. In what ways do social media gratify PR practitioners' needs in Lagos state, Nigeria?
4. How has social media usage shaped PR practices in Lagos state, Nigeria?

## **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is timely considering the current dilemma that the evolutionary and dynamic nature of new and social media poses, requiring continuous exploration through varying theoretical and methodological prisms. Therefore, it is the intention of this researcher to explore the use of social media among public relations practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria, within the Uses and Gratifications' perspective. Uses and Gratifications Theory provides understanding on how people actively use the mass media to achieve varying needs and gratifications. However, extensive findings have been detailing individual uses of, and gratifications from, the media. By examining professional-specific uses and gratifications of social media among Nigerian public relations practitioners, this study would be contributing to a different perspective on the application of the Uses and Gratifications Theory.

The study will also be providing a differing perspective on social media usage among public relations practitioners from an African, cum Nigerian context. As existing findings are mostly from the western (developed) countries like Canada, some countries in Europe and the United States of America (Cockerill, 2013; Kent, 2013; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011; Zerfass & Schramm, 2014). However, this study argues that findings from developed countries cannot be applied to a developing nation like Nigeria. This is in view of their different political, economic, social and cultural settings. Cultural differences have been identified in public relations practices around the world, (Grunig, 2009), similarly, Haff and Gregory (2014) recognize that cultural differences may prevent a generic pattern in every aspect of public relations practice. Although embracing new media is becoming a fad in all facets of human interactions, developing countries are lagging behind in this venture into the information superhighway.

Thus, this study intends to provide perspectives of PR practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria, on the use of social media in public relations practice. Being a developing region with a myriad of problems, the use of the social media in her public relations practices may converge or differ with other nations/regions of the world. Findings from this research may serve as a basis for subsequent research in the field of PR in Nigeria, adding to the understanding of Uses and Gratifications Theory, and contributing to the existing body of knowledge in the field of PR and social media usage in Nigeria.

In addition, the use of qualitative method in this study has the potential to bring forth subjective viewpoints and understanding of social media use among public relations practitioners in Nigeria. This approach resonates well with the current interest in public relations in terms of understanding the viewpoints of a range of practitioners and key stakeholders in order to develop effective and collaborative dialogues (Wright & Hinson, 2010).

This study argues that social media have the potential to enhance practitioners' effectiveness in achieving their organization-public relationship. It is crucial for practitioners to understand how social media could enhance their practices and know which social media tools are relevant to reach their respective public. The study also sheds light on how the use of social media has shaped, or is shaping PR practices in Nigeria. Being an exploratory study, findings of this research provide a basis for subsequent research in the field. Besides, the study contributes to the meagre literature in the field of public relations in Nigeria and by so doing, rouses other professional and scholastic interests in research about Nigerian public relations practice.

## **1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This study explores the use of social media among public relations practitioners within Lagos state in Nigeria. Lagos state is chosen based on its position as the public relations hub in Nigeria, housing the headquarters of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). NIPR serves as the regulatory body for public relations practices in Nigeria (NIPR, 2008). The state is also reputed for its domiciliation of a huge number of public relations consultancy firms in Nigeria. Being the economic capital of Nigeria, Lagos state is also the home and headquarters of many multi-national as well as mega corporations with organized public relations departments (Public Relations Consultant's Association of Nigeria [PRCAN], 2009). As a cosmopolitan state in Nigeria, Lagos is the state with enormous facilities that support the Internet, which is the bedrock of social media infrastructure.

Data were obtained from interviews conducted with certified PR practitioners who are registered with NIPR. These interviews were carried to determine their uses and gratifications of the social media. Eleven public relations practitioners were selected from the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations Practitioners (NIPR) list. In essence, the interviewees are certified public relations practitioners from different parts of Nigeria, though located in Lagos state, serving diverse public relations functions. The interviews were conducted between August 10, until September 4, 2015.

In view of the above, findings of this study cannot be generalized as they only serve as a basis for understanding the use of social media by public relations practitioners in Nigeria.

## **1.7 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS**

This study is reported in five chapters, each detailing important contexts and mechanisms aimed at answering the research questions and fulfilling the objectives proposed.

- Chapter One provides the background to the study by presenting the research from the uses and gratifications' perspective. It explains the rationale for exploring the study and the essential contributions of the study to professional, practical and theoretical advantage.
- Chapter Two explores what is obtainable in the field of public relations by reviewing some existing literatures on social media usage in public relations practice, from the outset till date. The chapter also gives insights on the origin of public relations in Nigeria, as well as explanation on the theoretical basis of the study.
- Chapter Three explains the methodology adopted by the study. Besides providing discussion on research design and methods for gathering and analyzing the data, the chapter further provides the operationalization of key concepts in the study.
- Chapter Four provides the findings and discussions of the interviews conducted with public relations practitioners in Lagos state, Nigeria. In addition, it presents the results that match key concepts in the study.
- Chapter Five offers the summary of the findings of the study. Being the concluding chapter, it also provides important conclusion reached. In addition, the chapter also documents the practical and professional implications of the study and provides suggestions for future studies.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter entails a discussion on social media usage in public relations. It begins with public relations, its practitioners and functions, the media and public relations, the new media and public relations, and how the social media are influencing public relations. In addition, the chapter provides an overview of Nigeria, where the study is conducted.

The section for public relations, its practitioners and functions details what public relations and public relations practitioners are regarded and perceived as, the way various definitions of public relations attribute different meanings to the profession and the numerous functions it serves. Next is the media and public relations section which shows the relationship between the media and public relations. It explains how the media are central to discharging public relations functions, the different types, and categorization of media as they pertain to public relations. The new media and public relations section gives an insight into the influence of new media on public relations practices; the changes in public relations as a result of the emergence of new media platforms, and the influence of the social media specifically on public relations as a profession. This chapter also provides an overview of public relations development in Nigeria, the country being studied, so as to enlighten us on the status quo of the country. Furthermore, it provides information on the theory being adopted for the study.