Asian Journal of
Science, Technology, Engineering, and Art

e-ISSN: 3025-4507
p-ISSN: 3025-5287
Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/AJSTEA.v3i6.7997

Social Media Utilisation in Institutional Communication: A Conceptual Analysis

Chiakaan Jacob Gbaden & Happiness Dah Robert
Adamawa State University, Mubi, Nigeria; Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria
shem.woyopwa@proton.me

Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Oct 13, 2025	Nov 4, 2025	Nov 16, 2025	Nov 21, 2025

Abstract

Social media has fundamentally transformed institutional communication, reshaping how organisations construct meaning, engage stakeholders, and sustain legitimacy. This conceptual paper examines the utilisation of social media in institutional communication, with particular emphasis on tertiary institutions, by drawing on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (DOI) to integrate audience-centred and innovation-centred perspectives on institutional adoption and user engagement. The analysis argues that social media has disrupted traditional, top-down communication models and enabled participatory, dialogic interactions that foreground transparency, immediacy, and co-creation. It identifies critical conceptual shifts from managerial to relational communication, from episodic to continuous engagement, and from closed to permeable communicative environments, while highlighting the ethical, strategic, and governance implications of these transformations. Particular attention is given to developing contexts such as Nigeria, where uneven institutional digital capacities and regulatory frameworks shape the dynamics of social media use in tertiary institutions. The paper contends that social media now constitutes a core dimension of institutional identity and legitimacy, thereby demanding new theoretical, methodological, and professional

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orientations. It concludes by outlining future research directions, including comparative studies, digital legitimacy assessments, and critical examinations of artificial intelligence in institutional communication, thereby advancing a holistic framework for understanding social media's evolving role in institutional discourse and underscoring the need for adaptive communication theories and practices in a networked public sphere.

Keywords: Social Media; Institutional Communication; Uses and Gratifications Theory; Diffusion of Innovations; Tertiary Institutions; Nigeria

Introduction

In recent years, social media has emerged as a defining force in the evolution of institutional communication. Once considered informal tools for social connection, platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp have now become integral to how organisations communicate, build relationships, and manage their public image (Breakenridge, 2012; Kietzmann et al., 2011). What makes this shift particularly striking is how social media has disrupted traditional top-down communication models, replacing them with interactive, real-time exchanges that connect institutions directly with their stakeholders.

For tertiary institutions, this transformation has been especially profound. Universities, polytechnics, and colleges no longer rely solely on noticeboards, press releases, or newsletters to engage their audiences. Social media platforms now serve as central channels for disseminating information, promoting institutional visibility, and fostering two-way communication with students, staff, alumni, and the broader public (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011). In Nigeria, the rise of social media within higher education has coincided with increased access to mobile internet and smartphones, enabling institutions to communicate with agility and immediacy (Ezeah et al., 2013; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). Yet, the degree of adoption varies widely — some institutions employ social media strategically as part of their public relations and information management systems, while others use it sporadically, often without clear communication policies, measurable objectives, or trained digital personnel.

Institutional communication, at its core, seeks to foster credibility, understanding, and cohesion between organisations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Traditionally, this process was hierarchical: messages flowed from institutional centres of authority to external publics through carefully managed channels. However, social media's participatory nature challenges the long-standing principles of control and gatekeeping that once defined institutional messaging. It compels communication managers to adapt, from disseminating messages to engaging actively, from being custodians of institutional voice to facilitators of dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The new reality demands not only technical skills but also conceptual agility, where immediacy, transparency, and audience feedback shape the rhythm of communication.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the evolving relationship between social media and institutional communication, particularly within tertiary institutions. It seeks to clarify how social media has redefined communication logics, reshaped institutional public relations, and blurred the traditional boundaries between formal and informal discourse.

Theoretical Framework

A conceptual analysis of social media utilisation in institutional communication can be anchored in a combination of complementary communication theories that explain both institutional adoption and audience engagement. Two theories are particularly useful here: Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Diffusion of Innovations Theory (DOI). Together, they offer a dual lens for understanding how institutions employ social media and how publics engage with institutional messages in the digital environment.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, originally developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), provides a user-centred explanation of why individuals actively seek specific media to satisfy particular needs. Unlike early media effects models that viewed audiences as passive recipients, UGT posits that users are purposive and selective — they consume media to meet cognitive, affective, and social integrative needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

In the context of institutional communication, UGT helps explain why target publics such as students, staff, and external stakeholders turn to institutional social media pages. They do so to obtain credible information, maintain a sense of connection, express opinions, and participate in institutional dialogue. Social media's immediacy, interactivity,

and multimedia richness satisfy gratifications that traditional communication channels often cannot provide (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

From the institutional perspective, this means communication officers must understand audience motives and design social media content that aligns with these gratifications. For example, informational posts meet cognitive needs; storytelling and behind-the-scenes content meet affective needs; and polls or comment threads meet social integrative needs. Institutions that recognise these motivations tend to achieve stronger engagement, trust, and retention of attention (Shao, 2009; Park et al., 2009).

In other words, UGT reframes institutional communication from what the organisation wants to say to what the audience wants to experience. It encourages communicators to see social media not as a mere dissemination tool but as a space for reciprocal exchange, where meaning and reputation are co-constructed. This orientation toward user-driven engagement aligns with the dialogic communication principles proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998), reinforcing that effective communication today depends on how well institutions listen, respond, and adapt to audience feedback.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory (DOI)

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory, developed by Everett Rogers (1962; 2003), explains how new ideas, technologies, or practices spread within a social system over time. It identifies five stages in the adoption process: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation, and notes that the rate of adoption depends on factors such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability.

Within institutional communication, DOI offers a framework for understanding how and why tertiary institutions adopt social media platforms as formal communication tools. Some universities and colleges in Nigeria and beyond have fully integrated social media into their communication systems, while others remain hesitant. These variations often reflect organisational culture, leadership commitment, staff digital literacy, and institutional risk perceptions (Asemah, 2011; Mergel, 2013).

Public relations officers play the role of change agents within this process, mediating between institutional traditions and emerging digital realities. Their attitudes toward innovation, as well as their ability to demonstrate social media's relative advantage (speed, reach, interactivity), strongly influence the pace of institutional adoption. Moreover, diffusion theory highlights that adoption is not a one-off decision but an evolving process

shaped by experimentation, policy learning, and audience feedback. For instance, an institution may begin by using X for announcements, later expand to YouTube for visual storytelling, and eventually integrate analytics for evidence-based decision-making.

Importantly, DOI also exposes institutional inequalities in the digital sphere. While elite institutions may have resources for digital strategy and content creation, smaller ones often struggle with infrastructure and staffing. These disparities underscore the need for capacity building and policy alignment if social media is to be fully institutionalised as a credible communication platform in the higher education sector.

From the foregoing, it is evident that UGT and DOI together provide a comprehensive framework for conceptualising social media utilisation in institutional communication. Diffusion theory explains how and why institutions adopt social media, while Uses and Gratifications theory explains how and why audiences engage with that communication once it is in play. One focuses on organisational behaviour, the other on audience psychology.

In practice, these perspectives meet at the intersection of institutional innovation and user participation. Social media platforms create a feedback loop where institutional adoption (DOI) and audience engagement (UGT) continuously shape one another. For example, as students use Instagram to share campus experiences, institutions respond by tailoring content to match that participation, thereby normalising Instagram as a legitimate communication space. Over time, the technology becomes embedded in institutional routines — a process Rogers (2003) calls re-invention.

This integrated theoretical view reinforces that institutional communication is no longer a linear process of transmission but a circular, dialogic ecosystem. The institution and its publics co-produce meaning through iterative interaction. Messages are negotiated, reputations co-authored, and credibility earned through transparency and responsiveness rather than authority alone. Theories like UGT and DOI thus offer conceptual scaffolding for understanding how technological innovation and audience motivation jointly redefine institutional communication in the digital age.

Social Media and the Changing Dynamics of Institutional Communication

The emergence of social media has redefined the landscape of institutional communication in ways that go far beyond technological adoption. It has altered the logic, tone, and rhythm of how institutions construct relationships, negotiate authority, and

sustain public trust. Communication is no longer confined to the realm of carefully crafted press statements or ceremonial speeches; it now unfolds in digital spaces where immediacy and interactivity are the currency of legitimacy. Institutions have had to move from "message control" to "relationship management," embracing a communicative paradigm that is participatory, transparent, and constantly evolving (Breakenridge, 2012; Kent & Taylor, 1998).

In traditional institutional settings, communication tended to be linear and bureaucratic — information flowed from management to staff, from administrators to students, and from institutions to external publics. The model was built on authority, predictability, and formality. Social media disrupted that hierarchy. It flattened organisational communication structures, creating what Castells (2013) describes as a *network society*, a communicative environment where information power shifts toward connected users and distributed publics. In this environment, institutions no longer control the conversation; they participate in it.

From Gatekeeping to Gatewatching

One of the most profound shifts introduced by social media is the erosion of traditional gatekeeping. In the era of mass communication, institutional messages were passed through established filters — spokespersons, press units, and editors of mass media. Today, the boundaries between producer and audience have collapsed. Anyone with a smartphone can share, remix, or critique institutional communication in real time. This phenomenon aligns with Bruns' (2005) concept of *gatewatching*, where audiences no longer wait for information to be mediated but actively monitor, comment, and circulate it themselves.

For institutional communicators, this means the public sphere has become both an opportunity and a vulnerability. On one hand, social media amplifies institutional visibility and allows direct engagement with key publics without relying on traditional media intermediaries (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). On the other hand, it exposes institutions to immediate feedback, misinformation, or public backlash when communication misfires. The balance between responsiveness and reputational risk is therefore delicate. Institutions must communicate with authenticity while maintaining professional discipline and factual integrity.

Dialogic Engagement and Relationship Building

Social media platforms are not merely tools for dissemination but environments for dialogue. Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic communication theory underscores this shift, proposing that organisations should engage publics in conversations characterised by mutuality, openness, and responsiveness. Platforms like X, Instagram, and Facebook exemplify this dialogic potential by allowing institutions to listen, respond, and co-create meaning with their audiences.

For universities, dialogic engagement often takes practical forms: responding to student queries, posting real-time updates about administrative processes, sharing academic achievements, or amplifying student voices. These practices foster relational trust, which is central to institutional credibility (Men & Tsai, 2013). For instance, during crises such as strikes or examination delays, institutions that use social media to provide transparent updates are often perceived as more accountable and empathetic. Conversely, silence or inconsistency in communication tends to erode public confidence and invite speculation.

In Nigeria, this dialogic turn is still evolving. While some universities have adopted social media for branding and engagement, others remain hesitant, fearing loss of control over messaging. Yet evidence suggests that institutions that actively cultivate online dialogue with stakeholders often experience stronger loyalty and more positive brand perception (Ademilokun & Olateju, 2015; Asemah et al., 2017). Thus, the challenge is not whether to use social media but *how* to use it strategically to reinforce institutional reputation and public trust.

Institutional Visibility and Digital Branding

Visibility is another defining dimension of the social media era. Institutions increasingly depend on digital presence to maintain relevance and legitimacy. The idea of *digital branding* has emerged as an extension of institutional identity, where values, culture, and achievements are communicated through carefully curated online personas (Schultz & Peltier, 2013).

For tertiary institutions, this means that a vibrant and authentic social media presence is no longer optional. It shapes how prospective students, parents, and international partners perceive institutional credibility. Posts about research breakthroughs, alumni success, and community engagement contribute to the narrative of institutional

excellence. Similarly, the tone and frequency of social media updates influence perceptions of transparency and openness (Distaso & McCorkindale, 2013).

However, visibility also comes with exposure. A single misinterpreted tweet or insensitive post can trigger reputational crises. As Jin, Liu, and Austin (2014) argue, crisis communication on social media requires agility, empathy, and consistent messaging. Institutions must be prepared to manage both the speed and the volatility of digital discourse. In Nigeria, where public debates around governance, policy, and education are often emotionally charged, the institutional communicator's ability to navigate online controversies with composure is critical.

From Information Control to Participatory Culture

The social media environment also fosters what Jenkins (2006) calls a *participatory culture* — one where audiences contribute to and reshape media content. This has profound implications for institutional communication. Students, alumni, and staff now co-produce institutional narratives through their own social media posts, hashtags, and shared experiences. The institution's image becomes a collective construction rather than a managerial product.

For example, hashtags like #UnilagAt60 or #BUExperience often evolve organically, driven by community pride and shared identity. These participatory campaigns create emotional resonance that official press releases rarely achieve. They also demonstrate that institutional communication is no longer confined to what the administration says; it includes how its publics perform belonging and express affiliation in digital spaces.

The implication here is conceptual as much as practical: communication is becoming decentralised, collaborative, and performative. The institutional communicator's role now involves curating, amplifying, and moderating rather than controlling discourse. As Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) suggest, genuine dialogue requires a willingness to engage publics as partners in meaning-making — even when their perspectives challenge institutional norms.

Algorithmic Mediation and the New Public Sphere

A subtler but equally powerful transformation arises from algorithmic mediation. Social media platforms are not neutral conduits; they are governed by algorithms that determine visibility and engagement. As Gillespie (2018) notes, these "algorithmic

gatekeepers" influence what content publics see, when they see it, and how they interact with it.

For institutions, this creates a paradox. While social media promises direct access to audiences, algorithmic filtering means that only certain types of content — usually emotionally charged or visually engaging, achieve significant reach. This dynamic pressure institutional communicators to adopt more entertainment-driven or sensational formats, sometimes at the expense of academic or policy depth. Over time, the communicative logic of the institution begins to adapt to the attention economy rather than its traditional ethos of deliberation and authority (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

This development raises critical questions about institutional integrity and communicative ethics. Should a university simplify complex academic messages just to "trend"? Should a public institution prioritise engagement metrics over public value? These tensions reflect the broader transformation of the digital public sphere, where institutional legitimacy is increasingly performed through visibility and responsiveness rather than through expertise alone (Etter et al., 2019).

Emerging Norms and Communicative Competence

Finally, the changing dynamics of institutional communication demand new forms of communicative competence. Social media literacy, the ability to understand platform logics, craft contextually sensitive messages, and manage digital relationships, is now a professional imperative (Breakenridge, 2012). Institutions must train communication officers not only in media production but in analytics, crisis management, and ethical digital engagement.

Moreover, policies must evolve. Institutional communication strategies should include clear social media guidelines that balance openness with responsibility. As Fuchs (2017) argues, digital communication ethics must protect both institutional credibility and the democratic values of participation, privacy, and accountability.

For Nigerian tertiary institutions, this implies investing in communication units that are data-informed, policy-aligned, and audience-sensitive. It also means embracing social media as an institutional philosophy, not merely a publicity tool, but a mechanism for dialogue, transparency, and inclusion.

Opportunities and Challenges in Social Media Utilisation for Institutions

The proliferation of social media has generated new communicative possibilities for institutions, while simultaneously presenting complex challenges that demand theoretical and strategic reflection. Institutional communication, historically characterised by hierarchical and one-directional models, now operates within a networked environment defined by immediacy, interactivity, and public scrutiny. Social media platforms have become both a medium and a milieu for institutional engagement, reputation management, and participatory dialogue (Fawkes, 2015; Kent & Taylor, 1998). This section examines the opportunities and challenges that accompany social media utilisation in institutional contexts, with emphasis on their implications for communication strategy and institutional legitimacy.

*Opportuniti*es

1. Enhanced Visibility and Strategic Reach: One of the most significant benefits of social media for institutional communication lies in its capacity to enhance visibility and broaden reach. Digital platforms enable institutions to disseminate information across geographical and socio-economic boundaries with unprecedented speed and scale. Social media, therefore, functions as a cost-effective alternative to traditional mass communication channels, facilitating both global exposure and local engagement. Kietzmann et al. (2011) describe this affordance as "scalable sociality," where institutional narratives can be amplified through networks of connected publics.

In the context of higher education, universities increasingly use platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram to communicate research outputs, promote events, and engage alumni networks. This digital visibility contributes to institutional branding and reputational capital, particularly in developing contexts where media coverage of educational achievements is limited (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). For Nigerian tertiary institutions, strategic use of social media has become instrumental in projecting institutional identity, promoting academic excellence, and countering negative public perceptions. The visibility gained through digital communication has also facilitated international partnerships and student recruitment, aligning institutional communication with global academic competitiveness.

2. Dialogic Engagement and Relationship Management: Social media also enables dialogic communication — a relational process in which institutions and their publics engage in two-way interaction and mutual understanding (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Unlike traditional top-down communication systems, social media encourages feedback, participation, and collaborative meaning-making. Institutions can now listen to stakeholder concerns, respond to criticisms, and co-create messages that reflect shared values and priorities.

This dialogic capacity enhances institutional trust and transparency. For instance, public institutions in Nigeria have used platforms such as X and Facebook to clarify policy issues, respond to misinformation, and engage citizens on matters of governance and accountability. In the education sector, universities use similar platforms to manage student relations, share administrative updates, and address welfare-related concerns. The immediacy of digital dialogue transforms institutional communication from a monologue into a participatory conversation that reinforces legitimacy and responsiveness (Jenkins, 2006; Men & Tsai, 2013).

3. Agility and Crisis Responsiveness: The temporal flexibility afforded by social media allows institutions to respond to crises in real time. Crises — whether reputational, operational, or policy-related — often unfold rapidly in the digital environment, and institutional silence can exacerbate public mistrust. Social media provides the infrastructure for timely response, rumor correction, and controlled dissemination of verified information (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014).

In this regard, the function of social media extends beyond information sharing to reputation repair. As Coombs (2015) notes, effective crisis communication in the digital age requires speed, empathy, and consistency. Institutions that proactively use social media to address stakeholder concerns tend to recover public confidence more rapidly than those that rely exclusively on traditional press mechanisms. This responsiveness reinforces perceptions of accountability and competence, which are central to institutional credibility.

4. Participatory Branding and Institutional Identity: A further opportunity lies in participatory branding, where institutional publics contribute actively to shaping organisational identity online. User-generated content, testimonials, and community engagement initiatives provide authentic expressions of institutional culture that enhance emotional connection and brand loyalty. Jenkins (2006) conceptualises this as participatory

culture — a communicative ecosystem in which audiences do not merely consume messages but also produce and circulate them.

For educational institutions, participatory branding translates into digital storytelling that humanises the institution. Students, staff, and alumni often share experiences that collectively define the institution's image in the public domain. Such collaborative meaning-making aligns institutional communication with the democratic ethos of social media and reinforces the sense of belonging among stakeholders (Distaso & McCorkindale, 2013).

5. Data-Driven Decision Making: Social media also generates valuable data that can guide institutional decision-making. Through analytics tools, communication managers can assess audience engagement, sentiment trends, and message effectiveness. This data-driven approach enables institutions to align communication strategies with audience behaviour and expectations, thereby improving message precision and impact (Waters & Jamal, 2011).

By integrating analytics into communication planning, institutions transition from intuition-based to evidence-based practice. The use of insights derived from social media monitoring supports strategic learning and adaptive management, which are essential for institutional resilience in a dynamic information environment.

Challenges

Despite its transformative potential, social media introduces significant risks and constraints to institutional communication. These challenges are not limited to technical barriers but extend to ethical, managerial, and epistemological concerns that affect credibility and sustainability.

1. Reputational Volatility and Message Control: The participatory nature of social media complicates institutional control over message interpretation and circulation. Content can be reshared, reframed, or misrepresented by users, often beyond the control of institutional communicators. The visibility that enhances reputation can also amplify reputational damage. Coombs (2015) observes that in digital communication environments, reputational crises evolve rapidly and are subject to collective judgment shaped by emotion, ideology, and networked amplification.

In Nigeria, several institutions have experienced online backlash arising from miscommunication or delayed responses to sensitive issues. The ease with which users mobilise collective outrage online underscores the fragility of institutional image in digital

spaces. Thus, social media demands not only proactive engagement but also continuous monitoring and professional oversight to mitigate reputational risks.

2. Misinformation and the Erosion of Trust: The circulation of misinformation and disinformation represents another formidable challenge. False or misleading content can undermine institutional credibility, distort public perception, and trigger crisis situations. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) argue that the viral nature of misinformation on social media often outpaces institutional efforts at correction, thereby deepening public confusion.

For universities and public agencies, the implications are severe, as their legitimacy depends on accuracy and trustworthiness. Institutions must therefore adopt proactive digital literacy initiatives, fact-checking protocols, and transparent messaging systems to maintain public confidence. The failure to manage information integrity on social media can compromise institutional authority in both academic and civic contexts.

3. Algorithmic Bias and Platform Dependency: Social media communication is also mediated by algorithmic structures that privilege certain types of content based on engagement metrics rather than informational value (Gillespie, 2018). These algorithmic biases can inadvertently distort institutional priorities, favouring sensationalism or entertainment over substance. Furthermore, institutional dependence on privately owned platforms exposes communication systems to external vulnerabilities — including policy shifts, data breaches, or platform restrictions, such as the temporary suspension of Twitter operations in Nigeria in 2021.

Such dependency raises questions of digital sovereignty and sustainability. Institutions that rely exclusively on third-party platforms risk losing direct access to their publics when platforms change their rules or become politically contested spaces. Hence, there is a growing need for hybrid communication models that combine institutional websites, mailing systems, and official apps with social media outreach.

4. Capacity Deficits and Resource Constraints: Effective utilisation of social media requires technical expertise, creative strategy, and sustained investment. Many institutions, particularly in developing contexts, lack adequately trained communication personnel or structured social media departments (Asemah, 2011). The result is often inconsistent content management, delayed responses, and fragmented digital presence.

The absence of institutional social media policies further exacerbates these challenges. Without clear guidelines on tone, approval processes, and accountability,

institutional communication becomes vulnerable to errors and unprofessional conduct. As Men and Tsai (2013) emphasise, digital communication competence is now a prerequisite for organisational legitimacy in the networked public sphere.

5 Ethical and Policy Dilemmas: Finally, social media utilisation raises ethical questions regarding privacy, consent, and institutional neutrality. The boundary between transparency and confidentiality remains ambiguous, especially in contexts where institutions manage sensitive or political information. Posting images or personal data without consent, deleting critical comments, or engaging in partisan communication can damage institutional integrity (Fuchs, 2017).

Therefore, institutions must develop comprehensive social media policies that integrate ethical principles, legal compliance, and risk management. Ethical social media governance ensures that communication practices reflect institutional values while protecting both organisational and stakeholder interests.

Conceptual Implications and Future Directions

The conceptual analysis of social media utilisation in institutional communication reveals a fundamental reconfiguration of organisational discourse, legitimacy, and stakeholder engagement. Social media is no longer a peripheral communication tool but a constitutive element of institutional identity and governance. The implications of this transformation extend across theoretical, methodological, and practical domains, requiring a reframing of how institutional communication is studied, managed, and theorised in the digital age.

Theoretical Implications

The integration of social media into institutional communication necessitates a reconceptualisation of traditional communication theories. Classical models such as Shannon and Weaver's (1949) transmission model, which emphasised linearity and control, are increasingly inadequate in explaining the interactive, participatory, and decentralised nature of digital communication. Instead, theories that foreground dialogue, networks, and audience agency — notably the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (DOI) — provide more appropriate frameworks for interpreting the dynamics of social media utilisation (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rogers, 2003).

Within the UGT framework, social media transforms institutional audiences from passive receivers to active co-creators of meaning. Institutional publics now seek information not only to be informed but also to connect, express identity, and participate in institutional discourse. This participatory orientation redefines institutional credibility as a product of sustained interaction rather than mere information dissemination. From the DOI perspective, social media adoption reflects institutional adaptability and innovation culture. Institutions that adopt digital communication early often signal openness, progressiveness, and responsiveness, traits that enhance public legitimacy in a rapidly evolving communication environment.

Moreover, the convergence of these theories highlights a dual process: the diffusion of social media technologies within institutional structures, and the gratification-driven interaction between institutions and their publics. This convergence underlines the relational logic of institutional communication, where technological affordances and human motivations intersect to shape communicative outcomes. Future theoretical work must therefore move beyond adoption studies to explore how social media reconstitutes institutional power relations, transparency, and the co-production of meaning.

Conceptual Shifts in Institutional Communication

The digital turn has redefined the conceptual boundaries of institutional communication. Historically, institutional communication was conceived as an extension of organisational management, a mechanism for information control, persuasion, and image maintenance (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Social media, however, disrupts this managerial logic by introducing what Castells (2009) describes as "networked interactivity," where communication becomes both distributed and dialogic.

Conceptual shifts emerge from this transformation.

First, institutional communication has evolved from being predominantly *managerial* to becoming *relational*. The emphasis has shifted from controlling messages to cultivating dialogue and trust. Social media enables institutions to engage in continuous conversation with their publics, fostering co-ownership of meaning and mutual accountability (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Second, communication has moved from being *episodic* to *continuous*. Institutional visibility is now sustained through ongoing digital presence and real-time engagement rather than sporadic press releases or annual reports. This temporal shift necessitates

continuous monitoring, content creation, and responsiveness — tasks that demand both technological competence and strategic foresight.

Third, the communicative environment has transitioned from *closed* to *permeable*. The boundaries between internal and external communication have become porous, as employees, students, and other stakeholders participate in shaping institutional narratives through their digital interactions. This permeability challenges the notion of a singular institutional voice and introduces multiplicity, diversity, and sometimes, conflict into the communication process (Fawkes, 2015).

These shifts imply that institutional communication in the social media age is inherently dialogical, fluid, and co-constructed. It demands conceptual models that account for interactivity, transparency, and shared agency — qualities that traditional communication frameworks rarely accommodate.

Methodological and Strategic Implications

The conceptual reorientation toward interactive communication necessitates corresponding methodological innovations. Scholars and practitioners must integrate digital ethnography, sentiment analysis, and network mapping into the study of institutional communication. These approaches can illuminate how institutional narratives circulate within digital networks and how publics interpret, remix, or resist official messages.

From a strategic perspective, institutions must embed social media within formal communication planning rather than treating it as an auxiliary publicity function. This requires dedicated social media units, policy frameworks, and capacity-building initiatives that enhance digital competence among communication professionals. In the Nigerian context, where institutional communication structures often remain bureaucratic, there is a need for leadership commitment to digital transformation. Such commitment should prioritise resource allocation, staff training, and the institutionalisation of ethical standards for online engagement.

Additionally, the reliance on third-party social media platforms underscores the importance of digital sovereignty. Institutions should explore hybrid communication infrastructures, combining institutional websites, databases, and mobile applications with social media channels, to ensure autonomy, data security, and continuity in the event of platform disruptions. This diversification aligns with best practices in communication resilience and risk management (Gillespie, 2018).

Ethical and Governance Implications

Social media's participatory logic raises profound ethical questions concerning privacy, representation, and institutional accountability. Unlike traditional communication channels, social media blurs the boundary between official and personal expression. Institutional representatives, whether consciously or inadvertently, act as public communicators whose digital conduct reflects organisational identity. The absence of clear ethical guidelines or governance frameworks often leads to inconsistencies and reputational vulnerabilities.

Fuchs (2017) cautions that while social media promotes openness, it can also reinforce surveillance and exploitation if not ethically managed. Institutions must therefore develop normative frameworks that balance transparency with confidentiality, freedom of expression with professionalism, and engagement with responsibility. These frameworks should address issues such as content ownership, audience data usage, consent, and moderation practices.

Moreover, ethical governance must extend to algorithmic accountability. As platforms increasingly mediate visibility and engagement through algorithmic curation, institutions have a moral responsibility to ensure that their communication strategies do not exploit or manipulate audiences. Transparent communication and respect for digital rights are central to sustaining institutional legitimacy in a data-driven society.

Conclusion

In sum, social media has transformed institutional communication from a controlled, hierarchical practice into a participatory and dialogic process embedded within networked publics. The theoretical and practical implications of this transformation are far-reaching. Institutions now operate in a communicative ecosystem where authority is negotiated, transparency is expected, and legitimacy is continuously performed through interaction.

To remain credible and relevant, institutions must not only adopt social media technologies but also internalise the communicative ethos they represent — openness, responsiveness, and accountability. Future conceptual work must therefore continue to interrogate the intersection of technology, communication, and institutional power, ensuring that theory evolves in tandem with the realities of digital society

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