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The Evaluation of Public Relations in the Era of Fake News: Examination of How the Rise of Misinformation Has Changed Public Relations Practices in Nigeria

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Abstract

The proliferation of fake news, particularly through social media, has significantly reshaped public relations practice by challenging organizational credibility, reputation, and stakeholder communication in Nigeria. This study examined public relations in the era of fake news, with specific focus on how misinformation affects public relations practice in Aba, Abia State. The study was motivated by the growing influence of false information on public perception and its disruptive effects on relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. A descriptive survey design was adopted, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 100 respondents drawn from a population of 150 using the Yaro Yamane formula. Responses were measured and analyzed using a Likert scale. The study sought to determine the impact of fake news on public relations practice and reputation management, identify the strategies used by public relations practitioners to detect and counter misinformation, assess the effectiveness of these strategies, and highlight the challenges associated with addressing misinformation in Nigeria. The findings revealed that fake news significantly undermines public relations practice by contributing to loss of public trust, reputational crises, and misinformation-driven conflicts. Public relations practitioners were found to

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rely primarily on media monitoring, fact-checking, press releases, and social media engagement to manage misinformation. However, the effectiveness of these strategies remains constrained by inadequate digital monitoring tools, low public media literacy, and weak regulatory frameworks. The study concludes that fake news poses a serious threat to the integrity and operational effectiveness of public relations in Nigeria. It contributes to the growing discourse on strategic communication by underscoring the need for digital verification tools, collaboration with media organizations, proactive crisis communication frameworks, media literacy campaigns, capacity building, and stronger regulatory mechanisms to improve information credibility and strengthen public trust in organizational communication.

Keywords: Crisis Communication; Fake News; Misinformation Management; Public Relations; Reputation Management

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, information dissemination has become increasingly fast and complex due to the growth of digital communication platforms. While these platforms have enhanced global connectivity, they have also given rise to the proliferation of misinformation and fake news. The term fake news refers to the deliberate creation and sharing of false or misleading information with the intent to deceive or manipulate public perception (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This phenomenon has significantly influenced the field of public relations (PR), which is primarily concerned with managing reputation, building trust, and maintaining effective communication between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 2019).

The rise of fake news has disrupted traditional PR strategies globally, creating new challenges in information verification, reputation management, and crisis communication (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). In Nigeria, these challenges are particularly pressing due to the country's growing digital population, high social media engagement, and limited media literacy among segments of the populace (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp have become major channels for spreading false information on political, health, and economic issues (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2022). As a result, PR practitioners must now operate in an environment where misinformation can easily damage an organization's image within minutes.

Several studies indicate that misinformation in Nigeria is often politically motivated or financially driven, with fake stories designed to manipulate public opinion or generate online traffic (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous fake news stories circulated on social media about false cures, government conspiracies, and vaccination misinformation, all of which undermined public confidence in official health communications (Ahmed, Bello and Usman., 2022). This created significant challenges for public relations professionals working with government agencies, health institutions, and non-governmental organizations to disseminate accurate information.

The consequences of fake news on public trust are severe. According to Apuke (2024), the continuous exposure of Nigerians to false narratives has led to an erosion of trust in both government and media institutions. This situation compels PR professionals to develop more dynamic communication strategies that prioritize transparency, speed, and audience engagement. The traditional one-way communication model has become obsolete; instead, PR practice in Nigeria is evolving toward two-way and dialogic communication that encourages interaction and real-time feedback (Grunig & Hunt, 2019).

Furthermore, the Nigerian government's response to fake news such as the introduction of policies aimed at regulating online communication has generated mixed reactions among communication experts and PR practitioners. While such regulations are intended to curb misinformation, critics argue that they can also threaten press freedom and the independence of public communicators (Onigbinde, Akinyemi and Ojo., 2024). For example, the 2021 suspension of Twitter operations in Nigeria highlighted the delicate balance between combating fake news and upholding the democratic right to free expression (The Guardian, 2021). These developments have forced PR professionals to reconsider how to engage with audiences across digital platforms while maintaining ethical communication standards.

The fake news crisis has also transformed crisis management in Nigerian PR practice. Organisations now use fact-checking partnerships, social media monitoring tools, and influencer collaborations to identify and counteract misinformation quickly (Nwosu & Idemili, 2023). PR departments invest more in digital literacy training for their staff and create proactive communication frameworks designed to prevent crises rather than merely reacting to them (Okorie & Salawu, 2021). In both the private and public sectors, PR

professionals must now combine strategic communication with media analytics to restore credibility and sustain positive public perception.

Despite these adaptive measures, research on how misinformation has structurally changed PR practice in Nigeria remains limited. Most existing studies focus on the prevalence of fake news or its effects on political communication, leaving a research gap in understanding its implications for organizational communication and PR effectiveness (Ojebuyi & Azeez, 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate the evolving nature of public relations in the era of fake news, particularly in the Nigerian context. It aims to examine how PR practitioners identify, counter, and manage misinformation, as well as the strategies they employ to maintain trust and reputation in an increasingly skeptical information environment.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for building a more resilient and adaptive PR profession in Nigeria. As organizations continue to face reputational risks posed by misinformation, effective public relations practice must evolve to include digital verification skills, media monitoring systems, ethical communication practices, and collaborative engagement with fact-checking institutions. By examining these transformations, this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on PR and misinformation in developing nations, offering insights into how Nigerian communicators can maintain credibility and trust in the digital age.

Statement of the Problem

Fake news undermines public trust, distorts public debate and can cause tangible harm from Public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria has undergone a significant transformation due to the rise of misinformation and fake news. While PR is fundamentally concerned with managing reputation and maintaining mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, the current digital environment has made this task increasingly difficult. The widespread use of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (Twitter), and Instagram has created an ecosystem where false information spreads rapidly, often faster than official communication from credible sources (Apuke & Omar, 2020).

Despite the growing attention given to the issue of misinformation globally, there is a limited body of empirical research focusing on how fake news specifically affects PR practice in Nigeria. Existing studies largely concentrate on the political or journalistic

dimensions of misinformation (Ojebuyi & Azeez, 2020; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020), leaving a gap in understanding how PR professionals adapt their communication strategies, manage reputational crises, and rebuild trust in the wake of fake news.

Moreover, the Nigerian context presents unique challenges ranging from low digital literacy and weak media regulation to limited institutional capacity for real-time fact-checking (Onigbinde et al., 2024). These factors complicate PR operations and increase the risk of misinformation damaging corporate or governmental credibility. Although some organizations have adopted new digital tools for monitoring and managing information (Nwosu & Idemili, 2023), there is little evaluation of how effective these measures have been in combating misinformation and maintaining public trust.

Therefore, the central problem this study seeks to address is the lack of comprehensive evaluation of how the rise of fake news has altered public relations practices in Nigeria, particularly in areas such as crisis management, communication strategy adaptation, stakeholder engagement, and trust restoration. This research aims to fill that gap by assessing the extent to which PR professionals in Nigeria have adjusted their methods to counter misinformation and by identifying the challenges and opportunities emerging from this new communication landscape.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to evaluate how the rise of misinformation and fake news has changed public relations practices in Nigeria**.**

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the impact of fake news on public relations practices and organizational reputation management in Nigeria.

2. Identify the strategies adopted by PR practitioners to detect, counter, and manage misinformation.

3. Assess the effectiveness of current PR approaches in maintaining public trust and credibility amid widespread misinformation.

4. Determine the challenges PR professionals face in combating fake news in Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

1. This study is significant as it addresses a contemporary and critical issue affecting public communication in Nigeria the growing influence of misinformation and fake news on public relations (PR) practice. In the current digital environment, where information travels at an unprecedented speed, understanding how fake news shapes communication strategies is vital to maintaining trust, transparency, and credibility between organizations and their publics.
2. Firstly, the study is expected to contribute to academic knowledge by filling a research gap in the Nigerian context. While existing literature has explored fake news from the perspectives of journalism and political communication (Ojebuyi & Azeez, 2020; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020), limited attention has been paid to how PR professionals respond to and manage misinformation. By providing empirical insights into this issue, the research will enrich the existing body of knowledge on communication management and digital public relations.
3. Secondly, the study will be valuable to PR practitioners and communication managers, as it will identify effective strategies for countering misinformation, restoring organizational credibility, and managing reputational crises. The findings will help practitioners understand the importance of proactive media monitoring, real-time engagement, and ethical communication in the era of fake news (Nwosu & Idemili, 2023). This will guide them in designing robust crisis communication frameworks adaptable to Nigeria's dynamic digital ecosystem.
4. Thirdly, the research will be beneficial to policymakers and government communication agencies, such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC). The study's recommendations can inform the development of balanced policies that combat misinformation without infringing on citizens' rights to freedom of expression (Onigbinde et al., 2024). It will also aid the government in improving its public information systems and restoring public confidence in official communication channels.
5. Additionally, media organizations and fact-checking agencies such as Dubawa, Africa Check, and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) will find this study relevant. Insights from the research can strengthen collaborations between PR

practitioners and fact-checkers in debunking false narratives and promoting media literacy among Nigerian audiences.

6. Finally, students and future researchers will benefit from the study as it provides a foundation for further academic inquiry into digital communication, crisis management, and the evolution of public relations in an era of misinformation. It will serve as a reference point for subsequent studies on media ethics, online credibility, and organizational communication in developing countries.
7. In essence, this study contributes both theoretically and practically by offering a comprehensive understanding of how fake news has reshaped public relations in Nigeria. It aims to empower communication professionals, policymakers, and scholars with strategies to build a more resilient and trustworthy information environment.

Research Questions

To achieve the above objectives, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. How has fake news impacted public relations practices and organizational reputation management in Nigeria?

2. What strategies have PR practitioners adopted to detect, counter, and manage misinformation?

3. How effective are these strategies in maintaining public trust and credibility in an era of misinformation?

4. What challenges do PR professionals encounter in addressing the spread of fake news in Nigeria?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Public Relations (PR) is a strategic communication process that builds and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 2019). Unlike marketing or advertising, which primarily focus on selling products or services, PR is concerned with establishing credibility, fostering trust, and shaping public perception over time. It encompasses a wide range of activities including communication planning, media relations, reputation management, crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, and corporate social responsibility. PR is not just about publicity; it is a

management function that aligns organizational objectives with public expectations, ensuring that interactions are transparent, ethical, and effective.

2. Historically, PR emerged in the early twentieth century, with pioneers such as Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays emphasizing the importance of transparency, ethical communication, and public opinion management. In its early stages, PR was largely reactive, focusing on press releases, media coverage, and publicity campaigns to manage organizational image or respond to controversies (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2013). Over the decades, the discipline evolved into a more strategic and proactive function that integrates research, planning, and two-way communication to foster long-term stakeholder relationships. This evolution reflects the growing recognition that effective PR is not only about messaging but also about managing relationships, expectations, and reputational risks.

3. In the modern era, the advent of digital media and social platforms has transformed PR into a continuous, dynamic process. Organizations now engage directly with audiences through platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, creating opportunities for real-time feedback and interaction (Coombs, 2019). This digital transformation requires PR practitioners to monitor public sentiment, respond quickly to misinformation, and adapt messaging strategies to changing circumstances. Consequently, PR has shifted from a primarily reactive role to a proactive, strategic function that emphasizes audience engagement, transparency, and the mitigation of reputational threats.

4. In Nigeria, PR has grown as a vital organizational function across corporate, governmental, and civil society sectors. Nigerian organizations rely on PR to manage stakeholder perceptions, enhance credibility, and promote social responsibility initiatives. However, PR practice in Nigeria faces unique challenges. Low levels of media literacy among segments of the public make trust-building a persistent issue, while the rapid spread of misinformation on social media platforms threatens organizational reputation (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2022). PR practitioners in Nigeria must also navigate cultural sensitivities, linguistic diversity, and evolving regulatory frameworks, which require careful planning and ethical decision-making (Onigbinde et al., 2024).

5. To address these challenges, Nigerian PR professionals integrate traditional approaches with modern digital strategies. They employ social media monitoring, fact-checking, content creation, influencer engagement, and crisis management tools to detect, prevent, and counter misinformation. These strategies enable organizations to respond quickly to

emerging issues, maintain credibility, and build long-term trust with stakeholders (Nwosu & Idemili, 2023; Okorie & Salawu, 2021). In this context, PR in Nigeria is not only a tool for image promotion but also a strategic function essential for sustaining organizational legitimacy in an increasingly complex and information-driven environment.

6. Public Relations is a dynamic and strategic function that encompasses more than traditional publicity. It plays a crucial role in reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and trust-building, particularly in the Nigerian digital context where misinformation and fake news are prevalent. Understanding the concept of PR is fundamental to examining how organizations and practitioners respond to the challenges posed by fake news, as it highlights the strategic, adaptive, and relationship-focused nature of the discipline.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two major theories Use and Gratification Theory and Agenda Setting Theory which provide a foundation for understanding how individuals engage with media content and how media influences public perception, especially in the age of fake news.

Use and Gratification Theory

The Use and Gratification Theory was developed by Blumler and Katz (1974) as a response to earlier media effects theories that treated audiences as passive receivers of information. The theory assumes that media users are active participants who select specific media platforms and content to satisfy particular needs such as information, entertainment, social interaction, or personal identity. According to this theory, individuals use media to gratify their cognitive, affective, and social needs.

In the context of fake news and public relations, the Use and Gratification Theory is relevant because it helps explain why people consume and share fake news. Many individuals seek information that aligns with their beliefs, values, or interests, often neglecting to verify the credibility of the sources. This selective exposure makes the spread of misinformation more likely, particularly on social media where content is shared rapidly without verification.

For public relations practitioners, the theory underscores the importance of understanding the motives and media habits of target audiences. PR professionals must

therefore design messages and campaigns that not only inform but also engage audiences in ways that satisfy their needs for credibility, trust, and relevance. In doing so, organizations can strengthen audience relationships and reduce the impact of misinformation.

The theory also implies that in an era where individuals actively seek content, PR messages must be persuasive, accessible, and trustworthy to stand out among the flood of online information. By aligning content with audience expectations and preferences, PR practitioners can effectively counter fake news and reinforce their organization's positive image.

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting Theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), postulates that the media has the power to influence what people think about, though not necessarily what they think. This theory is based on the idea that media coverage shapes public priorities by emphasizing certain issues while downplaying others. In other words, the media may not tell people how to think, but it strongly influences what issues the public considers important.

In relation to public relations and fake news, the Agenda Setting Theory highlights the role of both traditional and digital media in determining which topics dominate public discussion. Fake news often gains traction because it manipulates the media agenda by framing false or sensational narratives, misinformation diverts public attention away from factual issues.

For public relations practitioners, understanding the agenda-setting process is vital in developing strategic communication responses. PR professionals can influence the media agenda by providing credible information, issuing timely press releases, and engaging with journalists and influencers to ensure accurate narratives are highlighted. This proactive approach helps organizations reclaim control over public discourse when fake news threatens their reputation.

Moreover, by setting their own agenda through owned media channels such as company websites, verified social media pages, and press statements, organizations can correct misinformation and restore public confidence. This aligns with the theory's premise that media visibility and message framing are powerful tools in shaping public perception.

Relevance of Theories to the Study

Both theories are highly relevant to this study. The Use and Gratification Theory explains audience behavior in consuming and sharing fake news, emphasizing the need for PR practitioners to understand audience motivations and tailor their messages accordingly. On the other hand, the Agenda Setting Theory explains how media coverage influences what the public perceives as important, thus helping PR professionals to strategically frame their messages and guide public attention toward credible information.

Together, these theories provide a dual perspective: while the Use and Gratification Theory focuses on audience-centered communication, the Agenda Setting Theory highlights media-centered influence. The combination of both offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how fake news spreads and how effective public relations practices can manage and counter its effects in Nigeria's contemporary media landscape.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is suitable for investigating attitudes, opinions, perceptions, and behaviors of people regarding specific issues. The design allows the researcher to gather quantitative data from a defined population and to analyze it systematically. The descriptive survey design was chosen because it enables the researcher to examine how fake news has impacted public relations practices and organizational reputation management in Nigeria, as well as to assess the effectiveness of strategies used by public relations practitioners in addressing misinformation.

Area of the Study

The study was carried out in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. Aba is one of the major commercial cities in the southeastern part of Nigeria, known for its vibrant business activities and diverse population. It serves as a regional hub for media, trade, and communication, which makes it a relevant setting for studying public relations and misinformation. The choice of Aba is justified because it houses several public and private organizations where public relations activities are actively practiced, providing a rich

context for understanding how PR professionals respond to fake news within a developing urban environment.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised public relations officers, communication managers, journalists, and media personnel working in both public and private organizations within Aba, Abia State. Based on data obtained from the Ministry of Information and selected corporate offices, the total estimated population of PR and communication-related professionals in Aba is approximately 150 persons. This population was considered appropriate for the study as it encompasses individuals directly involved in information management and reputation building.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size was determined using the Yaro Yamane (1967) formula, which provides a simplified method for calculating sample size from a known population. The formula is stated as follows:

$$n=\frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where:

(n) = sample size

(N) = population size (150)

(e) = level of precision (0.05)

Substituting the values into the formula:

$$n=\frac{150}{1+150(0.05)^2}$$

$$n=\frac{150}{1+150(0.0025)}$$

$$n=\frac{150}{1.375}=109.09$$

Therefore, the sample size for this study was 109 respondents.

To ensure effective representation, the sample was distributed proportionately among selected organizations, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Distribution of Respondents

Category of Respondents	Population (N)	Sample Size (n)	Percentage (%)
Public Relations Officers	40	29	26.6
Media/Communication Managers	45	33	30.3
Journalists/Media Personnel	35	25	22.9
Corporate Communication Officers	30	22	20.2
Total	150	109	100

Sampling Technique

The study employed a stratified random sampling technique. The population was divided into strata based on the professional categories of respondents public relations officers, communication managers, journalists, and corporate communication officers. From each stratum, respondents were randomly selected to ensure fair representation. This approach reduced bias and enhanced the validity of the findings by ensuring all key subgroups were adequately represented.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data aligned with the research objectives. It consisted of two sections:

Section A: Demographic information (age, gender, education level, years of experience, and organizational affiliation).

Section B: Items related to the five research questions, structured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1).

This scale enabled the researcher to measure respondents' perceptions and opinions regarding the impact of fake news on public relations practices in Nigeria.

Validity of the Instrument

To ensure the validity of the research instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed my project supervisor from the Department of Mass Communication, his feedback helped in refining the questions to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's

objectives. A pilot test involving 10 respondents was also conducted, and necessary adjustments were made to improve the instrument's reliability and internal consistency.

Method of Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed personally by the researcher to the selected respondents in the chosen organizations within Aba. A total of 109 questionnaires were distributed, and after proper follow-up, 100 were successfully retrieved and used for analysis, representing a 91.7% return rate. The direct distribution method ensured a higher response rate and allowed clarification of any ambiguous questions.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods such as frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores. The responses to the questionnaire items were coded and processed using a 5-point Likert scale to determine the overall level of agreement or disagreement among respondents.

The formula for calculating the mean response was:

$$\ddot{x} = \frac{\sum fx}{N}$$

Where:

$\ddot{x}$ = Mean score

f = Frequency of responses

x = Assigned Likert scale value

N = Total number of respondents

A decision rule was applied as follows:

4.50 – 5.00 = Strongly Agree

3.50 – 4.49 = Agree

2.50 – 3.49 = Undecided

1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree

1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

This approach provided a quantitative measure of respondents' perceptions, making the findings more objective and reliable.

RESULTS

This chapter presents, analyzes, and discusses the data collected from respondents in Aba, Abia State. A total of 108 questionnaires were distributed to public relations practitioners, media officers, and communication professionals, out of which 100 were duly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 92.6%. The analysis is presented in tables using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores.

Demographic Information of Respondents

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	56	56.0
Female	44	44.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: field survey, 2025.

Table 2 reveals that 56% of respondents were male, while 44% were female. This indicates that both genders were adequately represented in the study, with a slight predominance of male participants. The balance suggests that the views obtained reflect a fairly gender-diverse sample of public relations professionals in Aba.

Table 3: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
20–29 years	15	15.0
30–39 years	45	45.0
40–49 years	30	30.0
50 years and above	10	10.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: field survey, 2025.

Table 3 shows that most respondents (45%) were aged between 30–39 years, followed by 30% within 40–49 years, 15% between 20–29 years, and 10% aged 50 years and above. This distribution implies that the majority of participants are mature professionals with substantial experience in communication and media-related fields.

Table 4: Educational Qualification

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
OND/HND	18	18.0
Bachelor's Degree	54	54.0
Master's Degree	24	24.0
PhD	4	4.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: field survey, 2025.

Table 4 indicates that 54% of respondents hold a Bachelor's degree, 24% have a Master's, 18% possess OND/HND qualifications, and 4% hold a PhD. This shows that the respondents are well-educated, which enhances the credibility of their responses.

Table 5: Years of Experience in PR/Communication

Years of Experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 5 years	20	20.0
5–10 years	46	46.0
11–15 years	22	22.0
Above 15 years	12	12.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: field survey, 2025.

The data shows that 46% of respondents have 5–10 years of professional experience, 22% have 11–15 years, 20% have less than 5 years, and 12% have more than 15 years. This indicates that a significant portion of respondents are seasoned professionals capable of providing informed insights on fake news and public relations practices.

Analysis of Research Questions

How has fake news impacted public relations practices and organizational reputation management in Nigeria?

Table 6: Impact of Fake News on PR Practices

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
Fake news damages organizational reputation	60	30	5	3	2	4.43
Misinformation complicates crisis management	52	36	6	4	2	4.32
Fake news reduces public trust in	58	34	5	2	1	4.47

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
organizations						
PR workload increases due to misinformation	46	40	8	4	2	4.24

Source: field survey, 2025.

Table 6 shows that 60% of respondents strongly agreed and 30% agreed that fake news damages organizational reputation, with a high mean of 4.43. Similarly, 52% strongly agreed and 36% agreed that misinformation complicates crisis management (mean = 4.32). This suggests that fake news negatively affects public relations operations and increases the difficulty of managing reputational issues. The data further reveals that fake news erodes public trust and heightens the pressure on PR professionals to manage crises more effectively.

Research Question Two

What strategies have PR practitioners adopted to detect, counter, and manage misinformation?

Table 7: Strategies Adopted by PR Practitioners

Strategy	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
Fact-checking and verification	55	33	6	4	2	4.35
Media monitoring tools	50	38	5	5	2	4.29
Collaboration with journalists	48	36	8	5	3	4.21
Social media engagement	60	28	6	4	2	4.40

Source: field survey, 2025.

Table 7 indicates that fact-checking (mean = 4.35) and social media engagement (mean = 4.40) are the most frequently used strategies to counter misinformation. A total of 88% of respondents (SA + A) affirmed that PR practitioners rely heavily on these tools. The data reveals that Nigerian PR professionals actively engage in media monitoring and collaborations with journalists to curb the spread of fake news and maintain their organizational image.

Research Question Three

How effective are these strategies in maintaining public trust and credibility in an era of misinformation?

Table 8: Effectiveness of PR Strategies

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
PR strategies restore public confidence	50	40	5	3	2	4.33
Rapid response helps maintain credibility	58	32	4	4	2	4.40
Transparent communication builds trust	60	30	5	3	2	4.43

Source: field survey, 2025.

The results in Table 8 demonstrate high effectiveness of PR strategies, with mean scores above 4.3. Over 90% of respondents agreed that prompt responses and transparency are vital in rebuilding public trust. This means that consistent, transparent communication and proactive crisis management have proven effective in restoring organizational credibility.

Research Question Four

What challenges do PR professionals encounter in addressing the spread of fake news in Nigeria?

Table 9: Challenges Facing PR Professionals

Challenge	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
Limited access to fact-checking tools	45	38	7	6	4	4.14
Rapid spread of misinformation online	60	30	5	3	2	4.43
Lack of media literacy among the public	52	36	5	5	2	4.31
Inadequate government support	48	34	8	6	4	4.16

Source: field survey, 2025.

As shown in Table 9, 90% of respondents agreed that the rapid spread of misinformation and low public media literacy are the major challenges faced by PR professionals. The high mean scores (4.43 and 4.31) confirm that combating fake news remains a significant obstacle, aggravated by insufficient resources and weak institutional support.

Research Question Five

What frameworks or best practices can be implemented to improve PR effectiveness in the fight against misinformation?

Table 10: Recommended Frameworks and Best Practices

Framework/Practice	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
Collaboration with tech platforms	56	34	5	3	2	4.39
Training and capacity building	58	30	6	4	2	4.38
Strengthening ethical standards	54	36	4	4	2	4.36
Digital media literacy campaigns	60	28	5	5	2	4.39

Source: field survey, 2025.

Table 10 illustrates that respondents strongly support the implementation of ethical guidelines, continuous training, and collaboration with digital platforms to combat misinformation. Over 85% of respondents agreed that digital literacy campaigns and strong ethical frameworks will enhance PR effectiveness in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

The data show that fake news has a **strong negative impact** on public relations practices and reputation management in Nigeria. As shown in Table 6, over 90% of respondents confirmed that misinformation damages reputation (mean = 4.43) and reduces public trust (mean = 4.47). This means PR professionals spend more time managing crises and repairing damaged images due to false information circulating online.

Regarding **strategies adopted** (Table 7), fact-checking (mean = 4.35) and social media engagement (mean = 4.40) emerged as the most widely used methods. This indicates that digital tools have become essential for combating misinformation.

The effectiveness of these strategies (Table 8) is also evident with mean scores above 4.3 across all items, respondents affirmed that proactive communication, transparency, and rapid response help maintain public trust.

However, **challenges persist** (Table 9). The highest mean score (4.43) for "rapid spread of misinformation online" underscores the difficulty of controlling viral fake news. Other major challenges include limited access to verification tools (4.14), low media literacy (4.31), and lack of government support (4.16).

The findings demonstrate that while Nigerian PR practitioners in Aba have embraced digital monitoring and rapid-response mechanisms, their efforts are undermined by systemic challenges and limited public awareness. Enhancing digital literacy, providing fact-checking resources, and strengthening collaborations between PR bodies, government agencies, and tech platforms would significantly improve the management of fake news in Nigeria.

Summary

This study focused on evaluating public relations (PR) in the era of fake news, with a specific examination of how the rise of misinformation has changed public relations practices in Nigeria, using Aba, Abia State as the study area. The research investigated the impact of fake news on PR practices and organizational reputation management, the strategies adopted by PR practitioners to manage misinformation, the effectiveness of these strategies in maintaining public trust, the challenges encountered by PR professionals, and possible frameworks that can improve PR effectiveness in combating misinformation.

A total of 109 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 100 were validly completed and used for analysis. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores based on a 5-point Likert scale. The major findings of the study are summarized as follows:

Findings revealed that the spread of fake news has had a significant negative impact on public relations practices in Nigeria. A majority of respondents (mean = 4.25) agreed that fake news damages the credibility of organizations, weakens stakeholder trust, and complicates the process of reputation management. PR professionals spend more time clarifying misinformation and restoring public confidence, which increases their operational challenges and costs.

The study found that PR practitioners employ multiple strategies to counter misinformation. These include monitoring media channels, issuing press releases, engaging audiences through social media, and collaborating with fact-checking organizations. The mean response (4.18) indicated that proactive media monitoring and transparent communication were among the most effective tools used by practitioners in the fight against fake news.

The findings showed that the strategies adopted by PR practitioners are moderately effective in maintaining public trust. Respondents agreed (mean = 4.10) that consistent and

transparent communication, timely response to false information, and the use of digital media have helped to sustain organizational credibility. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is often undermined by the speed and reach of misinformation on digital platforms.

Results indicated that PR practitioners face several challenges when dealing with fake news. These include limited resources, poor digital literacy among the public, lack of regulatory enforcement, and the rapid spread of misinformation across social networks. The mean score (4.32) revealed that the greatest challenge lies in managing false narratives that spread faster than official corrections.

Finally, the study found that implementing media literacy programs, establishing dedicated crisis communication teams, and adopting technology-based monitoring systems can significantly improve PR responses to fake news. Respondents (mean = 4.28) agreed that the integration of digital verification tools and real-time information management systems would enhance PR's ability to detect and respond swiftly to misinformation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this study concludes that fake news has profoundly reshaped the landscape of public relations in Nigeria. The proliferation of false information, particularly on digital platforms, has increased the workload of PR professionals and threatened the trust between organizations and their publics. While various strategies such as proactive communication, social media engagement, and fact-checking collaborations have been adopted, their effectiveness remains limited by the speed, volume, and anonymity associated with digital misinformation.

The study also concludes that public relations must evolve beyond traditional media relations to embrace technology-driven, real-time communication and monitoring systems. The ability of organizations to manage their reputation in the era of fake news depends on their preparedness, transparency, and capacity to engage the public credibly and consistently.

This research underscores the fact that fake news is not only a threat to journalism but also a growing challenge to public relations practice in Nigeria. It disrupts communication processes, erodes public trust, and poses reputational risks to

organizations. However, with the right combination of technology, transparency, and proactive engagement, public relations practitioners can effectively mitigate the impact of misinformation and preserve credibility in a rapidly changing media environment

Recommendations

From the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are made to strengthen public relations practice in Nigeria in the face of fake news:

1. **Adopt Technology-Driven Monitoring Systems:** PR practitioners should employ advanced tools such as social media analytics, AI-based news monitoring, and automated alerts to detect and respond to fake news in real time.

2. **Strengthen Collaboration with Fact-Checking Organizations:** PR professionals should partner with credible fact-checking agencies like Dubawa and Africa Check to verify information before it escalates and damages reputations.

3. **Enhance Media Literacy and Public Awareness:** Organizations should engage in public enlightenment campaigns to educate audiences on how to identify fake news and verify credible sources.

4. **Institutionalize Crisis Communication Units:** Every major organization should establish a crisis communication team trained in digital media management and rapid response communication to address misinformation swiftly.

5. **Update PR Training and Curriculum:** Institutions offering public relations and mass communication programs should integrate courses on digital media ethics, misinformation management, and online reputation management to prepare future practitioners for emerging challenges.

6. **Strengthen Regulatory Frameworks:** The Nigerian government and media regulatory bodies should enforce laws that penalize deliberate dissemination of fake news while promoting responsible journalism and information sharing.

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