CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AMONG PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS FOR BRAND'S REPUTATION MANAGEMENT: NIPR OSUN AND ONDO STATE CHAPTER

OKUNLOLA AYOMIDE AMINAT
Department of Mass Communication
Joseph Ayo Babalola University
Ikeji, Ara-keji, Osun State
Okunlolafavour16@gamil.com

AIYESIMOJU AYODEJI (PhD)
Department of Mass Communication
Joseph Ayo Babalola University
Ikeji, Ara-keji, Osun State
abaiyesimoju@jabu.edu.ng

&

Awofadeju Peter Olayinka (PhD)
Department of Mass Communication,
Joseph Ayo Babalola University,
Ikeji, Ara-keji, Osun State.
powaofadeju@jabu.edu.ng

Abstract
The increasing availability of digital media has affected the overall practice of Public Relations. This study examined the challenges of digital Public Relations among Public Relations practitioners for brand's reputation management in south-west Nigeria. This study explored the reasons Public Relations practitioners were not able to fully utilise the enormous benefits of using social media in managing brand's reputation. It also suggested ways that the practitioners could make use of social media in managing brand's reputation. The study identified the strategies Public Relations practitioners use in managing brand's reputation on social media platforms and the benefits of social media in managing brand's reputation. In-depth interview method was used to examine the challenges in the use of digital Public Relations among Public Relations practitioners for brand's reputation management in both NIPR Osun and Ondo States Chapters. This study recommended that Public Relations practitioners should implement technology innovative strategies for managing brand's reputation.

Keywords: digital channels, social media, Public Relations, brand's reputation, reputation management.

Introduction
The practice of Public Relations (PR), like most other professional fields, is undergoing varying levels of paradigm shifts, given increasing digital incursion. Digital Public Relations is the use of computer channels (especially the Internet) by Public Relations practitioners in

carrying out their duties to both the organisation they work for and the public (stakeholders). According to Nwosu (2004; 29), "Digital Public Relations is the systematic and broad-based application of ICTs in all aspects of modern Public Relations practice or management".

Before the introduction of social media, it was not cost-effective to reach niche audiences and goals (Bunting and Lipski, 2000), but the introduction of social media has made it easy to develop a customer chain at once (Beemer and Shook, 2009). Unlike large businesses that can afford to advertise through other mass media like television, magazines, etc., the invention of social media has made it easy for every business both small and large to cut across the mass audience at the same time.

Statement of the Problem
While social media are now recognised as critical elements of promoting and marketing strategies and their availability is widespread, firms are still struggling to understand how to effectively use and manage these media to achieve better brand performances (Haenlein, 2017). This study seeks to explore why Public Relations practitioners have not been able to fully utilise the enormous benefits of using social media in managing brand's reputation. It also examined whether or not the reasons are related to the challenges they face in adopting the social media for managing brand's reputation.

Research Questions
This study seeks to answers the following questions in the course of the research:
1. What are the strategies that the Public Relations practitioners have put in place for the effective use of social media in managing brand's reputation?
2. What benefits do social media platforms offer in managing brand's reputation?
3. What are the challenges that the Public Relations practitioners face while using social media in the management of brand's reputation?

Literature Review
Brand, Brand Identity, Brand Reputation
Nandan (2004) describes brand identity as how a company pursues to identify itself: it originates from the company, which is responsible for generating a distinguished product with unique features. He further said that businesses use their brand identity to communicate their distinctiveness to all their relevant stakeholders. With an ever-increasing number of products and services available to consumers, establishing and sustaining a brand identity has never been more crucial. The name, logo, symbols, design, packaging, performance and image or connotations make up a brand's identity.

In as much as brands build their identity, the brand also needs to be recognised by the stakeholders. This is where brand awareness comes into place. What is brand awareness? Brand awareness derives from anything that makes consumers experience the brand and, in this perspective, social media certainly represents a way to expose consumers to the brand and generate brand awareness (Hutter et al., 2013). In creating brand awareness, organisations can make use of social media to expose the public (their targeted consumers) to the brand; this can be done by providing information about the brand to the public. Social media activities

are not just for spreading marketing messages; they can also be used to strengthen consumer relationships and build, consolidate and retain brand recognition (Tiago and Verssimo, 2014). Before going into the concept of brand's reputation we have to understand reputation as a concept. What Is Reputation?

The academic-guru team of Argenti and Druckenmiller (2004) suggest that it is a collaborative representation of multiple constituencies' image of a company erected over. It is also linked to the organisation's identity, performance and the way others respond to its behaviour. It involves relationships with all the stakeholders it has gained, maintained and enhanced, or detracted from over time. Walker (2010) lists five key aspects in existing definitions of a company's overall reputation; according to him, it is built on perceptions, it reflects the aggregate perceptions of all constituents, it is comparative, it is either positive or negative and it is enduring and stable.

Roper and Fill (2012) further said that an advantage of building a favourable reputation is its "averaging" nature a poor experience on one dimension will usually be ignored by customers in favour of a generally positive impression they have of the organisation
The main benefits of a strong commercial character could be listed as follows:
1. perfecting the consumer's perception of the quality of products or services trade increases and positive word- of- mouth;
2. enhancing the capacity of hiring and retaining a good labour force in corporations.
3. raising the morale of workers and, thus, productivity;
4. guarding the value of the enterprise by easing the impact of scrutinizing, crisis and/ or competitive attacks;
5. preceding and helping international expansion, not only in terms of market penetration but also in preparing the scenery in crucial communities and facilitating alliances.

Brand's reputation Management
In an organisational context, reputation is based on perceptions of its characteristics, performance and behaviour, a reflection of how positively or negatively it is viewed by its stakeholders or other interest/issue groups in society (Larkin, 2003). Reputation declines when the experience or perceptions of an organisation fails to satisfy the expectations of its stakeholders. A reputation risk often occurs when the negative publicity caused by certain events, whether true or not, compromises the organisation's reputation and results in loss of value.

Reputation is widely known as one of the most important corporate assets and a major source of competitive advantage, but it is also the most difficult to protect. Heil (2018) stated that reputation risks are in many ways similar to other risks on an organisation's risk register that need to be managed by identifying, assessing, prioritizing, mitigating and continuously monitoring them. However, reputation risk is different from other risks which he further discussed:

1. Reputation is shaped outside the organisation: A reputational risk problem usually involves the media as well as what customers, employees and other stakeholders are saying in the public domain.
2. Reputation risk is considered a mega risk due to its compounded nature which is the event that causes the reputation risk, also constitutes another risk that has its actual circumstances and consequences for the organisation.
3. A reputation risk cannot be transferred to another party or a professional risk bearer namely an insurance or reinsurance company (Ross and Lofthouse, 2005).
4. A reputation risk presents not only potential negative consequences but, if well managed, an opportunity for improving the organisation's reputation.

Knowing that every brand could be exposed to reputational risk which can harm the brand if not handled appropriately therefore, organisations must ensure proper management of their brand's reputation.

Organisations that build and strengthen their corporate reputation model and intangible management process as part of horizontal strategic planning will ensure their long-term success, leadership and sustainability. To maintain a competitive economic performance, organisations now need to maintain healthy relationships with their various stakeholders more than ever before (Huang, 2008).

Benefits of a strong brand's reputation
The main benefits of a strong brand's reputation given by different scholars (Berens et al, 2004, Brammer et al, 2005), could be listed as follows:
1. Improving the consumer's perception of the quality of products or services (which allows charging premium prices): sale increases and positive word-of-mouth;
2. Improving the capacity of hiring and retaining qualified personnel in corporations;
3. Raising the morale of employees and therefore productivity;
4. Protecting the value of the enterprise by diminishing the impact of scrutinizing, crisis and/or competitive attacks;
5. preceding and helping international expansion, not only in terms of market penetration but also in preparing the scenery in key communities and facilitating alliances;
6. attracting a greater number of investors (good credibility): the rise of market value and diminishing risks for the organisation;

Organisations are not entirely in control of the information about them that exists outside the firm's boundaries. Many stakeholders base their opinions without ever having any direct communication with the establishment, through third-party sources (e.g. the social media and opinion leaders).

Therefore, organisations face an important challenge when it comes to managing their reputation: reputation may be influenced by a variety of outside sources besides communication and signalling from inside the company (Feldman, et al 2014).

Reputational strategies

Organisations build their reputations by developing practices that incorporate social and economic considerations into their competitive strategies. In doing so, they act as good citizens. They initiate policies that reveal their core values, reflect the joint welfare of investors, customers and employees, invoke concern for the development of local communities and ensure the quality and environmental soundness of their technologies, products and services. Argenti, Lytton-Hitchins and Verity (2010) classify the possible alternatives for reputational strategy as follows:

1. Excessive Negligence (or business-as-usual): All actions are valid as long as prices are kept low, customers are satisfied and the quarterly expectations of shareholders are fulfilled.
2. Deceitful Virtue: The "best face" is shown with the help of Public Relationships: changes in the brand, philanthropy, sustainability programmes and implementation of high-quality commercial practices. This attempts to build a reputation as a forward-looking and responsible organisation (even when this may not be true).
3. Favourable Competition: The Company emphasises the responsible management of its reputation. It fulfils the required regulations and invests adequately in building its management capacities (health, security and environment) and corporate communications abilities. The organisation concentrates on offering quality products and services and on fulfilling its obligations to customers and shareholders.
4. Reliability as a Competitive Advantage: This strategy differentiates the organisation from its competitors, attracts clients and employees and allows the firm to obtain an excellent reputation among its multiple stakeholders. The organisation is driven by its reputation, with a focus on transparency and upholding promises in all situations.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange theory gives an understanding of the motives of why individuals who participate in the use of social media appear fundamental. The theory uses the cost-benefit framework and a comparison of alternatives to explain how human beings communicate with each other, how they form relationships and bonds and how communities are formed through communication exchanges (Homans 1958). According to Pan and Crotts, (2012) the reasons why PR practitioners engage in a social exchange are a) to gain reputation and influence on others; b) to expect mutual benefit on the part of others; c) altruism and d) direct reward.

"Uses and gratifications theory" founded by Blumber and Kats (1974), can also be referred to as "need seeking" and is one of the theories of communications that focus on social communications. This theory explains how organisations can effectively use social media to build their brand's reputation by satisfying both the organisations' and customers' cognitive need (when an individual wants to enhance his or her knowledge or understanding of information), affection needs (an individual emotion, pleasure and feelings) personal integrative need (individual credibility, stability and status), social integrative need (an individual family and friends) and tension release needs (an individual wants to escape diversion).

Methodology

The study adopts in-depth interview methods. The in-depth interview was conducted with the NIPR executive officers. This study obtained first-hand information directly from the respondents who are registered Public Relations practitioners to obtain information on the impact of digital Public Relations for their brand's reputation and how they use it to manage their brand's reputation.

The population of the study are 5 executive members of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) in Osun and Ondo State chapter. Interview guide served as the instrument with which the Public Relations officials were interviewed with. Thematic analysis, deductive approach was used in analysing the data collected from the interviews conducted

Thematic Analysis
Themes:
Theme 1 - Public Relations Practitioners' Perception on Social Media in Managing Brand's reputation

In discussing their understanding and views on the use of social media in managing brand's reputation, participants explored their perception about social media and also gave their different experiences and views which provided a range of perspectives on the use of social media in managing brand's reputation.

Supporting Theme 1 - Public Relations Practitioners' View on the Use of Social Media in Managing Brand's reputation

All participants in this research said that the introduction of social media has been more advantageous to their day to day activities as Public Relations practitioners. They also stated that the introduction of social media has made it easier for them to sell and brand their organisation image, services, products and a person's image. Participant B mentioned that social media has changed the approach at which government make policies from top – down approach to bottom-top approach.

Participants also said that social media is a combination of all the traditional media and it gives practitioners more platforms to work with when branding and managing a brand's reputation. According to participant C "when you talk about social media, there are various platforms which PR can explore for the purpose of achieving his corporate goal for whatever reason". He also stated that practitioners needed to be mindful of how they use social media in managing brand's reputation because it is a gateless media. He also said "There is what we call the media tracking so there should be a constant tracking of whatever you drop on social media, so as to know the feedback". Participant E added that "social media enhances the work of a Public Relations practitioner in information dissemination, image branding and reputational management"

Supporting Theme 2 - The Effect of Social Media on Brand's reputation When Using It for Its Management

According to all participants, social media has a very good effect on brand's reputation. Social media makes their work faster and easier unlike the traditional media. It can also be used for creating brand awareness among target audiences. Participant B gave his experience on how

his team and the government of Osun State used the social media to sensitise the public on an on-going project in the state. He also mentioned that people made use of the social media to complain about how the on-going project was affecting their day to day activities. According to him, his team had to also use social media to sensitise the community, He said "we went on social media for two weeks to sensitize people; both the government and the people start to respond immediately". Participant C also added that social media could be used as a rejoinder.

Though social media has a good effect on brand's reputation management, participant C explained that a practitioner must be on his/her toes always and constantly check the various social media platforms on stories posted about the organisation's brand. He also said that the effectiveness of social media is determined by the way practitioners use it in managing brand's reputation. He stated "we have what you call RACE; that is the research, action, communication and evaluation." This model can be applied in engaging and evaluating the results of practitioner's activities in the social media space, especially in the use of social media to enhance the corporate reputation of an organisation". So it is a very good mechanism or platform of feedback. Practitioners must engage in constant research in order to evaluate the result of their activities on social media, and also check on how successful the media plan has been.

Supporting Theme 3 - Challenges of using social media in managing brand's reputation
Practitioners mentioned various challenges they face when using social media for managing brand's reputation, but the most peculiar among them is the issue of fake news. Social media being a gateless media has made it easily accessible to everyone and has increased the free flow of negative information about a brand on the Internet, due to lack of checks and balances. Participant B in his words said that "people turn up in their rooms' and just take any information, reframe it and just like that, it is ready to be put on the Internet without being subjected to any verification. Fake news are then spread everywhere". Participant C further said that media tracking is very important when using the social media in managing brand's reputation. Participants B and C said that media tracking should be done to monitor what the public has to say about your brand, the trends and also the reports [feedback].

Participant A also said that she uses *Google* pop-up messages to advertise her brand and to conduct e-survey, but it is also unfortunate that these messages could be reported back as either scam or fake and declined to be viewed by the targeted audiences, meanwhile these messages are already paid for. She also mentioned that another challenge is when your audiences are not social media literate. Participants B and D said that another issue they face is lack of important facilities and poor Internet connection in the country. Participant D further explained that due to lack of electricity, her media team have faced some lapses in disseminating information on time. She also said that most at times their brand's targeted audience often complain about the lack of funds or resources to download huge documents online.

Supporting Theme 4 - Benefits of Social Media in Managing Brand's reputation
Participants said that there are so many benefits derived from using social media in managing brand's reputation. They mentioned that social media has made it easy to reach more audience

than the traditional media. Participant B said**,** "It also helps PR practitioners to project the image of their organisations, a particular policy programmes, projects, products and services faster than ever before and it reduces the stress which PR practitioners have to face in visiting various media houses or send their stories which might even end up not to be used."

Social media can also be used to evaluate the acceptance rate of products and services by the public. Social media has been able to provide that interactive platform**.** Participant C also said "it has given PR that needed interactive platform that guarantees, immediate feedback and through that immediate feedback, you can always get fillers and then you react accordingly". Social media is a global media that is assessable by people around the globe. According to participant C "now, practitioners can interact with anybody from any part of the world. Social media can take the brand's message farther and wider than what it used to be in the past".

Supporting Theme 5: Solutions to the Issues
Participants suggested that government should ensure that the adequate facilities needed to aid the smooth transmission of information such as stable electricity; digital trainings for the local areas and elevation of poverty are put in place. Also, network service providers [telecommunication industry] should ensure that there is stable and quality Internet connection in the country. Then practitioners must also have good relationship with the social media influencers and must always monitor the Internet. Lastly, organisations should not hide information from their Public Relations officers.

Theme 2: Public Relations Practitioners' Uses of Social Media to Ensure Brand Credibility During Crisis
 According to participant C, social media cannot be used to give credibility to a brand's reputation if it is bad. He said "if the credibility or reputation of anorganisation is bad, there are little or nothing social media can do about that". He further said that if the brand has changed then social media can now be used to rebuild that particular brand's reputation. Participant A said that when a brand is at fault, they should come up with the truth and apologise. She further said communicating with the public on steps they have taken to make amendments is very important. Participants B, D and E also stated that practitioners must only put on the social media true and complete information about the brand and must also be consistent in their communication with their public.

Theme 3: Strategies for Using Social Media in Building Brand's Reputation
 Participants discussed various strategies they have put in place in managing brand's reputation on social media. All the participants said that as a practitioner, one needs to be close to all the social media influencers and bloggers. This is to ensure friendly relations with them because they can feed the public false information about one's brand and these influencers have up to millions of followers and are easily believed by the public. Another strategy that is common among them is that they make sure that their information goes online first and it must be true information with complete details of all the events about their brand. They also do follow up. All participants also said as part of their strategies, they follow up the information they have posted online to know the reactions of the public and their perception about the brand, in order to plan the next step and inform the organisation accordingly.

Participant A also said that her organisation does e-survey, that is asking the public what they want and how their services can be improved. Participants B said that research is very important, his organisation uses research to gain an insight as to what the public wants from the government. This information is what the government use in making policies and setting budgets. Participant C also said that research must be done in order to know the commonly used social media platforms among your target audience. Participant C also said that media planning is very important. He said "it is important for the Public Relations department to have a plan to ensure an effective management of the brand's reputation. The plan could be short term or long term media plan."

Participant D said "we have social media units under this territory; it is called online digital unit. The unit is headed by a social media manager who manages all information and also disseminates information for the college community."

Results
Strategies Public Relations Practitioners Use In Managing Brand's Reputation On Social Media
Different strategies have been put in place by practitioners on the use of social media in managing brand's reputation. Some of the strategies given by practitioners in theme 3 (strategies for using social media in building brand's reputation) in the thematic analysis include doing follow up after posting or uploading any update about their brands online, monitoring the number of people who saw the advert or the updates posted on social media about their brands, conducting an e-surveys which can be used to keep people apprised to avoid bottom - top approach and to ask for the public opinions and what they require from the brand. Social media experts should be employed to manage the organisation's brand's reputation online. Research should be carried out to know the most used social media platform your targeted audience uses. There must be effective coordination of whatever department that would be used in managing brand's reputation online. Lastly, there is must be media plan.

Benefits Social Media Platforms Offer in Managing Brand's Reputation
According to Subtheme 1.4 (benefits of social media when managing brand's reputation), Public Relations practitioners stated that social media has increased the platforms available to practitioners in disseminating information about their brand. Social media also enables the practitioners to reach out to more target audience on a larger scale. According to practitioner 3, "before the introduction of social media, practitioners found it difficult to disseminate information to people around the globe, but now the Internet has made it possible to interact with anybody from any part of the world". Social media has also made it easy for practitioners to carry out their duties without the need to visit media houses just to promote their brands. Social media has made communication two-way and gives room for easy interaction, because of the feedback obtained online from targeted audience. It also has all the functions of traditional media in it. Social media offers more than the traditional media.

Challenges Practitioners Face When Managing Brand's Reputation On Social Media
Subtheme 1.3 shows that Public Relations practitioners are faced with different types of challenges when using social media for brand's reputation management, one of which is the

lack of adequate Internet facility. In addition, some people may report adverts that pop up as deceitful and they don't wish to see them. Sometimes, people obtain information from the Internet, edit it with various applications such as Photoshop, video editor etc. and repost them online without any verification of the authenticity of such information, and this news ends up damaging the brand's reputation if not controlled or avoided. In order to control such fake news about a brand, the practitioner needs to effectively carry out media tracking and since media tracking involves constantly being online, small PR firms find it difficult to achieve it compared to the big PR firms that have so many people on deck. People can use the social media in disseminating information that are related to the goals and objectives of the organisation.

Solutions to the issues can be seen in subtheme 1.5. Some of the solutions given by practitioners include the followings: (a) the government should provide adequate Internet facilities and electricity. (b) Practitioners must be conscious of their integrity by telling the truth at all times.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the followings are the recommendations:
This study has shown that the gateless feature of the social media can serve as a threat to brands' reputation, especially when social media influencers post false news about brands. It further stated that the first information received online is easily accepted by target audience of practitioners.

Therefore practitioners should always be on guard, ensure that they are truthful, monitor the media and also develops a good relationship with social media influencers. That way, practitioners might not be able to control what is put on the media but they can manage the media.

Practitioners must be digitally proficient and right strategies must be put in place in other to ensure effective use of social media in managing brand's reputation.

Research must be done; this is to ensure that practitioners use the right platform to reach out to their target audience. Ensuring that practitioners use the social media platform that is commonly used among the targeted audience is important.

In addition, network providers should ensure that there are stable Internet connections around the country and government should ensure that electricity is constant.

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