

Re-conceptualizing Public Relations Practices in Nigeria: A Framework to Address Systemic Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines the roles and challenges of public relations practice in Nigeria by proposing a framework to address systemic issues hindering its professionalization. Despite cultural diversity shaping PR globally, the practice in Nigeria faces significant obstacles, including limited strategic involvement, deployment of unqualified practitioners, political interference, inadequate education and training, weak ethical standards, and lack of a robust regulatory framework. The absence of autonomy by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) further exacerbates these issues, allowing individuals without formal training or specialization to practice, thereby undermining the profession's credibility. Using a narrative literature review, the study synthesizes existing research to identify gaps and develop a conceptual framework aimed at addressing these challenges. Drawing from role theory in public relations and Grunig's Excellence theory, the paper proposes a tripartite framework for PR professionalization in Nigeria. This framework emphasizes education to impart theoretical knowledge and practical skills, accreditation to ensure eligibility for membership and registration, and certification to uphold ethical standards and professional conduct as well as autonomy of the NIPR as the primary regulatory body of the profession in the country. By implementing this tripartite model, PR practitioners in Nigeria can be empowered to perform strategic managerial and operational communication roles effectively. This will enable practitioners and by extension NIPR to uphold the integrity of the profession, and foster standardization and professionalization in alignment with global best practices. Hence, this study provides actionable insights for re-conceptualizing PR in Nigeria, advancing its role as a credible and strategic profession.

Keywords: *public relations, PR challenges, PR practitioners, role theory, tripartite PR framework.*

INTRODUCTION

Public relations (PR) is widely recognized as a strategic communication and management process aimed at fostering mutual understanding and maintaining harmonious relationships between organizations and their publics by shaping perceptions and building positive interactions (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Qausya & Bernadette, 2023). This comprehensive definition underscores key principles such as transparency, mutual

understanding, effective communication, and adherence to ethical and professional standards.

Furthermore, Adamu and Auwal (2023) emphasized that globalization has facilitated the integration of universal PR principles while adapting them to fit local contexts. This adaptation is driven by the cultural diversity, varying beliefs, societal structures, and governance systems that shape the distinct identities and practices of different nations and communities (Anani-Bossman & Tandoh, 2023). Such contextual variations highlight the dynamic and flexible nature of PR in addressing the unique needs of diverse environments.

Consequently, Chaidaroon and Hou (2021) observed that while Western perspectives of PR practice have been widely adopted globally, it is crucial to adapt generic principles to the unique cultural, political, social, and economic conditions of diverse societies. Such contextualization is essential for fostering the development of global standards for the PR profession (Abdullah, et al, 2023). Thus, a considerable number of culturally specific elements have been recognized across PR practices in Western, European, Asian, and African contexts. Gezgin (2019) emphasizes that the direct application of the global Western PR model is not universally feasible. Instead, incorporating localized practices into PR frameworks can enhance standards that are both effective and reflective of the unique characteristics of individual societies.

Globally, public relations practices are shaped by the socio-economic and political contexts in which they operate, influencing their roles, ethical frameworks, and interdisciplinary approaches (Al-Yaqoub et al., 2019; Alper, 2024). For instance, the British Public Information Model prioritizes transparency and accountability by disseminating truthful and factual information (Dalton, 2022).

In the United States, the Two-Way Symmetrical Model emphasizes ethical communication and mutual understanding, fostering balanced relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig, 2022). Meanwhile, Europe's Consensus-Oriented PR approach highlights collaboration and inclusiveness, mirroring the cultural and political diversity of the region (Verčič et al., 2015). In contrast, China's "Guanxi" system is deeply rooted in relational cultural values, focusing on building personal networks and mutual obligations through gift exchanges and favors (Servaes, 2016). These diverse models demonstrate how public relations practices adapt to reflect the unique values and dynamics of their respective societies.

Also, in Nigeria's Brown Envelope and India's Paid News practices operate within specific socio-economic contexts, encouraging content publication and promotional messaging (Lamwaka, 2022; Tripathi, 2023). While these practices cater to local needs, they are met with considerable criticism.

For example, Guanxi is often condemned for promoting relational manipulation and ethical compromises, while Brown Envelope and Paid News are criticized for eroding transparency and trust (Chen et al., 2020). This tension has been very apparent between context-specific practices and globally recognized ethical standards epitomized by the UK's Public Information Model, the USA's Two-Way Symmetrical Model, and Europe's

Consensus-Oriented PR, which anchors on truth, accountability, and trust to the stakeholders.

Background Study

Public Relations practice in Nigeria dates to the colonial era, primarily driven by government efforts to manage public opinion and promote policies (Sule, & Ridwanullah, 2023). Over the decades, PR has expanded to the private and non-governmental sectors, becoming a critical tool for managing public perception and fostering relationships (Igben, 2022). However, its evolution has been slow and inconsistent compared to global advancements, primarily due to systemic inadequacies in education, training, and regulation (Aja et al., 2019). In the Nigerian context, however, the practice of PR takes on unique characteristics shaped by the country's socio-political, economic, and cultural realities (Truong, 2024).

Historically and at present, PR has been viewed as a means through which institutions interact with various stakeholders to develop better communication and enhance corporate image or reputation in Nigeria (Ukonu et al., 2018). The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), established by Decree No. 16 of 1990, thus defined PR and "the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action that will serve both the organization and the public interest" (Aja et al., 2019). This definition thus underlines the dual responsibility of PR in achieving organizational objectives and the society at large.

However, PR in Nigeria faces unique challenges. The practice is often constrained by weak adherence to professional standards, corporate culture, inadequate training, and interference from external forces such as political actors and government agencies (Igben & Ugbon, 2020; Nyitse, et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024). Furthermore, in Africa and Nigeria by extension, PR practitioners are frequently relegated to operational roles, such as media liaison or event management, rather than being integrated into strategic decision-making processes (Nhedzi, & Azionya, 2022).

This limits the strategic potential of PR in addressing critical societal issues, including ethical governance, corporate accountability, and sustainable development. Furthermore, the Nigerian PR setting is largely influenced and characterized by socio-economic, political and ethnic disparities, of which PR practitioners must navigate the complex communication dynamics to reflect these realities (Adams et al., 2023). This necessitates a localized approach to PR that is responsive to Nigeria's unique challenges while aligning with global best practices.

For instance, with over 500 radio and television station in the country, the need to keep core audience informed and keeping the organization afloat sees many media outfit in Nigeria resort to sending journalist and by extension PR practitioners to fish for information thereby exposing them to vice like this (Aluko-Olokun, 2023). Similarly, in Nigeria the most active PR practitioners and journalists in the field are often freelance agents who focus on securing advertisement placements, planting news and features to

maintain their relevance, while also managing celebrities and providing consultancy services for banks and politicians (Olasoji, 2023).

Thus, from a critical perspective, the assumption that practices like paid news, brown envelopes, Guanxi, and other culturally embedded PR tactics are merely "tokens of appreciation" reflects a normalization of unethical behavior within certain domains of public relations. While these practices may be rationalized as necessary for maintaining business operations, such justifications obscure the broader ethical implications and undermine the integrity of the profession. However, by framing these tactics as indispensable, practitioners risk perpetuating a culture where ethical boundaries are blurred, ultimately eroding trust and professionalism in public relations in the perception of the Westernized precept of PR practice (Mandela, 2024).

Consequently, the expectation is that PR professionals in Nigeria should be actively engaged in creating brand strategy and company messaging rather than they are still acting as mere mouthpieces of their organization with little involvement and responsibility in crafting stories for their respective entities. Therefore, re-conceptualizing PR in Nigeria requires redefinition of role beyond operational functions to a strategic discipline that contributes meaningfully to national development.

In turn, the redefinition emphasizes on robust education, training, ethical enforcement, and professional accreditation as critical components for elevating the profession in Nigeria. While PR practice in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era, it is primarily driven by government efforts to manage public opinion and promote policies (Nwodu & Emechebe, 2023). Over the decades, PR has expanded to the private and non-governmental sectors, becoming a critical tool for managing public perception and fostering relationships. However, its evolution has been slow and inconsistent compared to global advancements, primarily due to systemic inadequacies in education, training, and regulation (Aja et al 2019).

The attainment of Nigeria's independence in 1960 and the Civil War from 1966 to 1970 significantly spurred public relations activities in the country. To foster reconciliation, accountability, and a positive national image, the military government established the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) in 1990, tasked with regulating and standardizing PR practice (Udomisor & Osademe, 2013). Despite this effort, PR in Nigeria is still largely perceived as a trade rather than a profession, with many practitioners lacking the skills, specialization, and training required to meet contemporary demands. Historically, Nigerian PR evolved through distinct phases: the Public Enlightenment Era (1859–1930s), Broadcasting Era (1930s), Political Propaganda Era (1930s–1940s), Public Information Era (1945–1960s), and the Professionalized Era (1960s–2000s) (Otubanjo, et al., 2013; Ubwa, 2014).

Conversely, the practice in the field has continued to decline and is marked by low standards and poor recognition of PR's strategic relevance (Amujo, & Melewar, 2011). Thus, the role and function of PR practitioners in Nigeria are often restricted by organizational policies and systemic issues. As Role theory in PR indicates, practitioners'

actions and inactions replicate the exact responsibilities of the profession, thereby underlining the need for standardized practices (Şeşen, 2015).

For public relations to be effective in Nigeria and in line with best practices, the practice must be anchored on sound educational training, enforcement of codes, and strict adherence to ethical principles. Although some scholars argue that accreditation and regulation are essential in maintaining standards, this is largely prevalent in developed societies where self-regulation ensures that professional ethics are upheld (Page et al., 2024). However, in developing countries like Nigeria, enforcement mechanisms are necessary to check unprofessional practices and ensure that the field evolves towards global benchmarks.

Issues and Challenges of PR Profession in Nigeria

The advent of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and globalization has significantly transformed PR, enabling real-time communication through digital platforms and expanding its reach and influence (Pepple et al., 2020). These developments have elevated PR's role in fostering trust and driving organizational success (Bhargava, 2024).

However, in Nigeria, PR remains largely focused on basic information dissemination with minimal adherence to structured principles (Iyinoluwa et al 2023). The lack of specialization, standardization, and proper curricular frameworks for PR education in higher institutions is a systematic gap that has left the profession open to unqualified individuals, undermining its credibility and effectiveness.

Public relations practitioners in Nigeria are often relegated to the role of information propagators, with little influence on managerial decisions or organizational strategy. Effective PR demands involvement in decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and strategic guidance (Olaoluwa 2021). Yet, in many Nigerian organizations particularly government agencies, untrained individuals are appointed to communication roles thereby limiting PR's scope to acting on the directives of top management without meaningful input (Achor, & Okoye, 2015). This exclusion reduces practitioners to mere technicians, diminishing their ability to influence corporate policies or effectively manage stakeholder relationships (Agu, et al., 2022).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in Nigeria further reflect this weakness, as projects are often imposed on communities without consultation, a consequence of engaging unqualified practitioners (Morris, 2022). Political appointments to key communication roles also undermine professional standards, resulting in PR strategies that prioritize political agendas over stakeholder needs (Ukonu, et al., 2018). Such systemic issues highlight the critical importance of source credibility and practitioner competence, particularly in crisis management. Credibility in public relations is rooted in trustworthiness, expertise, and timely communication which is essential for effective crisis responses (Dominic, et al., 2023).

In Nigeria, however, weak ethical standards and inadequate training often erode PR credibility, leading to poor outcomes in crisis situations (Zimal, & Aysar, 2021).

Addressing systemic gaps in education, accreditation, and ethical enforcement is crucial to enhancing PR roles and practice in Nigeria. Consequently, re-conceptualizing the profession within a structured framework can develop a cadre of skilled and accountable practitioners capable of driving organizational success and managing crises with professionalism as well as comply with global acceptable standards of the profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Perspectives on the Historical Development of Public Relations

The origins of public relations have long been debated among scholars, though most agree that modern PR emerged in the late 19th century (Rodríguez-Salcedo, & Watson, 2021). While American theories and practices have significantly influenced the field (Gezgin, 2019), but scholars like Etang (2015) & Fawkes (2018); argue that PR is not solely an American invention. Thus, Mandela, (2024) further highlights that PR's meaning and practice vary across cultural contexts, reflecting the evolving roles of PR in today's society.

In similar vein, PR's roots have been traced to organized publicity efforts and press agency, (Grunig, & Kim, 2021; Setoutah et al., 2024), however Fawkes, (2018) point out that discrepancies between historical interpretations and established theories, complicating PR's periodization. Communication actions akin to PR have been observed in politics, business, management and administration long before the establishment of press agencies and term public relations activities emerged (Edwards, 2018).

However, the evolution of public relations across continents reveals unique trajectories shaped by cultural, political, and socio-economic contexts. In the Americas, PR's formalization began in the late 19th century, influenced by figures like Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays, who established PR as a strategic communication tool (Penning, 2008). Lee emphasized open communication to rebuild public trust, while Bernays introduced research-driven practices to shape public opinion, cementing PR as a professional management function (Zoch, et al., 2014). These foundations aligned with America's industrial growth and democratic ideals, embedding PR into organizational strategies.

Similarly, Europe developed PR through a distinct lens, emphasizing societal engagement over organizational goals. Early European PR critiques highlighted societal tensions, and post-World War II reconstruction further accelerated the profession's growth (Milburn, 2021). The UK, for instance, saw significant advancements with the establishment of the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in 1948, while European PR evolved through reciprocal exchanges with American practices but retained its socially oriented focus (Anthony, 2018).

In Africa, media and by extension public relations developed within the colonial framework, serving initially as a propaganda tool for colonial administrations (Anani-Bossman, & Tandoh, 2023). With the rise of independence movements, PR transitioned into a mechanism for nation-building and cultural identity promotion. Nigeria and South

Africa emerged as regional leaders, with Nigeria establishing the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) in the 1960s to promote ethical practices (Iyinoluwa et al., 2023).

However, challenges like weak regulatory frameworks and the dominance of Western models persist, necessitating greater cultural contextualization. Similarly, in Asia, PR evolved through a blend of indigenous traditions and external influences. Countries like China, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore adopted hybrid models combining local norms with Western practices (Sriramesh, & Takasaki, 1999; Sriramesh, 2007; Edwards, & Hodges, 2011).

China's PR formalized during its economic reform era in the 1970s, while Japan's professionalization was shaped by wartime propaganda and the establishment of the IPR in 1948 (Chen et al., 2020). Despite advancements, Asia still grapples with the challenge of aligning Western models with its unique cultural frameworks (Hou et al., 2013; Dühring, & Zerfass, 2015; Domm, 2015).

Globally, the development of PR underscores the importance of contextualizing practices to reflect diverse cultural and economic realities. While Western theories have significantly influenced the field, regions like Africa and Asia have adapted these frameworks to align with their distinct societal norms. This diversity highlights the evolving nature of PR as both a strategic management function and a tool for fostering meaningful stakeholder engagement across different historical and cultural contexts (Mandela, 2024).

Roles of Public Relations

Public relations (PR) roles have undergone extensive scrutiny and evolution over the years. Broom and Smith (1979) initially identified five major roles for PR professionals: technical services provider, expert prescriber, communication process facilitator, problem-solving facilitator, and acceptant legitimizer. Broom (1982) later refined these into four key roles, distinguishing between managerial and technical functions. According to Dozier and Broom (1995), the technician role emphasizes the artistic and operational aspects of communication, such as crafting messages, writing, and managing media relations. Conversely, the managerial role is strategically oriented, focusing on diagnosing organizational challenges and developing solutions to meet stakeholder needs (Grunig, 2020).

In a similar vein, Sesen (2015) further expounded on these roles by adding the dual responsibility of the modern PR practitioner in nurturing relations with both the internal and external audience while devising strategies that connect with the social, cultural, and structural arrangement of an organization. This, therefore, highlights the increasing complexity of PR in the digital era, where access to social media has brought new dimensions to the practice. While many of these are responsibilities with which the contemporary role is familiar as it is communicative in nature, however Oparaugo (2021) suggests that PR roles must cater for the distinct needs of internal and external publics.

Over the years, Public Relations has evolved from a purely communications function to a wider organizational role of advising, developing strategies, and connecting

communication initiatives with overall organizational goals. As such, PR roles, according to Neill and Lee (2021), must not be restricted to just fulfilling routine operation task but also contribute to the strategic positioning of an organization and connecting the performance of such roles to the effectiveness of an organization.

Regardless of these advancements, there are still significant challenges to understanding and integrating PR roles within varied cultural contexts. For example, in countries such as Nigeria, PR is often narrowly limited to the dissemination of information. In addition, government influence and political interference has done much to shape the scope and impact of PR practice, thus bringing to light the need for a more adaptive and context-sensitive approach (Olaoluwa, 2021).

Examination of The Role Theory in Public Relations

Role theory in public relations (PR) offers a framework for understanding the varied and evolving functions that PR practitioners perform within organizations and societies (Ibrahim, et al., 2021). It focuses on the expectations, behaviors, and responsibilities associated with the roles that PR professionals occupy (Cornelissen, 2023). Initially grounded in sociology, role theory posits that individuals within an organization or society take on specific roles based on societal expectations, organizational needs, and professional standards (Sesen, 2015).

In the context of public relations, role theory helps to explain the complex relationship between the PR practitioner and the various stakeholders, including the organization, the public, and the media. However, the theory has undergone significant development since its inception, with scholars refining it to accommodate the changing nature of PR in response to social, technological, and organizational shifts (Laskin, 2012).

The difference between managerial and technical roles has played a decisive role in determining role theory in public relations. Both traditional and modern scholars in the field underline the importance of balancing these roles to achieve maximum effectiveness (Rabrenović, 2020). While the technical role is important for executing communication strategies, it often restricts PR's impact within organizations, as it is typically viewed as a supporting function rather than a core strategic contributor. On the other hand, the managerial role positions PR as a critical element in organizational decision-making, influencing both internal and external communication strategies, policy formulation, and crisis management (Krishnan, & Ahmad, 2021).

Scholars like Sampa, (2022) argue that while both roles are important however, the managerial role should dominate the PR profession, as it aligns with the need for PR to contribute to organizational goals, strategic communication, and relationship management. However, this division of roles into technician and managerial perspectives has been critiqued for oversimplifying the complex nature of PR roles (Gaara et al., 2024). This is because the reality of PR practice is not always confined to a dichotomy between managerial and technical functions. And as such, this is perhaps why practitioners must navigate both roles simultaneously, with strategic decision-making intertwined with tactical execution.

As Stojanović et al (2020) note, the role expectation of PR practitioners is shaped by both organizational goals and the external environment, which requires them to adapt their roles depending on the situation. For example, in crisis communication, PR professionals may switch from a strategic managerial role to a more technical role focused on message dissemination and media management (Babatunde, 2022).

Although Sesen (2015) added the dual task of managing relationships with external stakeholders and cultivating strong internal communications reflects the growing importance of internal communication for organizational effectiveness. However, the incorporation of social, cultural, and environmental factors that influence PR roles, highlighting the necessity for PR practitioners to tailor their strategies to the specific context in which they operate. And the rise of digital and social media has further transformed the roles of PR practitioners (Pribadi & Nasution, 2021). Given that traditionally, PR was heavily reliant on traditional media channels such as newspapers, television, and radio, however the advent of social media and digital platforms has introduced new opportunities and challenges for PR professionals (Udomah et al., 2023).

In that sense, with increased responsibility for managing online reputations, engaging with influencers, and creating content to engage varied audiences on numerous platforms, PR professionals are expected to do more than just communicate. But the challenge anchors on how to balance the technical and managerial dimensions of PR within this new paradigm. Incidentally, the technical component of social media management is very important, but it must be complemented with a strategic approach whereby practitioners using digital platforms do so in the interest of achieving larger organizational objectives like brand building, crisis management, and effective stakeholder engagement.

METHODOLOGY

As asserted by Jaakkola (2020), the methodological basis of conceptual papers lies in synthesizing and integrating evidence from pre-existing concepts, theories, and scholarship rather than conventional analysis of empirical data. This paper's conceptual model, therefore, draws from a narrative review as its core methodology, leveraging the strength of this approach in discussing systemic problems within PR practice in Nigeria. While conceptual papers do not intricately include new empirical data, they build upon theories and concepts which have been developed and tested through prior empirical research (Lindgreen et al., 2021).

This paper follows Jaakkola's (2020) framework, which posits that model conceptual designs in conceptual research aim to develop frameworks that predict relationships between concepts, describe entities, or identify key issues relevant to explaining a phenomenon. Similarly, Heinonen and Gruen (2024) emphasize that model conceptual designs clarify and explain events, objects, or processes by identifying antecedents, outcomes, and contingencies associated with the focal construct. Thus, the use of a model conceptual design in this study provides a structured approach to re-conceptualizing PR practices in Nigeria. It ensures that the argumentation is

systematically developed, addressing critical aspects of PR practice rather than limiting itself to abstract conceptual contributions.

The integrative methodology of narrative literature review further strengthens the conceptions of this paper in the sense that it enables the exploration of available research on PR practice in Nigeria and provide an extensive synthesis of current knowledge. Thus, this synthesis provides a foundation for the proposed framework. According to Byrne (2016), narrative reviews aid critical reflection and interpretation of past or existing research with the aim of ascertaining gaps in research or practice which is what the conceptual framework sought to address. The implication of the integrative narrative methodology is that it makes the proposed framework relevant and necessary relative to PR in Nigeria. Unlike systematic reviews, which follows rigid methodological protocols, narrative literature reviews are more flexible and interpretive, allowing for a discursive approach to analyzing diverse insights (Sukhera, 2022).

Thus, the flexibility of integrative literature approach is important for providing contextualization and integration of sets of views which makes the narrative reviews particularly suitable for the advancement of conceptual arguments. The integration of scholarship is thus key in the development of comprehensive framework towards addressing systemic challenges to PR practice in Nigeria. It therefore provides a clear view of the state of PR practice in the country and lays a firm foundation for the proposed framework. A significant portion of the integration is identifying the knowledge gaps. The review points out areas that were previously unexplored or under-explored in prevailing theories and applications in the Nigeria setting, such as the influence of modern communication technologies and political pressures on PR practices, that have been overlooked by past studies in favour of narrower challenges like cultural limitations and media engagement.

In like manner, the narrative approach deployed in this paper therefore deepened the understanding of paradigm shift in PR theory and practice evolution relevant to the inimitable context of Nigeria. The integrative review draws from both Western and African perspectives to ensure that the study does not simply duplicate existing knowledge but rather engages the knowledge towards uncovering and proposing valuable contribution of knowledge to the field. This integration is critical in laying out a clearer picture of PR practice in Nigeria and the theoretical bases underpinning the proposed framework and broad applicability and challenges practitioners face in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the integrative review adopted in this paper provides the basis for grounding the proposed framework within existing knowledge while also creating avenues of engagement complex issues that influence PR practice in Nigeria. A conceptual design, according to MacInnis (2011), provides a roadmap to understand the subject matter in which key concepts are delineated and their processes described, with identified mitigating factors that influence their operation. In the context of this study, this approach underpins the effort to develop a framework that methodically addresses

the systemic challenges affecting PR practice in Nigeria, hence giving a coherent and actionable blueprint for re-conceptualization.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Role theory in PR underlines the increasing complexity and strategic relevance of PR in modern organizations. Early frameworks distinguished PR roles into two categories: technicians, responsible for tactical execution, and managers, focused on strategic control. However, modern-day expectations and interpretations of these roles according to Sesen (2015) are fluid and intertwined in practice to include legal (ethical), social, and economic responsibilities thus making them key drivers for organizational excellence. The rise of digital and social media offers new dimensions to the profession of public relations, while also requiring and demanding practitioners to be more versatile and adaptive. Consequently, knowledge of the intricate nature of PR roles, along with understanding their contextual use and needs certainly make PR practitioners instrumental in negotiating today's communication milieu.

Equally, Excellence theory supports the integration of two-way symmetrical communication, strategic management, and PR's involvement in organizational decision-making (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021). Excellence approach, just like the role model, represents a fundamental shift from one-way information dissemination to facilitating meaningful engagement between organizations and stakeholders. On the premise of well-defined role and excellence in performance, the framework confronts the systemic problems identified as poor educational training, unethical practices, weak professional standards, poor enforcement of code and standards of practices and PR practices that is media driven. The reconceptualization of PR roles encourages expertise in communication, stakeholder engagement, and ethical conduct in manners that enhance the credibility and effectiveness of PR in the complex socio-political environment of Nigeria.

Competence cannot be divorced from PR roles and excellence in PR. It is, therefore, expected that the professionalization of PR in Nigeria must start with comprehensive education as a bedrock for competence in modern-day PR practice. There is, therefore, an imperative need for reforms in updating PR curricula in higher institutions to ensure that modern PR tools are integrated, standards are globally aligned, and sensitive to local needs. However, Scholars such as Hayes et al., (2023); Kinnear and Bowman, (2024) attribute weak ties between theory and practice to the disconnect between PR practitioners and academics. Contextual variations, on the other hand, further question the universality of the theories of PR thus calling for specialized education to bridge these gaps (Muswede, & Lubinga, 2018; Abdullah et al., 2023. And this is probably why the need for educational reforms in PR in Nigeria is more crucial than ever.

Presently, in Nigeria, PR practitioners enter the field through various routes such as journalism, political science, management, marketing, business, administration, and social sciences. Training schemes such as the master's program offered by the Nigerian

Institute of Public Relations attempts to give the necessary introductory knowledge to practitioner without PR background, but the program lack the depth needed for contemporary PR practice. For instance, a six months NIPR program cannot replace a three-year or four-years university education. This paper, therefore, proposes a framework of education, training and professional accreditation to provide a benchmark for PR practice in Nigeria.

On a global scale, PR practitioners generally do not have to obtain formal licenses to practice (Page et al., 2024). Instead, regulatory oversight is usually provided through accreditation bodies and schemes operated by national PR associations. The challenge with such regulatory bodies and mechanisms is that most are voluntary, thereby limiting their enforceability and recognition as standardized regulatory frameworks in that regard (Olaoluwa, 2021). For instance, in developing countries such as Nigeria, political influence greatly reduces the independence of regulatory agencies such as the NIPR and presents a major barrier to the implementation of the ethical codes and the upholding of professional standards. Although the law of NIPR states that all practitioners must register with the body before practicing, but there are people still practice without registering, hence questioning the institute's efficiency. More important, public complaints and reports against ethical violations seldom come out into the open, and the lack of any significant precedents undermines the credibility and strength of the regulatory framework governing the profession.

In other words, for professionalism of PR practice in Nigeria to be effective, an independent supervisory body is required. Although independent but must collaborate with NIPR to enforce ethical codes and its bylaws. The body must be saddled with ensuring compliance with the code to raise standards of PR practice in the country. Therefore, the re-conceptualization of PR practice in Nigeria aims to solve the systemic challenges that impede professionalization of the profession. Drawing from Sesen's (2015) description of public relations as a dynamic, interdependent relationship with legal, social, and economic responsibilities that must be undertaken by practitioners to achieve organizational excellence. This paper makes a case re-conceptualization of PR and professionalization in the industry.

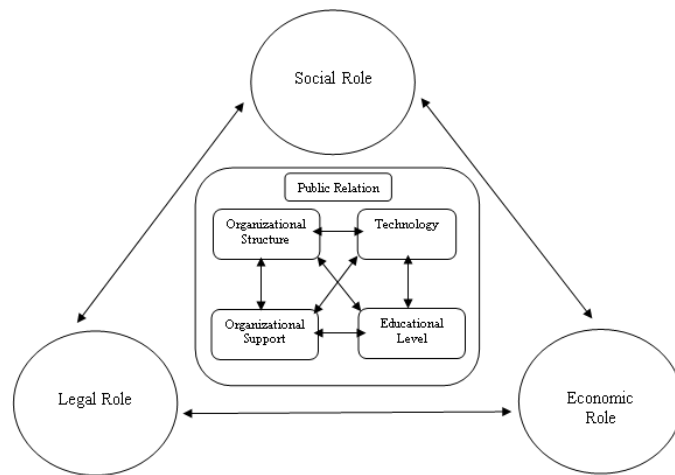


Figure 1: Model for Role Theory in Public Relations (Sesen, 2015)

On the premise of systemic challenge as hindrance to the roles of public relations and by extension its PR practitioners in the practice of PR in Nigeria, this paper proposes framework geared at addressing these systemic challenges. The basis for re-conceptualizing public relations in Nigeria is geared as professionalization of PR profession in Nigeria. The study proposes a framework emphasizing education, accreditation, and certification as prerequisites for professional practice:

1. Education: Ensures competence by equipping aspiring PR professionals with theoretical knowledge and practical skills.
2. Accreditation: Validates membership and eligibility through rigorous professional assessments.
3. Certification: Establishes the autonomy of regulatory bodies like NIPR, enforcing adherence to ethical codes and professional standards as well as holding practitioners accountable.

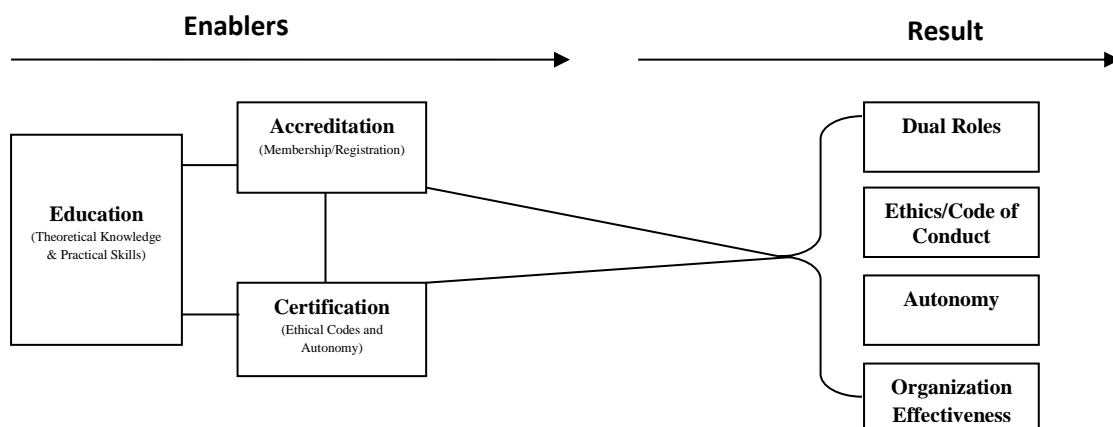


Figure 2: Tripartite Framework for Professionalization of PR Practice in Nigeria (Framework Proposed by Author, 2024).

The above tripartite framework proposed for the professionalization of PR practice in Nigeria rests on three critical pillars, namely: Education, Accreditation, and Certification. This framework presents a stepwise means of raising standards, ensuring ethical adherence, and advancing organizational and professional excellence in PR. Education provides the foundation for professionalism, equipping PR practitioner with theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed in practice. It sets the base level of competencies necessary to navigate the changing demands of the profession.

Education is followed by accreditation, which affirms professional validity through strenuous professional assessment. It ensures that practitioners are up to the established standards that gives them membership and eligibility in the professional community. Membership, through registration with NIPR chapters, serves as an indicator of credibility and acceptance, somewhat like a professional badge of honor. Certification seals accountability and ensures compliance with codes of ethics without compromising the independence of the regulatory body. Certification reinforces the ethical standards of the profession and holds practitioners accountable for their actions, thus upholding the integrity of the profession. Together, these enablers result in the standardization and professionalization of PR practice. The outcomes are such that practitioners demonstrate competency and adherence to ethical codes, dual role proficiency-strategic and technician to boost organizational effectiveness. The framework also provides for independence and autonomy of NIPR for sustainability and credibility of the regulatory environment for public relations practice in Nigeria.

The tripartite approach toward professionalization proposed for PR practice in Nigeria enables quality and competent practitioners, accepted standards of operations, promote ethical practices that enhances organization values. Conversely, the tripartite model equally enhances credibility and effectiveness of PR across a complex socio-economic, cultural, and political milieu such as Nigeria. In addition, the tripartite framework for the professionalization of PR practice in Nigeria will facilitate greater autonomy of NIPR as the regulatory body of the profession in the country because the efficiency of NIPR as an accrediting and regulatory body is seriously challenged. This is mainly due to political interferences in the operationalization of its status, thus making it weak in its abilities to ensure compliance and enforcement. For instance, while registration with NIPR is a requirement for PR practitioners and organizations, many are still not registered including government agencies and department, and this defeats the institute's authority to have offenders penalized as asserted in NIPR's regulations. Hence, the autonomy of NIPR is highly instrumental in reinstating its integrity so that it can undertake the implementation of its mandate without any interference by outside forces. In this regard, the paper recommends the following:

1. Mandatory accreditation (licensing) of all practitioners
2. Autonomy and Non- politicization of NIPR
3. National database for accreditation (registered) practitioners.

4. Establishment of independent ethics committee with the NIPR body to monitor and enforce code of ethics and standards of best practices.
5. Engagement of trained practitioners by government and politicians alike.
6. Greater involvement of practitioners in the organizational decision-making process.

Evidently, Nwakanma (2013) observes that less than 10% of 350 Ministries, Department and Agencies (MDAs) in Nigeria deploy formally registered PR practitioners. Likewise, Iyinoluwa et al., (2023) affirmed lack of engagement of trained practitioners by the government has led to increase in the number of unqualified practitioners merely laundering image of corrupt politicians and government officials. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2024) noted that while the federal ministry of education employs public relations strategies to promote inclusive education for individuals with special needs, their efforts are minimal, resulting in limited success. The limited success rather than the substantial impact is due to underutilization of PR and by extension practitioners and the lack of autonomy of NIPR to checkmate these violations.

The proposed tripartite framework for PR professionalization in Nigeria comprising education, accreditation, and certification offers significant practical applications is not only within the Nigerian context but also extend to other regions, particularly in developing countries. As such, the implementation of this framework can be extended and adapted to other regions, where socio-political, economic, and cultural factors complicate PR practices.

Focusing on the educational component of the framework, emanates from the lack of standardized education and the prevalence of unqualified practitioners which hinder the growth and credibility of the PR profession. Thus, creating specialized and accredited academic programs to upgrade existing ones offers a blend of theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Universities and training institutions must develop comprehensive curricula that focus on PR theories alongside hands-on training to better prepare students to tackle unique challenges in the Nigerian context. This educational framework also holds global relevance, as many developing countries face similar issues of inadequate or substandard PR education.

A prime example of poor PR education is prevalent across much of Africa, parts of Asia, and Latin American nations. This provides avenues to make unqualified practitioners proliferate in the field and practice. This shortcoming is accentuated by Anani-Bossman and Tandoh (2023) who noted minimal corpus of knowledge on the African perspective of the practice, culminating into the saturation of field and profession with PR theories and models originating predominantly from a Western perspective.

On the same note, running of educational programs is thus one of the major challenges before national PR bodies like NIPR of Nigeria. The establishment of specialized PR programs is further made complex by economic factors in developing nations. In addressing such constraints, there is, therefore, a need for international

collaboration, e-learning platforms, and public-private partnership cooperations to make these measures available and accessible at an affordable price.

Furthermore, the accreditation element of the model has international potential, particularly through collaborations with international PR bodies such as the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. This could be through mutual recognition agreements whereby PR practitioners would obtain international standing and contribute to international standardization. In countries with significant government interference or where authoritarian regimes are in place, partnerships (cooperations) is necessary to protect the independence of regulatory bodies while also taking into consideration political realities (balancing political realities) so that the integrity of the profession is upheld.

Similarly, the certification aspect of the framework focuses on standards and ethics which vital in a country like Nigeria where the industry has been marred by corruption and unethical practices in the profession. Globally accepted standards must be applied but keeping in mind cultural considerations because what may be deemed ethical or unethical differs from region to region. For example, the relationship between PR practitioners and government bodies can vary greatly in regions with strong political control or limited media freedom, thus making standards relevant and effective in particular contexts. Consequently, in regions prone to government interference a case for regulatory independence must be done through tactful negotiation with political stakeholders so that the need for autonomy is balanced with the socio-political realities of the region or state. It is for this reason that the successful application of the framework on a global scale depends on flexibility considering cultural, economic, and political differences to ensure its relevance and adaptability across diverse settings.

Case in point, the ongoing issue of non-qualified individuals being appointed as spokespersons by security agencies, in Nigeria as highlighted by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). Despite existing laws that criminalize the appointment of untrained PR practitioners, many security agencies continue to appoint non-PR professionals to key communication roles. In response, NIPR is working with the Attorney General's office to criminalize such appointments and is pushing for the regularization of non-certified individuals (Abdulsalam, 2022). However, till date there has been no precedent to this effect. This situation illustrates the need for a robust accreditation system, as proposed in the tripartite framework, to ensure only qualified individuals hold PR positions, enhancing both the credibility and professionalism of the industry.

Thus, for public relations to function as a planned and sustainable effort aimed at fostering goodwill and mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations must operate as an independent body, free from government interference. Also, for public relations to function as a planned and sustainable effort aimed at fostering goodwill and mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, NIPR must operate as an independent body, free from government interference.

A good example is the Public Relations Institute of South Africa-PRISA-which has the power to strike off practitioners who breach its code of conduct or who behave in an unprofessional manner and thus preventing them from practicing (Wöcke et al., 2020). On the other hand, the NIPR does not have a clear framework for punitive action and as such, there is the need for research on how the institute can better perform its regulatory role in terms of disciplining errant members and unqualified practitioners. The study also points out that further research is needed to empirically investigate the implications of inaction by PR practitioners, which would highlight its impact on the standards and credibility of the profession in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Although legislation was put in place to govern the practice of public relations, PR in Nigeria still struggles to gain professional acceptance. The reason for this challenge is largely down to systemic barriers that make it impossible for the PR professionals to perform their jobs effectively. These challenges are heightened by organizational culture, management priorities, and overall socio-political, cultural and economic systems in which practitioners operate. The amount of freedom and autonomy extended to PR professionals in any given society is a major determinant of how well they can carry out their mandates and excel in public relations practices.

It has, therefore, become necessary in Nigeria to have a PR role defined via a structured framework that tackles systemic challenges, standardizes practices, and professionalizes the field of PR. This framework emphasizes key elements such as education, accreditation, and certification to raise the profession to global standards, with cognizance of local realities.

However, the framework may not be applied across the board because of existing socio-economic, political, and cultural variations in various regions of the world. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why this is peculiar to Nigeria. Precisely, lack of funding and resources, especially in underdeveloped territories, has prevented the development of specialized PR programs and accreditation and certification systems that can professionalize PR practice thereby showcasing the economical factor or reasons.

Likewise, cultural resistance could also contribute to difficulties in adopting the framework. This is because of prevalent hierarchical management structures in Nigeria which sees employees and department like PR and communication succumb to pressures from top management. Consequently, this makes practitioners to negotiate and align with corporate politics and agendas which often interfere with the ethical dispositions and self-efficacy of the practitioner. Thus, high power distance culture in Nigeria also subject employees to management objective and goals.

While institutional weaknesses have been identified as hindrance to the practice of PR in Nigeria, particularly inadequate regulatory powers of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, coupled with deficiencies in its enforcement mechanisms. However, while the framework makes a case for accreditation, certification and autonomy, the

facility of the framework to successfully police its ranks and try quacks reduces could dampen the chances of its success.

In addition, there is also the challenge of reconciling global PR standards with the peculiar socio-political and economic context of Nigeria or developing regions. For example, while it is a standard ethical practice globally in PR not to accept gifts as a way of ensuring integrity, the brown envelope culture in Nigeria where journalists are given gifts or money for publishing a story to favor the giver is an abiding reality. While this is unethical by international standards, it is sometimes seen as a means of survival by media professionals and their media organizations. It follows that international PR standards should be applied cautiously in view of local practices that have been cultivated and engraved into the socio-economic fabric of a region or state (informally) or within the media landscape of a given society. Therefore, a balanced approach is relevant in the call for global ethical standards, taking into consideration local challenges so that the framework can be effective and contextually relevant.

The implications of role non-performance are enormous which may take the form of damage to organizational reputation, damage to organizations, loss of stakeholder trust, missed opportunities for effective communication, dwelling business and financial losses. These setbacks not only affect individual organizations but also undermine the credibility of the PR professionals and by extension the PR profession. It is, therefore, imperative that these challenges be addressed through a comprehensive and actionable framework if the PR industry in Nigeria is to thrive and contribute meaningfully to the success of organizations and societal development.

BIODATA

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