

Social media and effective public relations activities: A study of the carnival Calabar

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Abstract - The study explores the use of social media tools in public relations to promote the 2023 Calabar Carnival, a significant cultural event in Nigeria. It utilises Uses and Gratification and Technological Determinism theories to analyse the phenomena and draw conclusions. Through qualitative research via Focus Group Discussions, the study examined the effectiveness of social media and public relations strategies in enhancing attendee experiences and promoting the event. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that social media significantly boosted public relations efforts, leading to increased followers and engagement, as well as extensive media coverage. Notably, Facebook emerged as the most effective platform for engagement during the carnival. The study recommends leveraging additional platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to enhance real-time engagement and user-generated content. It also advises event organizers to prioritize social media engagement, form influencer partnerships, and focus on building relationships with social media representatives while creating dynamic, engaging content.

Keywords: social media, effectiveness, public relations, event promotion, carnival Calabar

1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) is recognized as a vital strategy for effective organizational communication, encompassing planned efforts between organizations, individuals, and their publics. Scholars have offered various definitions of PR, reflecting diverse academic and professional perspectives. For instance, Hayes (2024) characterizes PR as "the set of techniques and strategies related to managing how information about an individual or company is disseminated to the public and especially the media." Additionally, the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations articulated a seminal definition in 1978, stating that "public relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organization leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 9). These definitions highlight key PR functions, including strategic communication, brand management, relationship building, media relations, and crisis management.

The rise of social media has transformed the PR landscape, providing powerful tools for engaging with audiences, shaping brand reputations, and amplifying messages. This shift has



been particularly beneficial for promoting cultural events like the Carnival Calabar, established in 2004 by Governor Donald Etim Duke to enhance tourism and attract investment in Cross River State, Nigeria. The carnival has evolved into a major cultural spectacle, leveraging social media to foster relationships and enhance visibility.

As a significant tourist attraction, Carnival Calabar showcases Nigeria's cultural heritage through vibrant parades, music, and dance, attracting a global audience. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp facilitate real-time updates, event promotion, and audience interaction. This engagement generates excitement through captivating visuals and user-generated content, creating anticipation for the event (Obukoadata et al., 2021).

PR practitioners utilize social media to connect directly with participants and spectators, encouraging them to share experiences using event hashtags (#calabarcarnival). This user-generated content extends the carnival's reach and fosters community engagement. By actively responding to comments and feedback, organizers demonstrate commitment to their audience (Wright & Hinson, 2009; Obukoadata, 2022b). Moreover, social media plays a crucial role in managing brand reputation. Organizers can swiftly address misinformation and feedback, leveraging accurate information to clarify misconceptions and maintain a positive image. The Carnival Calabar, often referred to as "Africa's biggest street party," involves a complex network of stakeholders whose contributions are essential to its success. Engaging these stakeholders through social media is vital for navigating logistical challenges and ensuring a positive visitor experience. This paper critically analyzes the role of social media in the PR strategies employed for the successful hosting of the 2023 Carnival Calabar, emphasizing its significance in enhancing communication and engagement within the broader context of Nigeria's cultural heritage.

The integration of social media into public relations has fundamentally transformed communication between organizations and their publics. Recognizing social media as a potent PR tool and a rapid communication channel prompted this research. This study aims to investigate how social media usage enhanced PR activities for the 2023 Carnival Calabar, identifying which platforms garnered the most user participation and visibility for the event. Furthermore, it seeks to address the gap in scholarly and empirical literature regarding the Carnival Calabar since its inception in 2004.

Specifically, the study explores whether social media usage by PR practitioners has significantly influenced the visibility and acceptance of the 2023 Carnival Calabar, whether tourists show a preference for specific social media platforms during the event, and whether there is a correlation between the success of the carnival and social media engagement in PR activities. Utilizing technological determinism theory, this research will provide empirical data to answer these questions, ultimately catalyzing future PR initiatives related to the Carnival Calabar.

The objectives of the study were derived from the statement of the problem. They are: (1) To evaluate the key social media platforms deployed as public relations strategies by the organizers of the 2023 Carnival Calabar. (2) To determine the role of user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms by stakeholders in shaping perceptions of the 2023 Carnival Calabar. (3) To assess how social media platforms enhanced the promotion and dissemination of information regarding the 2023 Carnival Calabar.

Social media has become integral to public relations (PR), with platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn revolutionizing communication between organizations and their publics. Mogos (2011) emphasizes that social media is now a key component of PR campaigns, humanizing organizations and reducing communication barriers. However, challenges such as limited internet access and skills persist, particularly in Nigeria (Cammaerts, 2015). Olayinka & Ewuola (2019) argue that social media significantly impacts public perception by fostering seamless relationships between organizations and their audiences. Missy-Graham and Avery (2013) highlight the proliferation of platforms that enhance communication, making effective social media use a hallmark of a robust PR strategy. This facilitates real-time information flow and multi-level engagement (Obukoadata, 2022a).

Two-thirds of online adults engage with social media daily, including top management and PR practitioners, enabling direct, instant communication. Social media enhances various PR functions, such as audience engagement, brand monitoring, crisis management, and community building (Obukoadata, 2022a). Thus, it is a vital tool for modern PR strategies. Social media accelerates outreach for organizations like the Cross River State Carnival Commission, replacing traditional methods like press releases. Obukoadata (2022a) asserts that social media enables practitioners to connect with previously hard-to-reach audiences, supporting effective communication and driving return on investment (RoI) and further emphasizes that social media integration enhances client relationships and reputation management.

Social media has been utilized in PR activities, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube amplifying the carnival's messages and managing brand reputation in real-time. Each carnival year features a defined theme, with social media playing a crucial role in enhancing visibility and engagement for "Africa's biggest street party." Diggs-Brown (2012) notes that PR's primary function is to facilitate relationships between organizations and their publics, which is vital for strategic communication. Ekwok (2019) emphasizes the necessity of effective social media use in planning and executing Carnival Calabar. Olayinka and Ewuola (2019) observe that social media enables seamless interactions, allowing the Cross River State Carnival Commission to communicate swiftly with stakeholders. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook showcase vibrant costumes and performances, generating interest among potential attendees (Lewis, 2015; Obukoadata, 2022b; Olorunniwo & Islam, 2017).

Social media facilitates direct engagement with participants, encouraging attendees to share experiences and create a sense of community through specific hashtags (#calabarcarnival). Organizers demonstrate commitment by promptly responding to feedback on social media platforms, enhancing audience engagement and brand reputation (Obukoadata et al., 2021). The influence of social media on the brand reputation and success of the 2023 Carnival Calabar has been discussed without empirical evidence. Social media platforms have shaped public perception, expanded reach, and enhanced the overall success of events, as such the Carnival Calabar would not be an exception. Scholars have asserted that PR practitioners gauge relationship effectiveness through audience feedback. The proliferation of social media has bridged gaps between organizations and their publics.

Through platforms like Instagram and Facebook, event organizers communicate directly with audiences, utilizing user-generated content to manage brand reputation. Biglin (2018) supports the notion that social media is essential for creating a positive brand image, which fosters loyalty and enhances reputation. Rukhlia (2023) emphasizes the importance of brand reputation management in increasing revenue and attracting sponsors and positively influencing event success, fostering trust and transparency through user-generated content (Obukoadata et al., 2021). The successful execution of Carnival Calabar has relied on various PR tools, which Hasan (2013) defines as methods used by practitioners to communicate with publics and manage organizational reputation. Ghose (2024) lists tools such as press releases, media kits, and social media, which facilitate timely message dissemination. Linton (2024) adds that effective PR tools include media partnerships and social responsibility initiatives.

The Cross River State Carnival Commission employs a mix of PR tools, including social media, press releases, influencer endorsements, and media relations, to achieve its goals. Over the years, these tools have been pivotal for the carnival's success. Strategic communication and planning are essential for successful event execution. The PR team at the Cross River State Carnival Commission employs various strategies, aligning PR tools with organizational goals. Bhattacharya (2024) underscores the importance of PR strategies in maintaining a strong public reputation. Key strategies include reputation management, audience engagement, and media relations. Oshie and Ushie (2021) define PR strategies as planned actions to achieve goals, while Ghose (2024) refer to them as integrated activities for organizational objectives. For the Cross River State Carnival Commission, effective PR strategies are needed to enhance visibility and participation through brand awareness and strategic communication owing to the importance placed on the events by state and non-state actors. The 2023 carnival theme, "Season of



Sweetness,” was unveiled early to set the tone for success, with the next theme, “Our Shared Prosperity,” announced for 2024.

Social media as a key PR tool for disseminating strategic communication messages includes key features such as push notifications, content sharing, messaging, and user-generated content (UGC). Rodman (2010) highlights features like real-time notifications and responsiveness, common across popular platforms. Hermida (2014) and Shuvo (2023) emphasize that user-friendly and engaging platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, and WhatsApp excel in real-time information dissemination. Naseer (2023) stresses the importance of understanding target audience preferences on social media, guiding organizations in platform selection. Mahmudov (2016) categorizes social media features into communicative, informational, organizational, social inclusion, and entertainment functions. Ultimately, selecting the right platforms with relevant features is crucial for achieving PR goals (Obukoadata et., 2024).

This study adopted two theoretical frameworks: Technological Determinism Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory. Technological Determinism Theory serves as the foundation for the first and third research objectives, while Uses and Gratification Theory underpins the second objective.

Technological Determinism Theory, introduced by Marshall McLuhan in 1962, posits that media technologies shape societal thought, emotion, and behaviour, influencing how societies evolve with technological advancements. The theory asserts that changes in communication technology led to significant transformations in social order, positioning technology as the primary driver of societal change. This perspective is evident in the reliance of Carnival Calabar's public relations activities on social media platforms. Technological determinism has evolved alongside communication and technology changes, necessitating that PR practitioners adapt to contemporary trends for effective service delivery. Social media has emerged as the preferred tool for PR practitioners, exemplified by the Carnival Calabar organizers' heavy dependence on these platforms to drive traffic to their websites and other commission channels. Technological determinism suggests that “technology causes or determines the structure of the rest of society,” highlighting the role of social media as a mechanism for social integration and communication. This relevance underscores its utility for PR professionals in planning significant events like the 2023 Carnival Calabar.

Social media has, without question, become an extraordinarily powerful force in shaping contemporary society – touching everything from our language and communication styles to the cultural landscapes in which we operate. A growing body of research spotlights social media's nuanced and significant influence across sectors such as education, journalism, marketing, and cultural exchange. Taken together, these studies demonstrate both the promise and the pitfalls of digital platforms, as well as the complex new realities they help to shape.

In educational contexts, the impact of social media is particularly striking. Digital platforms can act as a double-edged sword for language learning and academic achievement. For instance, Ali (2023) found that social media has potential to enhance English language acquisition among undergraduate students, but its effects are far from uniformly positive. Benefits can be substantial when platforms are used intentionally to access resources, practice language skills, and connect with other learners. At the same time, social media can easily become a distraction, undermining academic performance and reducing meaningful engagement. This suggests an ongoing need for balance, digital literacy, and critical self-regulation among students and educators.

Social media's reach goes beyond pure language instruction; it serves as a vital space for intercultural learning. Mahmood et al. (2024) argue that platforms such as Facebook and Instagram foster cultural diversity and intercultural understanding in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Through these digital environments, students are exposed to authentic communication with peers from various backgrounds, encountering new perspectives and practices. Such engagement is invaluable for broadening horizons – not just linguistically, but also culturally – preparing students for participation in an increasingly interconnected world.

Focusing on journalism, the digital transformation induced by social media is profound.



Traditional journalistic boundaries are being redefined as news outlets adapt to a climate of real-time information, commentary, and engagement. Hassan et al. (2024) explore both the opportunities and anxieties fuelling this transformation, emphasizing the challenges journalists face as they navigate socio-political complexities in the digital realm. The pressure to remain objective in an environment rife with misinformation and sensationalized content is intense. Acheampong (2024) further demonstrates that, in Ghana, the mainstream media ecosystem is evolving rapidly in response to digital trends, with news reporting and audience interaction taking new forms dictated in part by social media engagement. Here, professional credibility hinges on a journalist's ability to discern fact from fiction and curate content in an often-chaotic environment.

Zhang (2022a) offers an in-depth examination of public relations strategies, thoroughly discussing the ways organizations can shape their public image through carefully crafted communication methods. The analysis spans multiple dimensions of the public relations landscape, such as the intricacies of media relations, the tactical management of crises, and the complex dynamics of stakeholder engagement. Notably, Zhang draws attention to the strategic significance of digital platforms, underscoring how the rise of social media and new digital communication tools has fundamentally transformed the profession. In today's fast-evolving media climate, these digital tools play an increasingly critical role, allowing organizations to influence public perception more directly and rapidly than ever before. Yet, while Zhang's discussion of digital strategies is both timely and comprehensive, the analysis could certainly be further enriched by integrating specific, real-world case studies. Concrete examples drawn from various industries would not only ground the theoretical insights in practical reality but also illustrate the nuanced ways these strategies are implemented and their actual effectiveness across different organizational contexts.

Zhang (2022b), in a distinct but equally compelling study, investigates the linkage between social capital, income, and subjective well-being within rural China. This research brings forth valuable perspectives on the socio-economic elements that foster overall life satisfaction, especially within communities where traditional social structures and interpersonal networks still hold immense influence. Zhang's findings challenge longstanding assumptions by revealing that individuals with robust social ties tend to report higher levels of well-being, even in the absence of substantial financial resources. This suggests that social capital can, in certain settings, outweigh income as a predictor of happiness – a notable departure from the conventional focus on economic metrics. Nevertheless, the study's impact could be further strengthened through a more rigorous methodological approach. For instance, a broader sample and a more varied regional representation might enhance the generalizability of the findings, making them more applicable not only across different regions of China but potentially to rural populations globally.

Taken together, both studies contribute meaningfully to their respective academic conversations – one advancing our comprehension of modern public relations and the other reshaping our understanding of what drives personal well-being. At the same time, there remains an opportunity for further exploration in both domains. Future research could address existing methodological limitations, expand on theoretical frameworks, and more explicitly demonstrate how these ideas are translated into practice. By doing so, subsequent work could build on Zhang's foundation, offering both deeper theoretical rigor and greater practical relevance.

Within marketing and business, the rise of social media has led to unprecedented shifts in how brands engage with consumers. Unlike traditional marketing, digital platforms allow direct, interactive, and highly targeted communication with potential buyers. Studies by Paramita and Zulfan (2024) and Pastini and Lilasari (2023) illustrate how strategic use of social media by businesses – notably Tista Tourism Village and others – can drive brand awareness and fortify brand loyalty. By curating appealing content and engaging directly with audiences, these brands are able to extend their reach and shape consumer behaviour more effectively than ever before. Likewise, Azmir and Purnomo (2025) provide compelling evidence that Facebook-based marketing correlates with tangible sales growth, highlighting the economic relevance of these platforms.



Yet, the prevalence of social media in commercial and journalistic spheres introduces ethical concerns. The merging of journalism and marketing can blur lines of integrity, while the commodification of personal and cultural identities raises critical questions about authenticity, privacy, and representation. As Balan et al. (2023) observe in their examination of viral memes, social media has the power to amplify cultural expression and humour, but also the potential to reinforce stereotypes or problematic social norms, often at dizzying speeds. This dynamic raises further concerns about the unintended consequences of digital virality on public perception and discourse. Social media's influence extends into the domain of civic engagement and collective action. Ahmad and Joseph (2023) highlight its empowering potential, especially for marginalized groups such as women. By leveraging platforms like Facebook and Twitter, women are able to mobilize, advocate for social change, and facilitate community development in ways that were previously inaccessible. This demonstrates how social media can democratize participation, foster solidarity, and promote social justice initiatives.

Nevertheless, these positive dynamics are counterbalanced by significant risks, primarily concerning misinformation and the erosion of traditional media values. The sheer volume and speed of online content can foster polarization and the viral spread of inaccurate—sometimes intentionally misleading—narratives. Silaban et al. (2024) illustrate this phenomenon by analysing comment sections on Indonesian news portals, uncovering highly polarized discussions and widespread dissemination of falsehoods. Such developments underscore a persistent need for robust media literacy, ethical standards, and critical engagement with online information. The influence of social media is vast, multifaceted, and evolving. It presents powerful opportunities for education, intercultural dialogue, and business innovation, even as it introduces complex ethical challenges and threats to reliable public discourse. The task moving forward is to maximize the benefits these platforms offer—while developing strategies to mitigate their risks—so that society can navigate the digital age with greater wisdom and responsibility.

Social media has, without question, become a central force shaping modern communication—a fact that's been picked apart and analyzed from public relations to shifting cultural dynamics. Acheampong (2024), for example, offers an in-depth look at how digital platforms have fundamentally disrupted mainstream journalism in Ghana. The traditional boundaries distinguishing professional journalists from everyday citizens have become increasingly porous. Now, digital access gives essentially anyone the potential to influence narratives and drive public discourse. While this democratization of reporting does create opportunities for increased engagement and plurality of voices, it also introduces complexities regarding credibility, verification, and the maintenance of journalistic standards.

Looking at a broader cultural spectrum, Adams (2024) underscores social media's multifaceted role in Nigeria, describing it as both an amplifier for marginalized voices and a powerful shaper of cultural narratives. Yet, this new visibility comes at a cost: the same tools that give voice to the underrepresented are sometimes weaponized to spread misinformation or polarize communities. The dual-edged nature of these platforms reflects broader global concerns over digital literacy and the discernment required to navigate such a saturated information environment.

From a business standpoint, Adeyemo (2025) details the transformative impact of social media on the growth trajectories of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Ibadan. Digital platforms have expanded market reach, provided new channels for customer interaction, and contributed to business development efforts. Nevertheless, this increased connectivity also puts pressure on SMEs to adapt rapidly and develop digital competencies—an endeavour that may overwhelm those without adequate resources. Likewise, when considering the integration of social media into education, Ali (2023) finds that while these tools can enhance English language learning and boost academic performance among undergraduates, careful moderation is necessary to prevent distraction and ensure educational outcomes remain positive.

Theoretical perspectives on public relations have not remained static amid these technological shifts. Anderson (2023) formulates a theoretical framework tailored to the current



digital communications context, highlighting how strategy development now includes an intricate balance of traditional skills and digital acumen. Bartnick (2023) adds depth to this discussion by emphasizing social media's critical role in shaping both brand identity and real-time public perception. The instantaneous, reactive nature of these interactions demands a level of agility and responsiveness perhaps unprecedented in the field.

Examining digital commerce, Azmir and Purnomo (2025) investigate how specific platforms, such as Facebook, facilitate marketing strategies and directly contribute to sales growth for localized industries—furniture stores in Bandar Lampung serve as a case study. The ability to leverage targeted advertising and community networks demonstrates the practical application of digital marketing theory. Additionally, Balan et al. (2023) draw attention to the emergence of internet memes as a form of multimodal language. Memes serve not only as vehicles for humour and viral communication but also as significant cultural artefacts, reflecting and influencing online discourse. Beyond these focused examples, Bilgin (2018) highlights the powerful relationship between social media marketing, brand loyalty, and heightened consumer awareness—further evidence that digital platforms now play a decisive role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. Social media's influence extends into the arena of activism, as Cammaerts (2015) explores: these platforms facilitate the engagement and amplification of social causes but can concurrently foster echo chambers that limit perspective and dialogue.

For those seeking to systematically study these phenomena, foundational works by Cresswell (2015) and Digs-Brown (2012) provide essential methodologies for research design and public relations strategies. These frameworks remain relevant for contemporary scholars aiming to critically assess the ever-evolving landscape of social media-driven communication. Social media has, without question, become a central force shaping modern communication—a fact that's been picked apart and analyzed from public relations to shifting cultural dynamics. Acheampong (2024), for example, offers an in-depth look at how digital platforms have fundamentally disrupted mainstream journalism in Ghana. The traditional boundaries distinguishing professional journalists from everyday citizens have become increasingly porous. Now, digital access gives essentially anyone the potential to influence narratives and drive public discourse. While this democratization of reporting does create opportunities for increased engagement and plurality of voices, it also introduces complexities regarding credibility, verification, and the maintenance of journalistic standards.

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The influence of social media across diverse fields such as public relations, marketing, and brand management has become an increasingly prominent theme within contemporary research and professional discourse. Scholars like Obukoadata (2022b) delve into this phenomenon by closely examining the intersection between musicology and brand identity negotiation. In this study, the focus on Urhobo/Isoko music provides a valuable lens for understanding how digital platforms shape, reinforce, and sometimes disrupt both culture and individual or group identities, particularly within the African context. The research highlights not only how social media mediates cultural transmission, but also how it enables new forms of engagement with heritage and community belonging. Similarly, the work of Obukoadata et al. (2024) explores the impacts wrought by the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, especially regarding knowledge transfer and educational continuity. Through their case study on the SENSE-transactional radio instruction experience, the authors spotlight innovative approaches to learning during moments of acute societal crisis, suggesting that social media and related technologies can fill critical gaps left by traditional institutions.

With particular regard to public relations and corporate communications, the rise of digital platforms has been transformative, fundamentally altering the means and manners in which organizations connect with their multiple stakeholders. Olayinka and Ewuola (2019) point out that social media has enabled real-time engagement, introducing both opportunities for immediate dialogue and challenges surrounding message control and reputation management. Their analysis demonstrates that as organizations increasingly leverage these platforms, practitioners are compelled to revise strategies that formerly relied on slower, one-way communication channels. Olayinka and Olorunsho (2019) further illuminate this paradigm shift by considering the dual-edged nature of social media influence; while practitioners have greater means to interact and build relationships, they also face complexities such as information overload, rapid news cycles, and the volatility of online publics. On a more conceptual level, Oshie and Ushie (2021) propose frameworks for understanding public relations as an essential tool for organizational communication, particularly as a mechanism for risk and reputation management in an environment where digital narratives can spread globally within seconds.

The function of social media in brand management is also an area of ongoing scholarly focus. As demonstrated by Olorunniwo and Islam (2017), digital platforms serve as amplifiers for events such as the Calabar Carnival, greatly enhancing brand visibility and deepening engagement with audiences both local and international. Their research reveals that cultural events – when synergized with strategic social media use – can generate substantial economic and reputational capital for associated brands. In a related vein, Pastini and Lilasari (2023) analyze the deployment of social media in constructing and promoting customer brand



awareness, providing evidence of how businesses are increasingly integrating digital tools into their strategic repertoire. Rukhlia (2023) brings further nuance by focusing on the critical function of social media in managing brand reputation: the real-time nature of these platforms allows for immediate response to both opportunities and threats, thereby serving as a central axis of contemporary reputation management strategies.

Beyond established corporations, the entrepreneurial and business development implications of social media are notable. Sharma (2024) offers a systematic review of how platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn foster innovation and facilitate the growth of startups and small businesses. The research underscores that social media, when utilized effectively, provides entrepreneurs with affordable and extensive promotional opportunities, the ability to rapidly test ideas, and a direct line to consumer feedback. In the tourism sector, Paramita and Zulfan (2024) discuss the practical application of social media in enhancing brand awareness, with empirical results indicating positive effects on tourist attraction engagement. Susanto et al. (2023) further elaborate, demonstrating that concerted digital marketing efforts are associated with increased tourist visits and overall economic uplift for local destinations.

It is equally important to consider the broader social implications of widespread social media engagement. Whiting and Williams (2013) approach this issue from a uses and gratifications perspective, unpacking the motivations behind social media usage. Their findings suggest that individuals are driven by desires for social interaction, instantaneous information access, and various forms of self-expression—factors which help explain the platform's appeal across demographic groups. Silaban et al. (2024) contribute to this discourse by examining the content and tone of online interactions, particularly as visible in netizen comments on Indonesian news platforms. Their analysis highlights the ways in which social media not only reflects but also shapes public opinion, illustrating the dynamic interplay between online discourse and societal attitudes.

Uses and Gratification Theory, developed by Blumer, Katz, and Gurevitch in 1974, focuses on audience engagement, emphasizing the active role users play in selecting and utilizing social media platforms that meet their needs, such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Whiting and Williams (2013) assert that individuals seek media that fulfil their needs and lead to gratification. This theory is particularly pertinent to social media as a vital PR tool for the success of the 2023 Carnival Calabar, providing insights into how the Cross River State Carnival Commission's publics utilize social media for information about carnival activities. The theory posits that people engage with media to satisfy specific needs. Adeyanju and Haruna (2012) highlight that the theory's core premise is that audiences selectively expose themselves to, attend to, and retain messages based on the perceived gratification derived from social media content. Users are pivotal in the communication process, as they choose content, derive meaning, and act upon it. This explains the extensive use of social media to disseminate information about the 2023 Carnival Calabar, where increased traffic to carnival-related sites correlated with a significant turnout of participants and spectators, contributing to the event's success. The application of the Uses and Gratification Theory in this study illustrates that social media users are intentional in their engagement with content, utilizing user-generated content and hashtags to fulfil their specific purposes.

2. Method

This study adopts the focus group discussion research design because the study seeks to gather data from a small specialized population on an issue of professional or technical interests. The population of the study is public relations practitioners in Cross River State and personnel of the Cross River State Carnival Commission. According to data from the State Chapter of the NIPR, the population of PR practitioners are 136; while personnel of the Cross River State Carnival Commission are 82. This gives a total population of 218.

Due to the nature of the research design a sample size of 12 was arrived at in line with what Cresswell (2015) says that for qualitative studies/designs, a sample size of between 10-36



was adequate. Consequently, this sample size was broken down into two (2) FGDs of six discussants each (D1 and D2) because saturation was achieved at this point. The composition of the two groups was six (6) PR practitioners and 6 (six) Carnival Calabar Commission personnel. They were purposefully selected as a result of their direct involvement in the activities of the Carnival Calabar over the years. Their selection was without bias to gender, age or qualification, but solely based on knowledge and participation in the Carnival Calabar. In the course of the reporting, the discussants were labelled as D1a, D1b, D1c, D1d, D1e, and D1f for the first FGD, and D2a, D2b, D2c, D2d, D2e and D2f for the second FGD. The data gathered was analysed in themes.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The conceptualisations of social media articulated in this scholarly discourse are both enlightening and multifaceted. One perspective regards social media as a "means of exchanging and sharing ideas, information, and content within a community-oriented populace through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and others (D1c)." This interpretation underscores the communicative and collaborative essence of social media.

Conversely, another conceptualization presents social media as "a realm that exists independently, yet within a complex conundrum. Social media are pertinent in today's society; consequently, individuals utilize them to fulfil their objectives, particularly among younger generations. Social media possess the transformative capacity to reshape anything. They are preeminent platforms for creating awareness, promoting, and marketing ideas and services (D2f)." This viewpoint accentuates the transformative potential of social media and its pervasive presence in contemporary life.

To substantiate these conceptualizations, Biglin (2018) contends that social media platforms offer organizations opportunities to engage with their audiences and cultivate relationships. This notion aligns with the essence of the Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that individuals engage with media to satisfy their needs. Public Relations officials have discovered that certain social media platforms fulfil the necessity of keeping their publics informed about specific events, framing social media as agents of information and communication.

Furthermore, social media are perceived by some as the most convenient space for disseminating information (D1a), as evidenced by the considerable efforts devoted to sharing details about Carnival Calabar 2023. This perspective resonates with Technological Determinism Theory, which asserts that technology shapes and displaces various facets of our lives, including the modalities and mediums through which individuals convey information to their intended audiences.

More broadly, social media are conceptualized as platforms for the exchange of information, ideas, and diverse forms of content, as well as instruments for enhancing communication and interaction among individuals (D1d). Importantly, social media also grants individuals opportunities for self-presentation and identity performance, as suggested by Forsey (2023) and Naseer (2023). Collectively, these conceptualizations illuminate the intricate nature of social media, encompassing its communicative, transformative, and interactive capabilities, along with its pivotal role in shaping contemporary information dissemination and personal expression.

The discourse articulated herein presents a compelling argument for the indispensable role of social media as a tool for the public relations activities associated with Carnival Calabar. The assertions made are firmly rooted in scholarly perspectives and resonate with established theories within the realms of communication and public relations. A pivotal point raised is that "Public Relations is about doing something for the people and informing the people about it. Thus, social media are essential for achieving the objectives of public relations, as a significant number of individuals converge there" (D2a). This viewpoint accentuates the significance of

social media as a platform for effective communication, engagement, and the dissemination of information to targeted audiences.

The argument is further bolstered by the claim that social media have emerged as "relevant tools for public relations practitioners" (Andrew & Ekpenyong, 2012; Obukoadata et al., 2024; Olayinka & Folorunsho, 2019). This aligns seamlessly with the Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that individuals engage with media to satisfy their needs and aspirations. Within the context of public relations, social media offer practitioners a conduit to promote their initiatives and convey their messages to their target audience, thereby fulfilling their intended objectives (D1b).

Moreover, the discourse underscores the significance of social media in facilitating instantaneous feedback and cultivating relationships with stakeholders, as noted by Anderson (2023). This aspect is crucial in public relations, as it enables real-time engagement and the nurturing of mutually beneficial relationships. The scholars further emphasize that social media "advance communication" and "create platforms for the exchange of information in the global era." This highlights the transformative potential of social media and its capacity to foster global connectivity and information dissemination. For public relations professionals, this represents an opportunity to reach a broader audience and communicate their messages effectively (D2c).

Additionally, the discussion acknowledges the preference of younger generations for social media platforms, underscoring the necessity of leveraging these channels to enhance public relations activities. This aligns with the recognition that social media have become a dominant force in contemporary communication and information-sharing practices. In summary, the discourse presented herein offers a robust and well-reasoned case for the necessity of social media as a pivotal tool for the public relations activities surrounding Carnival Calabar. The findings compellingly draw upon pertinent theories, research, and practical considerations to advocate for the strategic utilization of social media in this context.

The PR team's social media efforts for Carnival Calabar 2023 have received a strong overall rating of 8 out of 10. Their effectiveness is highlighted by engaging content, strategic hashtag campaigns, influencer utilization, and real-time updates, which have broadened the carnival's reach. Challenges include information overload, measuring return on investment (ROI), and maintaining audience engagement post-event.

Creativity is rated at 7.5 out of 10, with strengths in innovative visuals, videos, and storytelling that capture the carnival's vibrancy. However, limited experimentation with new formats and platforms indicates room for growth. Social media engagement stands out with a rating of 8.5 out of 10, driven by high audience participation, effective hashtag use, and responsive communication that fosters community. The challenge remains in sustaining this engagement after the carnival concludes. In summary, while the PR practitioners have demonstrated effective, creative, and engaging social media strategies that enhanced the carnival's visibility and attendance (Bartnick, 2023; Kent, 2014; Obukoadata et al., 2024), there are opportunities for improvement in creativity and sustained engagement beyond the event.

The discussion emphasizes the necessity of a diversified media strategy that incorporates traditional media alongside social media. As one participant noted, "We have to consider other media strategies in reaching out to people including the traditional media. Without the intention of sounding immodest, social media serve only an aspect and does not reduce or exterminate the relevance of other forms of media of information and communication that have long been in existence" (D2c). This highlights the importance of not relying solely on social media, especially for reaching diverse demographic segments, such as the elderly.

While social media have become crucial for event promotion in Nigeria (Ghose, 2024; Krishan, 2015; Obukoadata et al., 2024), the discussion notes that "broader parts of the social media that are yet to be utilized" (D1d), suggesting untapped potential. The participants also invoke the Uses and Gratification Theory and Technological Determinism Theory to explore the overrating of social media's effectiveness. The former indicates that users' diverse needs may not always be met by social media, while the latter highlights how inherent limitations and biases can hinder effectiveness.



Challenges such as limited access and engagement among certain segments, particularly in rural areas and among the economically disadvantaged, are also acknowledged, as previously noted by Digs-Brown (2012). One discussant remarked, "Social Media have setbacks too. Some people cannot access social media because of a lack of data and considering the poor economy which does not afford them the purchasing power to subscribe to social media as often as they would have loved to, to obtain entertainment or information value" (D2a). Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of social media are recognized, with one discussant asserting, "social media services are relatively cheap and should be appreciated" (D2f). This necessitates a balanced view that acknowledges both the value and limitations of social media. Overall, the discussion provides a thoughtful examination of the potential overrating of social media in achieving objectives during Carnival Calabar 2023. The discussants highlight that Carnival Calabar has emerged as a major tourist attraction and a significant contributor to the economy of Cross River State, as noted by Eze-Orji and Nwosu (2016). This underscores the importance of effective public relations strategies in promoting the event.

Specific social media platforms used for promoting Carnival Calabar 2023 - such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok - are discussed. The participants noted that "so much content was made to promote Carnival Calabar, 2023, especially on Facebook. Social Media worked so well because we used YouTube, Facebook and Twitter also known as TikTok to sell Carnival Calabar 2023" (D1c; D2f). This directly addresses the first research question and the study's initial objective.

The emphasis on specific platforms aligns with Gurevitch's Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that individuals seek media content to fulfil their needs. The analysis indicates that various social media platforms were leveraged to meet the gratifying factors of the target audience (D2e). However, the discussion also acknowledges areas for improvement in the PR approach for Carnival Calabar 2023. One participant remarked, "We may have done a good percentage of the job but there is still a lot more to do especially in the PR angle. There is user-generated content everywhere but I do not think we have targeted the PR area. The PR professionals need to affiliate more with social media influencers to come up with content that will sell whatever message they want to send out to the people" (D1f). This suggests a need for a more strategic and targeted approach to social media in PR activities, potentially through collaborations with influencers.

The discussion references Technological Determinism Theory, which posits that technology plays a crucial role in decision-making across various aspects of life (Obukoadata et al., 2024; Obukoadata et al., 2021). This theory contextualizes the increasing reliance on social media for event promotion and information exchange, as observed in the Carnival Calabar 2023 case. Finally, the discussants provide a detailed assessment of the specific social media platforms used in the PR campaign, highlighting strengths and benefits. For example, live streaming the event on Facebook "added another level of excitement and engagement," with the audience becoming "interactive and commented on every event that played out at the time" (D1c; D2c). Overall, this analysis offers insights into the deployment of social media in the PR activities surrounding Carnival Calabar 2023.

The discussants highlight the greater perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of user-generated content (UGC) compared to brand-generated content, noting that UGC effectively aligns with brand messages and reaches a wider audience (D2a). This aligns with the Uses and Gratification Theory, which explains that users create and share UGC to fulfill needs such as self-expression and social connection, thereby influencing their engagement and perception of brands.

They propose a rating scale to assess UGC's impact on brand perception, considering factors like production quality and audience sentiment. The relevance of both Uses and Gratification Theory and Technological Determinism Theory is emphasized, as these frameworks help understand user motivations and how platform features shape behaviour (Obukoadata et al., 2024).

Additionally, the discussion notes that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube enable PR practitioners to reach larger audiences and foster community engagement through real-time interaction (D2b; D1b). The visual nature of social media is essential for showcasing the carnival's vibrant elements, and it effectively promotes specific events, driving attendance (D2e). The ability to track feedback and adapt strategies in real-time further enhances PR efforts. Overall, the analysis illustrates how social media has significantly improved the promotion and dissemination of Carnival Calabar 2023 activities, emphasizing its role in engaging audiences and enhancing brand perception.

4. Conclusion

The study highlights the critical role of social media in promoting the 2023 Carnival Calabar, emphasizing its vast reach and accessibility. Participants noted that platforms like Facebook were particularly effective, with engaging content showcasing the carnival's unique aspects, such as videos capturing excitement and cultural significance. Prompt responses to audience feedback were also deemed essential for maintaining engagement.

Partnerships with social media influencers were recognized for their ability to broaden audience reach and add authenticity to promotional efforts. Participants stressed the importance of tracking engagement metrics to evaluate and adjust strategies effectively. However, challenges such as internet connectivity issues and information overload were acknowledged.

The findings underscore the need for integrating social media and public relations strategies to enhance event promotion and attendee experiences. Recommendations include diversifying social media strategies beyond Facebook, leveraging user-generated content to shape perceptions, and utilizing analytics to refine promotional efforts. Overall, the study contributes significantly to social media use and public relations in event promotion, offering practical guidance for future cultural festivals to enhance reach, engagement, and overall success.

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