

The Role of Public Relations: A Study of Image Management of Candidates during General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examined the role of public relations in the image management of candidates during general elections in Nigeria. The study was motivated by the increasing use of public relations strategies, social media campaigns, political branding, and image-building techniques by political candidates seeking electoral support. Specifically, the study investigated the extent to which candidates' projected images align with their actual interactions with voters, the effectiveness of public relations strategies in influencing public perception, and the factors responsible for the image-reality gap often observed after elections. The study adopted a quantitative survey research design. A structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale was used to collect data from a population of 300 respondents comprising voters, political party members, campaign officials, and members of the public. Data were analyzed using frequency tables, percentages, and mean scores. The findings revealed that public relations play a significant role in shaping the public image of political candidates during elections. The study found that many candidates project favorable personalities on social media that do not always correspond with their physical interactions at the grassroots level. The findings further showed that political public relations strategies are increasingly focused on digital campaigns and image projection, while communication and engagement often decline after electoral victory. Respondents also perceived unfulfilled campaign promises, black public relations, and excessive political branding as major contributors to public distrust and the image-reality gap in Nigerian politics. The study concluded that although public relations is essential for effective political communication and voter engagement, its credibility depends on consistency between campaign promises, projected images, and actual performance in office.

Keywords: Public Relations, Image Management, Political Communication, General Elections, Political Branding.

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Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of global democracy, the success of a political candidate is increasingly dependent not just on policy frameworks or manifestos, but on the strategic construction and management of their public persona. Public Relations (PR) has transitioned from being a supplementary support service to a core pillar of political strategy, particularly within the volatile and ethnically diverse political ecosystem of Nigeria. As electoral contests in Nigeria become more competitive, the role of PR in image management has become a decisive factor in voter persuasion and mobilization. According to Johnson (2021), political public relations is the deliberate process by which candidates use communication to establish, maintain, and protect a reputation that aligns with the aspirations of the electorate.

In Nigeria, the democratic journey since 1999 has witnessed a significant shift in how candidates engage with the public. The 2019 and 2023 General Elections, in particular, highlighted a departure from traditional "godfatherism" toward a more media-centric approach where candidate perception is heavily curated (Onuoha, 2022). Image management involves a strategic blend of rhetoric, visual symbols, and media presence designed to foster trust and credibility. As Adebayo (2020) notes, a candidate's

image is their "political capital"; in a country where ethnic and religious sentiments often influence voting patterns, PR professionals are tasked with crafting a "nationalist" image that transcends local biases while still appealing to grassroots bases.

The digital revolution has further complexified the role of PR in Nigerian elections. The emergence of "digital diplomacy" and the use of social media influencers have redefined how candidates manage their reputations. During the 2023 election cycle, platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram became the primary battlegrounds for image wars. Okafor (2023) observes that PR strategies have shifted from top-down broadcasting to interactive, real-time engagement, where candidates must constantly defend their brand against "fake news" and "black PR." This era of "post-truth politics" in Nigeria demands that PR practitioners move beyond simple publicity to sophisticated crisis management and sentiment analysis (Williams & Adeyemi, 2024).

Furthermore, the influence of PR on voter behavior in Nigeria cannot be overstated. With a burgeoning youth population that is increasingly skeptical of the status quo, PR professionals now focus on "identity branding." This involves portraying

candidates as empathetic, technologically savvy, and reform-minded. However, the ethical dimensions of this practice remain a subject of academic debate. Arowolo and Bello (2025) argue that while image management is essential for visibility, a disconnect between the curated PR image and the candidates' actual political pedigree can lead to "voter cognitive dissonance" and post-election apathy. This highlights the need for authenticity in political branding, a challenge that continues to define Nigerian electoral communication.

As Nigeria prepares for the 2027 electoral cycle, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in PR strategies is projected to become the new frontier. Recent scholarly projections suggest that AI-driven data analytics will allow PR firms to personalize candidate messaging to specific demographics with unprecedented precision (Ibrahim & Smith, 2026). This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the multifaceted role of Public Relations in shaping candidate images, evaluating the strategies employed during recent Nigerian elections, and assessing the impact of these efforts on the democratic process. By examining the intersection of traditional media, digital innovation, and ethical communication, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how image management dictates the trajectory of political power in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigerian general elections, there is a widening "image-reality gap" where candidates use Public Relations (PR) to package artificial personas that mask their actual governance capabilities. This over-reliance on manufactured branding leads to post-election disillusionment and a breakdown of public trust when elected officials fail to live up to their curated images. Furthermore, the rise of "Black PR" and misinformation has distorted the electoral space, making it difficult for voters to distinguish between genuine leadership qualities and deceptive propaganda.

Researchable Gaps

➤ The Digital-Grassroots Divide:

Most research focuses on social media PR for urban voters, leaving a gap in how these digital images are reconciled with the expectations of the rural grassroots electorate.

➤ Image Sustainability:

There is a lack of study on why candidate images often collapse immediately after the election, specifically the failure to transition from "campaign branding" to "governance PR."

Objective of the Study

1. To examine the specific Public Relations strategies employed by political candidates for image management during General Elections in Nigeria.
2. To evaluate the impact of "Black PR" and misinformation on voter perception and the overall credibility of the electoral process.
3. To examine the level of consistency (or dissonance) between the digital image management targeted at urban voters and the traditional PR outreach used for the rural grassroots electorate.
4. To investigate the factors responsible for the "post-election image collapse" and the challenges candidates face in transitioning from campaign branding to sustainable governance PR.

Significance the Study

➤ To Political Candidates and Political Parties:

This study will provide valuable insights into the importance of building authentic and sustainable brands. It will help political actors understand that effective Public Relations goes beyond winning elections; it involves managing a reputation that can survive the transition into governance, thereby maintaining long-term political relevance.

➤ To Public Relations Practitioners and Image Consultants:

The research will serve as a strategic guide for PR professionals on how to navigate the complex Nigerian media landscape. Specifically, it offers a framework for bridging the "digital-grassroots divide," ensuring that communication strategies are consistent and effective across both tech-savvy urban populations and traditional rural electorates.

➤ To the Electorate and the General Public:

By deconstructing the techniques used in political packaging and "Black PR," this study will enhance the media literacy of Nigerian voters. It will empower the public to critically evaluate candidate images, distinguish between propaganda and substance, and make more informed choices during elections.

➤ To Academia and Future Researchers:

This study contributes significantly to the body of knowledge in political communication and African studies. By addressing the identified gaps specifically the sustainability of political images post-election and the rural-urban PR dissonance it provides a theoretical and empirical foundation for future scholarly inquiries into electoral dynamics in developing democracies.

Literature Reviews

Public Relations and Political Image Management

Public relations has become a critical tool for political image management during elections in Nigeria. Political candidates increasingly employ public relations strategies to create favorable perceptions among voters and stakeholders. According to Obasi H.U and Ubani E. (2024), modern political campaigns in Nigeria utilize public relations techniques such as media relations, agenda setting, image building, crisis management, and strategic communication to influence public opinion and electoral outcomes. These strategies help candidates establish credibility, maintain visibility, and strengthen voter trust.

Similarly, Eruo (2024) found that public relations activities, including campaign planning, media management, and stakeholder engagement, significantly contribute to political image construction. However, ineffective implementation and inadequate feedback mechanisms may weaken the impact of such strategies. Public relations therefore serves as a bridge between political candidates and the electorate by facilitating mutual understanding and reputation management.

Strategic Political Communication and Electoral Success

Strategic political communication is closely linked to public relations and candidate image management. Research on the 2023 election campaigns in Rivers State revealed that political parties adopted agenda-setting and persuasive communication strategies to shape voter perceptions and increase electoral support

(Njoku et al., 2024). Public relations practitioners coordinated campaign messages to ensure consistency across media platforms.

The study further observed that successful candidates maintained a positive public image through issue-based communication and continuous voter engagement. This supports the view that political communication functions as a public relations mechanism for managing candidate reputation and influencing voter behavior during elections.

Social Media as a Public Relations Tool in Elections

The rise of social media has transformed political public relations in Nigeria. During the 2023 general elections, candidates extensively utilized Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to communicate directly with voters. Idris and Alabi (2024) found that Twitter played a significant role in shaping voter perceptions and mobilizing political support.

Social media platforms enable candidates to humanize their personalities, respond quickly to issues, and disseminate campaign messages at relatively low costs. These platforms also provide opportunities for image repair and crisis communication. Consequently, social media has become an indispensable component of political public relations and image management strategies in Nigeria.

Political Advertising and Voter Attitudes

Political advertising is a major public relations strategy used to influence voter attitudes. Nwanmuoh et al. (2024) examined political advertising campaigns during the 2023 general election and found that well-designed public relations campaigns positively affected voter registration, turnout, and acceptance of election outcomes.

The study concluded that political advertising contributes significantly to candidate image management by creating awareness, projecting competence, and enhancing public trust. Through strategic message framing, candidates can shape voter perceptions and strengthen electoral competitiveness.

Agenda-Setting Theory and Candidate Image

Agenda-setting theory explains how public relations practitioners influence public discussions by highlighting specific issues. During election campaigns, candidates focus media attention on favorable issues while minimizing negative publicity. Otumala (2025) found that media engagement significantly influenced voting decisions during Nigeria's 2023 elections.

The study revealed that strategic media coverage of economic development, security, and governance shaped voter attitudes. Public relations professionals therefore play a vital role in controlling narratives and managing candidate images through agenda-setting techniques.

Crisis Communication and Reputation Management

Crisis communication is an essential aspect of political public relations. Political candidates frequently face scandals, misinformation, and public criticism that threaten their reputations. Inobemhe et al. (2023) argue that reputation management strategies such as transparency, stakeholder engagement, and proactive communication are effective in rebuilding public confidence.

Although the study focused on the Nigeria Police Force, its findings are applicable to political candidates who must

continuously protect and restore their public image during election periods. Effective crisis communication can significantly influence voter perceptions and electoral outcomes.

Spin Doctoring and Public Opinion Management

Political campaigns increasingly employ spin doctoring to influence public opinion. Adejoh and Jibrin (2025) found that political candidates in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election widely adopted spin communication strategies to shape public perceptions and media narratives.

The study revealed that while spin doctoring can improve candidate visibility and image, excessive manipulation may lead to voter skepticism and political apathy. Public relations practitioners therefore face the challenge of balancing persuasive communication with ethical considerations.

Visual Communication and Candidate Branding

Visual communication has become a powerful public relations tool in modern political campaigns. Omole and Ogoala (2024) examined campaign posters used during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election and found that visual and linguistic elements effectively influenced voter perceptions.

Campaign posters, logos, colors, and photographs contribute to candidate branding and identity creation. These visual components communicate competence, trustworthiness, and leadership qualities, thereby strengthening candidate image management efforts.

Strategic Communication and Political Branding

Strategic communication has evolved significantly in Nigeria's political environment. According to Adesina (2023), strategic communication integrates public relations, advertising, media management, and stakeholder engagement to achieve political objectives.

Political candidates increasingly rely on integrated communication strategies to build strong political brands and maintain positive public perceptions. Through strategic communication, candidates can differentiate themselves from competitors and establish meaningful relationships with voters.

Emerging Trends in Political Public Relations

Recent developments indicate that political public relations is becoming increasingly digitalized. Discussions on political communication practices in Nigeria suggest growing use of influencers, online opinion leaders, and digital advocacy networks to shape candidate images and public discourse (Adejoh & Jibrin, 2025). Social media influencers and digital communities now serve as intermediaries between candidates and voters.

The emergence of data-driven campaigns, influencer marketing, and real-time engagement strategies highlights the changing nature of political public relations. Future election campaigns in Nigeria are likely to depend more heavily on digital image management, personalized communication, and audience analytics to influence voter behavior and electoral outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks

Excellence Theory of Public Relations

The Excellence Theory was developed by James E. Grunig and his colleagues and remains one of the most influential theories

in public relations. The theory posits that effective public relations is achieved through two-way symmetrical communication, where organizations and their publics engage in mutual understanding and dialogue rather than one-way persuasion. The theory emphasizes strategic communication, relationship building, transparency, and feedback mechanisms as essential elements of successful public relations practice.

In the context of Nigerian general elections, political candidates function as organizations seeking public acceptance and electoral support. Public relations practitioners working for candidates employ communication strategies such as media relations, stakeholder engagement, campaign planning, reputation management, and crisis communication to establish favorable relationships with voters. According to Obasi and Ubani (2024), political campaigns in Nigeria increasingly rely on public relations techniques such as agenda setting, image building, media management, and crisis communication to shape public perception and electoral outcomes.

The relevance of the Excellence Theory to this study lies in its emphasis on mutual communication between candidates and the electorate. During election campaigns, candidates who maintain effective communication channels with voters are more likely to build trust and

credibility. Eruo (2024) found that political parties that employed public relations activities such as media planning, campaign management, and stakeholder engagement experienced improved image management, although challenges such as inadequate funding and weak feedback mechanisms affected effectiveness.

Furthermore, the theory explains how candidates can use public relations to manage crises, counter negative publicity, and maintain a positive image throughout the electoral process. In contemporary Nigerian elections, where misinformation and disinformation are prevalent, effective public relations practices help candidates protect their reputations and sustain voter confidence. Studies on the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections indicate that campaign communication units actively responded to information disorder and negative narratives in order to safeguard candidate images.

Therefore, the Excellence Theory provides a suitable framework for examining how public relations strategies contribute to image management and electoral success among political candidates during general elections in Nigeria.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory was originally developed by McCombs and Shaw and explains how the media influence public perception by determining which issues receive attention and prominence. The theory argues that the media may not tell people what to think, but it significantly influences what people think about. In political communication, agenda-setting is widely used to explain how candidates and political parties shape public discussions and influence voter perceptions through strategic communication.

The theory is highly relevant to the study of public relations and image management during general elections because public relations practitioners deliberately design communication strategies that direct public attention toward favorable aspects of a candidate's personality, achievements, and policy proposals.

Through media engagements, press releases, political advertisements, debates, social media campaigns, and public appearances, candidates seek to establish issues that portray them positively while minimizing attention to unfavorable issues.

Research on political communication during Nigeria's 2023 elections demonstrates that agenda-setting strategies were extensively employed by political parties to influence voter perceptions. Njoku et al. (2024) observed that the People's Democratic Party (PDP) utilized strategic political communication and agenda-setting techniques to shape public opinion and enhance electoral support during the Rivers State election campaigns.

Similarly, studies on media coverage of the 2023 Nigerian elections reveal that news media significantly influenced electoral narratives by emphasizing candidate character, campaign promises, and policy issues. This selective emphasis affected public perception of candidates and contributed to image construction during the election period.

The emergence of social media has further strengthened the application of Agenda-Setting Theory in political campaigns. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok enable candidates to directly influence public discussions and control campaign narratives. Research indicates that social media campaigns played a significant role in persuading voters and shaping electoral discourse during Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

Consequently, Agenda-Setting Theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how public relations activities influence the image management of political candidates by shaping public attention, controlling campaign narratives, and influencing voter perceptions during general elections in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design using the survey method. The survey design is considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to collect data from a large number of respondents and examine their perceptions regarding the role of public relations in managing the image of political candidates during general elections in Nigeria. The quantitative approach allows for objective measurement and statistical analysis of respondents' opinions and experiences.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consists of three hundred (300) respondents drawn from eligible voters, political party members, campaign officials, public relations practitioners, and members of the general public who participated in or observed the conduct of general elections in Nigeria. The choice of these respondents is based on their knowledge and experience of political campaigns and image management activities during elections.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Since the population is relatively manageable, the researcher adopts a census sampling technique whereby all the 300 respondents constitute the sample size of the study. This approach ensures that every member of the population has an opportunity to participate in the study, thereby increasing the reliability and representativeness of the findings.

Instrument for Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection is a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher. The questionnaire is divided into two sections. Section A seeks information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while Section B contains questions relating to the role of public relations in image management of political candidates during general elections.

The questionnaire items are structured using a Five-Point Likert Scale as follows:

Response Option	Score
Strongly Agree (SA)	5
Agree (A)	4
Undecided (U)	3
Disagree (D)	2
Strongly Disagree (SD)	1

The Likert scale enables respondents to indicate the degree of their agreement or disagreement with statements related to public relations and candidate image management.

Validity of the Instrument

To ensure the validity of the instrument, the questionnaire will be submitted to experts in Mass Communication, Public

Relations, and Research Methodology for review. Their observations, corrections, and recommendations will be incorporated to ensure that the instrument adequately measures the variables under investigation.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument will be established through a pilot study involving a small group of respondents outside the study population. The data obtained from the pilot test will be analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or above will be considered acceptable for the study.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher will administer copies of the questionnaire directly to the respondents. The questionnaires will be distributed and retrieved personally to ensure a high response rate and to clarify any issues that respondents may encounter while completing the instrument.

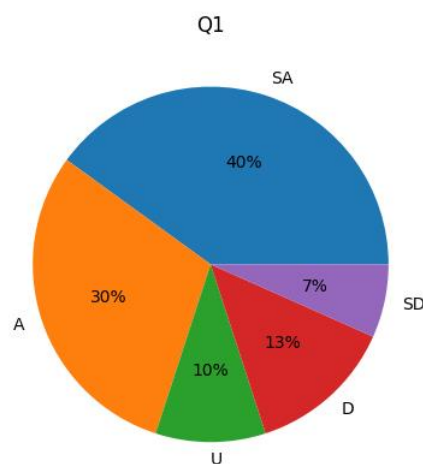
Ethical Considerations

The researcher will obtain informed consent from all respondents before administering the questionnaire. Respondents will be assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation. Information obtained from respondents will be used strictly for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

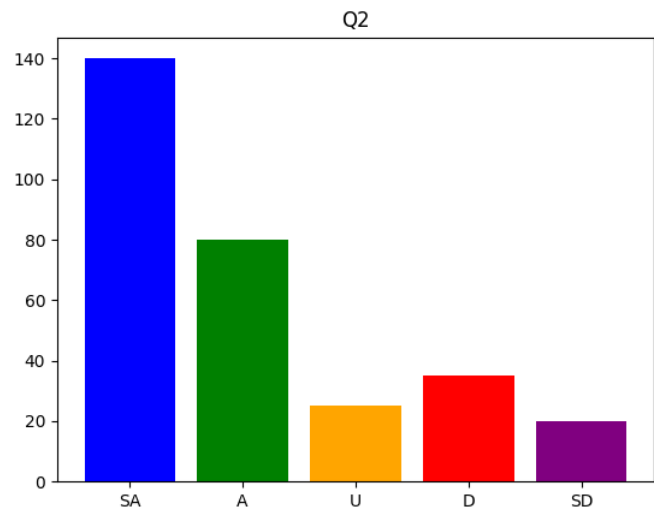
Figure 1

RQ 1



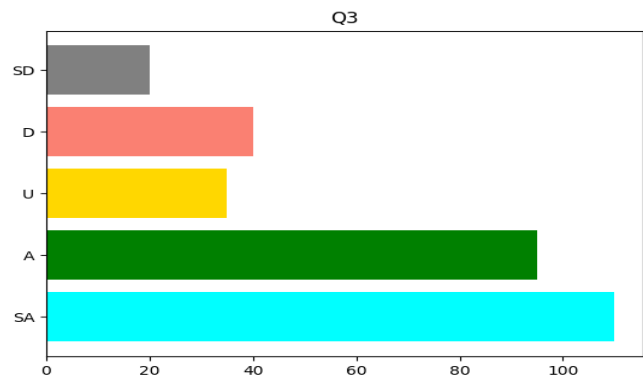
Interpretation: Most respondents believed that candidates' online personalities differ from their grassroots interactions.

Figure 2
RQ 2



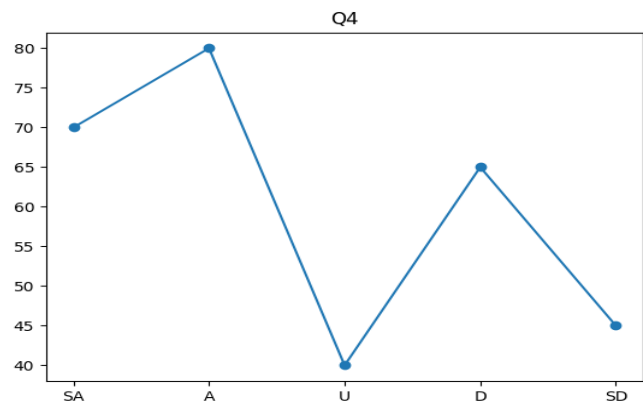
Interpretation: Respondents generally agreed that PR strategies focus more on online debates than local concerns.

Figure 3
RQ 3



Interpretation: Many respondents observed candidates changing behavior and appearance to fit grassroots settings.

Figure 4
RQ 4



Interpretation: Opinions were mixed, though many respondents questioned the effectiveness of influencers outside major cities.

Table 5–7

Question	SA	A	U	D	SD
Q5	100	90	40	45	25
Q6	130	85	25	35	25
Q7	150	80	20	30	20

Interpretation: Respondents largely believed that elected officials fail to sustain campaign images and promises after elections.

Questions 8–10

Question	SA	A	U	D	SD
Q8	120	90	30	40	20
Q9	100	85	45	45	25
Q10	140	80	30	30	20

Interpretation: Communication often declines after elections, black PR influences perceptions, and over-promising contributes to the image–reality gap.

Findings

RQ One

- To what degree do you think the personalities displayed by candidates on social media (X, Facebook, Instagram) align with their in-person interactions with rural grassroots communities?

The results indicated that most respondents felt that the personalities candidates portray on social media do not completely align with how they interact with rural grassroots communities. Many respondents noted that candidates often seem more approachable, caring, and community-oriented online compared to their in-person engagements with rural voters.

RQ Two

- In your view, are the public relations strategies of candidates in Nigeria more centered on winning online arguments than addressing the concerns of non-internet users?

The findings suggested that a majority of respondents believed that modern political PR strategies in Nigeria prioritize online engagement and digital visibility over addressing the needs of citizens without internet access. Respondents noted that candidates frequently focus on social media debates, online promotion, and digital campaigning at the expense of direct communication with rural and non-internet users.

RQ Three

- How frequently did you see candidates altering their language, attire, or behavior to fit into a rural "grassroots" environment compared to their online persona?

The results revealed that a significant number of respondents often observed candidates adjusting their language, clothing, and behavior when engaging with rural communities. They reported that candidates would frequently use local dialects, wear traditional or culturally relevant clothing, and exhibit behaviors designed to foster closeness with grassroots voters.

RQ Four

- Do you believe that candidates using social media influencers is an effective method for communicating with the average Nigerian voter living outside major cities?

The findings showed that respondents generally viewed social media influencers as effective for engaging urban and digitally savvy voters but less effective for reaching rural residents and those with limited internet access. Many respondents felt that influencer-led political communication has restricted effectiveness among voters who primarily rely on traditional media, community gatherings, and personal interactions.

RQ Five

- How would you assess the current public image of your elected official compared to the "ideal" image presented by their PR team during the campaign?

The findings indicated that most respondents rated their elected officials' current public image as inferior to the ideal image promoted during the election campaign. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the behavior, availability, and performance of some officials once they took office.

RQ Six

- To what extent do you agree that the "brand" established for a candidate during the election is abandoned immediately after they take office?

The findings showed that a substantial majority of respondents concurred that candidates often relinquish the public persona, campaign narratives, and commitments made during elections once they assume office. Respondents observed significant changes in the communication style, accessibility, and public representation of many elected officials after the elections.

RQ Seven

- To what degree do you agree that the failure of an elected official to deliver on campaign promises has led you to view their election PR as deceptive or "fake"?

The results highlighted strong agreement among respondents that unfulfilled campaign promises adversely affected

their perception of election public relations. Many stated that unmet commitments made campaign messages seem misleading, exaggerated, or insincere.

RQ Eight

- In your opinion, does your representative's communication style remain as frequent and engaging now as it was during the elections?

The findings suggested that most respondents felt that communication between elected officials and the public decreases substantially following elections. Respondents reported that officials communicate less often, offer fewer updates, and provide limited opportunities for direct engagement after taking office.

RQ Nine

- How much did "Black PR" (negative news or character assassination of opponents) affect your negative views of a candidate in the last election?

The findings indicated that negative public relations significantly shaped the opinions of many respondents during the last election. A considerable number noted that negative news, allegations, character attacks, and harmful publicity influenced their perceptions of political candidates.

RQ Ten

- What do you think is the primary reason for the "image-reality gap" in Nigerian politics: over-promising by PR consultants or the candidates' inherent lack of ability?

The findings revealed that respondents attributed the image-reality gap in Nigerian politics to both over-promising by PR consultants and the limited capacity of candidates. However, a larger portion of respondents linked the gap primarily to the exaggerated promises and unrealistic images crafted by campaign consultants and PR teams. Others pointed to elected officials' inadequate performance as a key contributor to the gap.

Summary of Findings

The study demonstrated that public relations significantly influences the image of political candidates during elections in Nigeria. It found that the persona candidates project online often contrasts with their face-to-face interactions with rural communities. Additionally, it highlighted that political PR strategies mainly focus on online visibility, neglecting rural voters and those without internet access.

The findings further indicated that candidates commonly adapt their language, attire, and behavior to resonate with grassroots communities. Social media influencers were seen as more effective for urban and digitally engaged voters than for those in rural regions. Most respondents rated the post-election image of elected officials lower than the ideal image they presented during campaigns and agreed that many officials abandon their campaign identities once in office.

The research also found that unfulfilled campaign promises contribute to the perception of election public relations as misleading. Communication from elected officials was reported to decline post-elections, while black public relations affected negative perceptions of several candidates. Lastly, respondents recognized both exaggerated promises and inadequate candidate abilities as significant factors behind the image-reality gap in

Nigerian politics, with a greater emphasis on over-promising by PR consultants.

Discussion of Findings

RQ One

- To what extent do you believe the personality projected by candidates on social media (X, Facebook, Instagram) matches their physical interaction with rural grassroots communities?

The findings revealed that the majority of respondents believed that there is a significant difference between the personality projected by candidates on social media and their interactions with rural grassroots communities. Most respondents indicated that candidates often appear more accessible, compassionate, and people-oriented online than they do during physical engagements with rural voters.

This finding supports the views of Idris and Alabi (2024), who observed that social media platforms enable candidates to strategically construct desirable public images that may not always reflect their actual behavior in offline settings. The result suggests that social media has become an important public relations tool for image projection, but it may also contribute to an image-reality gap between political branding and actual candidate conduct.

RQ Two

- In your opinion, are candidates' PR strategies in Nigeria more focused on winning the online argument than addressing the local concerns of non-internet users?

The findings showed that a majority of respondents agreed that contemporary political public relations strategies in Nigeria are increasingly focused on online engagement and digital visibility rather than addressing the concerns of citizens who lack internet access.

This finding aligns with Obasi and Ubani (2024), who argued that political campaigns in Nigeria have become heavily dependent on digital communication strategies. The result further indicates that while online public relations campaigns may increase visibility, they may inadvertently exclude rural populations and non-internet users from meaningful political communication.

RQ Three

- How often did you observe a candidate changing their language, dressing, or behavior specifically to fit into a rural "grassroots" setting compared to their online persona?

The study found that most respondents frequently observed candidates adapting their dressing, language, and behavior when interacting with rural communities. Respondents viewed such adjustments as deliberate image management strategies designed to create a sense of identification with grassroots voters.

This finding corroborates the position of Omole and Ogoala (2024), who noted that visual communication and symbolic representations are essential elements of political branding. The result suggests that candidates often employ strategic self-presentation techniques to appeal to diverse audiences during election campaigns.

RQ Four

- Do you think the use of social media influencers by candidates is an effective way to communicate with the average Nigerian voter who resides outside major cities?

The findings revealed that respondents generally believed that social media influencers are effective in reaching urban and digitally active voters but have limited influence among rural residents and individuals with restricted internet access.

This finding supports literature indicating that while digital influencers enhance campaign visibility and online engagement, their effectiveness is constrained by the digital divide that exists between urban and rural populations in Nigeria (Idris & Alabi, 2024). Consequently, influencer-based campaigns may not adequately communicate political messages to the average rural voter.

RQ Five

- How would you rate the current public image of your elected official compared to the "ideal" image presented by their PR team during the election campaign?

The findings indicated that most respondents rated the current image of elected officials lower than the ideal image portrayed during election campaigns. Respondents expressed disappointment with the performance and conduct of some elected officials after assuming office.

This finding is consistent with the concept of political branding discussed by Adesina (2023), which emphasizes the role of public relations in creating attractive political identities. The result suggests that the inability of elected officials to sustain campaign promises contributes significantly to public dissatisfaction and image deterioration.

RQ Six

- To what extent do you agree that the "brand" created for a candidate during the election is abandoned immediately after they assume office?

The findings showed that a substantial majority of respondents agreed that candidates often abandon the public image and campaign narratives that were carefully developed during elections after assuming office.

This finding aligns with the observations of Eruo (2024), who noted that image management efforts are often concentrated during election periods with limited continuity after electoral victory. The result suggests that political branding in Nigeria is frequently campaign-driven rather than governance-driven.

RQ Seven

- How much do you agree that the failure of an elected official to fulfill campaign promises has made you perceive their election PR as deceptive or "fake"?

The findings revealed strong agreement among respondents that the failure of elected officials to fulfill campaign promises has negatively affected their perception of political public relations. Many respondents described campaign communication as deceptive when promises remain unfulfilled.

This finding supports the argument of Adejoh and Jibrin (2025) that excessive image-building and persuasive

communication can create unrealistic expectations among voters. When campaign promises are not fulfilled, public relations activities risk being perceived as manipulative rather than informative.

RQ Eight

- In your view, does the communication style of your representative remain as frequent and engaging now as it was during the heat of the election?

The findings showed that most respondents believed that communication between elected officials and citizens decreases significantly after elections. Respondents reported reduced access to elected representatives and fewer opportunities for engagement.

This finding supports the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, which emphasizes the importance of continuous two-way communication between organizations and their publics. The result suggests that many political actors prioritize communication during campaigns but fail to maintain meaningful engagement after securing electoral victory.

RQ Nine

- How much did "Black PR" (negative news or character assassination of opponents) influence your negative perception of a candidate during the last election?

The findings indicated that black public relations significantly influenced voter perceptions during elections. A considerable number of respondents admitted that negative publicity and character attacks affected their opinions of political candidates.

This finding is consistent with studies on political communication which show that agenda-setting and framing strategies can shape public attitudes toward political actors. The result demonstrates that negative campaigning remains a powerful image management strategy in Nigerian elections despite concerns regarding ethical public relations practice.

RQ Ten

- What do you consider the biggest reason for the "image-reality gap" in Nigerian politics: over-promising by PR consultants or the inherent lack of capacity of the candidates?

The findings revealed that respondents identified both factors as contributors to the image-reality gap in Nigerian politics. However, a greater proportion of respondents attributed the gap to over-promising by campaign consultants and public relations teams who create unrealistic expectations during election campaigns.

This finding aligns with the literature on political branding and strategic communication, which suggests that excessive image construction may produce expectations that candidates are unable to meet once elected (Adesina, 2023; Adejoh & Jibrin, 2025). The findings therefore indicate that while candidate competence remains important, exaggerated public relations campaigns are a major cause of voter disappointment and declining trust in political leadership.

Conclusion

The study concludes that public relations has become an indispensable tool in the management of candidates' images during general elections in Nigeria. Through media relations, political

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branding, social media campaigns, agenda-setting, and strategic communication, candidates are able to shape public perceptions and influence voting decisions. However, the study found a significant gap between the images projected during election campaigns and the realities experienced by citizens after elections. The findings suggest that many candidates fail to sustain the positive image created during campaigns due to inadequate communication, poor performance, and unfulfilled promises. Consequently, public trust in political public relations is weakened when campaign messages do not translate into tangible governance outcomes. Therefore, effective image management should be accompanied by accountability, transparency, and continuous engagement with the electorate.

Recommendations

1. Political candidates should ensure that campaign messages and public relations strategies accurately reflect their capabilities, policies, and intentions to avoid creating unrealistic expectations among voters.
2. Public relations practitioners should prioritize ethical communication practices and discourage the use of deceptive information, propaganda, and black public relations campaigns during elections.
3. Elected officials should maintain regular communication and engagement with citizens after elections through town hall meetings, media interactions, and digital platforms.
4. Political parties should strengthen grassroots communication channels to ensure that rural communities and non-internet users are not excluded from political discourse.
5. Government agencies, electoral bodies, and professional public relations organizations should promote standards that encourage transparency and accountability in political communication.
6. Candidates and elected officials should align their actions and governance performance with the public image projected during election campaigns in order to build trust, credibility, and long-term relationships with the electorate.

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