Abstract

This study critically examined the uses of public relations in the management of healthcare institutions in Nigeria, with specific focus on Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi. Despite the growing recognition of public relations as a strategic management function in contemporary organisations, its application in Nigerian healthcare institutions remains inadequately investigated. The study adopted a qualitative case study design, utilising Focus Group Discussions as the instrument of data collection. Twenty staff members of the Information Unit of the hospital constituted the population, and census sampling technique was employed to include all twenty respondents, who were divided into four groups of five participants each. Data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that public relations use at the hospital helped in managing internal and external publics through crisis communication management, effective management of communication programmes, publicity of institutional responses to health issues, and creation of awareness on health-related matters. The study further found that the impact of public relations use in the management of the hospital included conducting formal and informal research surveys to determine public opinion and attitudes as a basis for planning and action, as well as creating awareness of the unique services of the healthcare institution. The study concluded that there is a high level of public relations use at Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi, and that public relations exerts a significant impact on the management of the institution. The study recommended that public relations experts should be fully involved in healthcare delivery, that the public relations unit should be adequately funded, and that similar studies should be expanded to cover more healthcare organisations for better generalisation.

Keywords: Public relations, Hospital management, Healthcare institutions, Strategic communication, Nigeria

Introduction

The contemporary healthcare landscape in Nigeria is characterised by intense competition among healthcare providers and escalating patient expectations, conditions that have necessitated the strategic deployment of public relations as a fundamental management function (Kehinde & Igbozuruike, 2016; Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). Public relations, as conceptualised by Grunig and Hunt (1984), constitutes the management of communication between an organisation and its publics, encompassing activities that establish and maintain mutual understanding between healthcare institutions and their diverse stakeholders. This conceptualisation underscores the critical role of public relations in shaping organisational image, fostering patient trust, and facilitating effective healthcare delivery (Vujadinovic, 2020; Bamidele, 2025).

The significance of public relations in healthcare management cannot be overstated, particularly in the Nigerian context where healthcare institutions grapple with multifaceted challenges including resource constraints, infrastructural deficits, and evolving patient expectations (Nwodoh et al., 2019). As Kehinde and Igbozuruike (2016) observe, the choice of healthcare institution or medical practitioner at the early stage of health complications is fundamentally determined by certified quality management systems, positive press coverage, recommendations from relatives, and personnel friendliness to patients. This observation underscores the imperative for healthcare institutions to strategically harness public relations to build corporate image, enhance patient satisfaction, and maintain competitive advantage in an increasingly saturated healthcare market (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2016).

Contemporary public relations scholarship emphasises the shift from traditional one-way communication models to dialogic, relationship-centred approaches that prioritise mutual benefit and stakeholder engagement (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Ledingham (2003) explicates relationship management as a general theory of public relations, positing that the central purpose of public relations is to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. This theoretical orientation is particularly pertinent to healthcare settings, where trust, credibility, and patient-centredness are paramount (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). Sophisticated public relations practitioners now understand that they must serve the interests of people affected by organisations if they are also to serve the interests of the organisations that employ them (Broom & Sha, 2013).

Within the Nigerian healthcare context, public relations assumes heightened significance given the sector's unique challenges and opportunities. As Nwodoh et al. (2019) argue, effective public relations in health practice represents an unexplored tool for the growth of Nigeria's health sector and its professionals. The healthcare industry in Nigeria is characterised by diverse stakeholders including patients, healthcare professionals, regulatory bodies, government agencies, media organisations, and host communities, each with distinct expectations and concerns (Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024). Managing these diverse relationships requires sophisticated public relations

strategies that transcend mere publicity to encompass community relations, crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement (Hallahan, 2004; Chiakaan et al., 2023).

The role of public relations in healthcare institutions extends beyond external communication to encompass internal stakeholder management and organisational culture development. Amiresmaili et al. (2012) emphasise that healthcare organisations must recognise the interconnectedness of internal and external publics, as employee attitudes and behaviours significantly influence patient perceptions and organisational reputation. This internal-external nexus is particularly critical in healthcare settings where frontline staff interactions substantially shape patient experiences and satisfaction levels (Ivwighren et al., 2024). The work of shaping organisational image, therefore, requires coordinated efforts that address both internal communication climate and external stakeholder relationships (Cornelissen, 2020).

Despite the theoretical recognition of public relations' importance in healthcare management, empirical investigations into its practical application in Nigerian healthcare institutions remain limited (Kehinde & Igbozuruike, 2016; Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015). The applicability and impact of public relations in hospitals in Benue State specifically has not been practically ascertained, hence the need for this present research. This knowledge gap is particularly concerning given the increasing recognition that public relations adds value to organisations by balancing organisational self-interest with the interests of affected publics (Doorley & Garcia, 2020). The absence of systematic inquiry into public relations practices in Nigerian healthcare settings impedes the development of evidence-based strategies for improving healthcare communication and management (Eke & Alikor, 2025).

This study, therefore, seeks to critically examine the uses of public relations in the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi, with particular attention to how the institution manages its internal and external publics and the perceived impact of public relations on institutional management. The study is positioned within the broader discourse on strategic communication in healthcare, contributing to the growing body of scholarship on public relations in developing country contexts (Vujadinovic, 2020; Bamidele, 2025). By examining the specific case of Benue State University Teaching Hospital, this study provides contextually grounded insights that may inform policy and practice in Nigerian healthcare institutions while contributing to theoretical development in public relations scholarship.

Statement of the Problem

Healthcare institutions globally have increasingly recognised the significance of public perception in evaluating service quality and are consequently investing in administrative mechanisms designed to improve and evaluate consumer impressions and experiences (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020; Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2016). The work of shaping organisational image, as Broom and Sha (2013) assert, constitutes the domain of public relations expertise. Addressing consumer-friendly factors requires public relations staff trained in enhancing public perceptions of healthcare facilities (Nwodoh et al., 2019). Public relations departments serve to assist with specific complaint behaviours regarding consumer-perceived problems while providing responses to consumer complaints that affect overall satisfaction with hospital services (Vujadinovic, 2020).However, the effectiveness of public relations departments in Nigerian healthcare institutions, particularly at Benue State University Teaching Hospital, remains inadequately investigated. As Kehinde and Igbozuruike (2016) note, despite the growing recognition of public relations' importance, there exists a significant gap in empirical knowledge regarding the specific strategies, practices, and impacts of public relations in Nigerian healthcare settings. This gap is particularly concerning given the unique challenges facing Nigerian healthcare institutions, including resource constraints, infrastructure deficits, and increasing patient expectations (Nwodoh et al., 2019; Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015).

The workability and professionalism of the public relations function at Benue State University Teaching Hospital have not been systematically ascertained. There is need to investigate the strength and professionalism among staff of the department, if at all there is a distinct public relations department at the institution. This investigation is imperative given the theoretical recognition that public relations effectiveness significantly influences patient satisfaction, organisational reputation, and ultimately, healthcare outcomes (Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024; Eke & Alikor, 2025).Furthermore, the cliché that "it is he who is sick that has need of a physician" is common among health experts, bringing into question the place of public relations in the health sector. However, as Amiresmaili et al. (2012) argue, the sick, the management, the workers, and the general public require mutually beneficial relationships aimed at achieving organisational goals and public favour. This is primarily the role of public relations. It has therefore become pertinent to measure the level of effectiveness of public relations strategies in

the health sector, as deficiencies in this area may contribute to patient dissatisfaction, institutional image problems, and suboptimal healthcare outcomes (Chiakaan et al., 2023).The absence of systematic inquiry into public relations practices at Benue State University Teaching Hospital represents a significant gap in both scholarship and practice. As Chiakaan et al. (2023) demonstrate in their evaluation of public relations strategies in government hospitals in Jalingo metropolis, context-specific investigations are essential for developing evidence-based recommendations that address local realities while contributing to broader theoretical understanding. It is against this background that this study seeks to critically investigate how public relations is applied in the health sector, with Benue State University Teaching Hospital in view.

Research Objectives

The broad objective of this study is to ascertain the uses of public relations at Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi. Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. Critically examine how Benue State University Teaching Hospital uses public relations in managing its internal and external publics.
ii. Establish the perceived impact of public relations use on the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital.

Research Questions

i. How has Benue State University Teaching Hospital used public relations in managing its internal and external publics?

ii. What is the perceived impact of public relations use on the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital?

Conceptual Clarification

Public Relations

Various public relations professional organisations and scholars have made concerted efforts over the years to develop comprehensive yet precise definitions of public relations. Baran (2004) defines public relations as the management function that focuses on the relationships and communications that individuals and organisations have with other groups (called publics) for the purpose of creating mutual goodwill. This definition emphasises the management function aspect of public relations and its focus on relationship building. Black (1972) similarly conceptualises public relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. This definition underscores the intentional, systematic, and ongoing nature of public relations practice.Grunig and Hunt (1984) provide what has become a seminal definition, describing public relations as the management of communication between an organisation and its publics. This conceptualisation positions public relations squarely within the management function of organisations while emphasising its communication-centric nature. Broom and Sha (2013) extend this understanding by identifying public relations as a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and its publics on whom its success or failure depends. This definitional evolution reflects the growing recognition of public relations as a strategic management function rather than merely a tactical communication activity (Doorley & Garcia, 2020).

Public relations, as Adeniji (2013) observes, is fundamentally the persuasion business—convincing audiences inside and outside one's usual sphere of influence to promote ideas, purchase products, support positions, or recognise accomplishments. This persuasive dimension of public relations is particularly relevant in healthcare

settings, where health promotion, patient education, and behaviour change communication constitute core activities (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). However, contemporary public relations scholarship emphasises that persuasion must be grounded in ethical practice and mutual benefit rather than manipulation (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014).The Business Dictionary defines public relations as the process of creating and maintaining goodwill of an organisation's various publics (customers, employees, investors, suppliers, etc.), usually through publicity and other non-paid forms of communication. This definition highlights the goodwill-building function of public relations and its reliance on earned media rather than paid advertising (Hallahan, 2004). The distinction between public relations and advertising is significant, as public relations typically involves more credibility-enhancing communication channels that are perceived as less commercially motivated than advertising (Cornelissen, 2020).

In healthcare contexts, public relations assumes additional dimensions related to health communication, patient education, and community engagement (Vujadinovic, 2020). As Amiresmaili et al. (2012) note, the attitude of health professionals in every interpersonal relationship with non-professionals, irrespective of the setting, constitutes the focus of public relations in healthcare. This observation underscores the importance of recognising that public relations in healthcare is not confined to designated public relations departments but is enacted through every interaction between healthcare providers and patients, families, and communities (Nwodoh et al., 2019).Contemporary public relations scholarship has increasingly emphasised the dialogic and relational dimensions of public relations practice (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham, 2003). The dialogic theory of public relations, as articulated by Kent and Taylor (2002), posits that public relations should be oriented toward building relationships through genuine dialogue rather than one-way persuasive communication. Taylor and Kent (2014) further clarify that dialogic engagement involves interaction, trust, and commitment to mutual understanding. This theoretical orientation is particularly relevant to healthcare settings, where trust and credibility are essential for effective health communication and patient-provider relationships (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the major components of hospital management, showing how planning, human resource management, financial management, patient care, public relations, monitoring and evaluation, and community engagement work together to ensure effective healthcare service delivery.



Figure 1: Conceptual Overview of Hospital Management Functions

Hospital Management

According to the 2004 Baldrige Health Care Criteria, strategic planning involves how an organisation develops strategic objectives and key action plans, how these plans are deployed, and how progress is measured (Broom, 2003). A hospital, as Drucker (1968) conceptualises, is a system with various components integrated by a common purpose of achieving a set of objectives. The performance of all these services depends on the cooperation and coordination of various components within the system. Individual sub-systems have independent goals for providing the best patient care, yet they must be aligned with overall organisational objectives (Weihrich et al., 2011).Hospitals are highly complex social, economic, and scientific organisations whose function is to provide

comprehensive healthcare services (Drucker, 1968). Hospital management, therefore, encompasses the coordination of diverse activities including clinical services, administrative functions, financial management, human resources, and stakeholder relations (Broom & Sha, 2013). As Weihrich et al. (2011) articulate, management involves planning, organising, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting—functions that are equally applicable to healthcare institutions and public relations departments within them.

The complexity of hospital management is exacerbated by the multiplicity of stakeholders with divergent interests and expectations (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2016). Patients seek quality care and positive experiences, healthcare professionals desire conducive working conditions and professional recognition, regulatory bodies demand compliance with standards, government agencies expect accountability and service delivery, and host communities seek accessible and responsive healthcare services (Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024). Managing these diverse stakeholder relationships requires sophisticated communication and relationship management capabilities that public relations functions are uniquely positioned to provide (Ledingham, 2003).Effective hospital management, as Drucker (1968) emphasises, requires sound management principles that integrate various departments of a healthcare unit, including clinical, non-clinical, and supporting departments. Health care services must be comprehensive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative, provided through a network of various primary, private, and community health centres in all societies (Broom, 2003). This comprehensive conceptualisation of healthcare management underscores the need for integrated communication strategies that address the information needs and concerns of all stakeholder groups (Chiakaan et al., 2023).

Review of Related Literature

Role and Place of Public Relations in Health Organisations

Seitel (1987) indicates that there is considerable competition in healthcare provision, and for a hospital to succeed in its objectives and plans, it must be properly "positioned" through public relations efforts. These positioning efforts include educating hospital publics through services such as "open houses" that demonstrate and explain services, sponsorship of health and medical events, and seminars (Seitel, 1987). Hospitals can also distribute health-related information through newspaper columns, radio spot announcements, television interviews, and telephone hotlines (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). Furthermore, hospitals can increase community interaction and improve relations with the community, which constitutes a key aspect of hospital public relations (Hallahan, 2004).As part of public relations activities, health organisations in Nigeria stage events that are captured by local media, including Federal Medical Centre, Benue State University Teaching Hospital, and Madonna Hospital, among others (Nwodoh et al., 2019). Public relations can be deemed effective when the attitudinal message communicated to the general public by members of an organisation portrays a sustained good image of the organisation to its publics (Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024). In health practice, the attitudinal message is such that will guarantee the establishment and sustenance of positive image of health professionals and the entire healthcare industry in the eyes of the general public (Kehinde & Igbozuruike, 2016).

The significance of public relations in healthcare organisations is further underscored by the recognition that healthcare is fundamentally a relationship-based enterprise (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2016). Patients' decisions to seek care, comply with treatment regimens, and recommend healthcare providers to others are significantly influenced by their perceptions of healthcare institutions and the quality of their interactions with healthcare professionals (Vujadinovic, 2020). Public relations, therefore, plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions and facilitating positive patient experiences (Bamidele, 2025).Contemporary healthcare organisations face increasing scrutiny from diverse stakeholders, including media organisations, regulatory bodies, patient advocacy groups, and the general public (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). This scrutiny necessitates proactive public relations strategies that anticipate and address stakeholder concerns before they escalate into crises (Heath, 2013). Crisis communication, as a specialised area of public relations practice, is particularly relevant to healthcare settings where medical errors, disease outbreaks, and ethical controversies can rapidly damage organisational reputation and public trust (Ajayi & Aloba, 2025). Figure 2 shows how public relations helps health organisations through communication, community relations, reputation building, patient relations, crisis management, and stakeholder engagement to improve healthcare services and public trust.

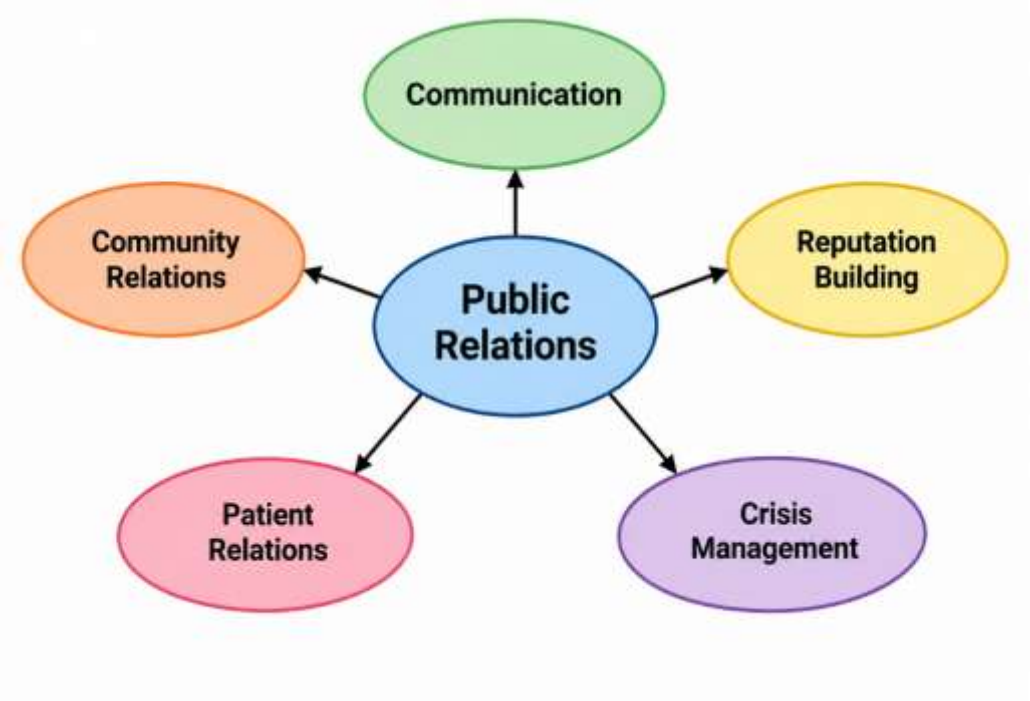


Figure 2: Role of Public Relations in Health Organisations

Public Relations as a Management Function

As management in many companies, big or small, as well as government, embraces the interactive nature and value of public relations, it must be noted that success is seldom accidental (Bills, 2007). Public relations helps craft strategic plans that contribute to efficiency, profitability, and overall success of whoever uses this management tool effectively (Bills, 2007). Grunig and Hunt (1984) position public relations as a distinctive management function that helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organisation and its publics.

It is axiomatic that the management of an organisation needs to be aware of values and attitudes of its various publics for the organisation to achieve its goals (Black, 1972; Seitel, 1987). Public relations as a management function encompasses anticipating, analysing, and interpreting public opinion, attitudes, and issues that might impact on the organisation, for good or for bad (Broom & Sha, 2013). Public relations advises management on the impact of any action or lack of action on the behaviour of target audiences (Doorley & Garcia, 2020).

The management functions of public relations, according to Basavanthappa (2005) as cited in Wilcox et al. (2001), include:

Planning: Working out a broad outline of things to be done and methods of doing them to accomplish the purpose set for the enterprise. In public relations terms, planning involves setting objectives, identifying target publics, developing strategies, and determining evaluation criteria (Watson & Noble, 2014).

Organising: Establishing formal structures of authority through which work of subdivisions is arranged, defined, and coordinated for defined objectives. Public relations organising involves structuring the department, defining roles and responsibilities, and establishing workflows (Hendrix & Hayes, 2019).

Staffing: The whole personnel function of bringing in and training staff and maintaining favourable conditions of work. Public relations staffing requires recruiting qualified practitioners, providing professional development opportunities, and creating supportive work environments (Chiakaan et al., 2023).

Directing: The continuous task of making decisions and embodying them for the guidance of staff. Public relations directing involves providing leadership, making strategic decisions, and guiding implementation of communication programmes (Cornelissen, 2020).

Coordinating: Interrelating the various parts of the work and eliminating conflicts. Public relations coordinating involves ensuring alignment between communication activities and organisational objectives, as well as harmonising messages across different channels and audiences (Doorley & Garcia, 2020).

Reporting: Keeping those to whom the executive is responsible informed as to what is going on through records, research, and inspection. Public relations reporting involves documenting activities, measuring outcomes, and communicating results to management and stakeholders (Watson & Noble, 2014).

Budgeting: Fiscal planning, accounting, and control. Public relations budgeting involves allocating resources for communication activities, tracking expenditures, and demonstrating return on investment (Hendrix & Hayes, 2019).

Public Relations Activities in Nigerian Healthcare Institutions

Empirical evidence on public relations activities in Nigerian healthcare institutions reveals a range of practices designed to manage stakeholder relationships and enhance organisational image (Kehinde & Igbozuruike, 2016; Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024). At Federal Medical Centre Makurdi, for instance, public relations activities include free and subsidised medical outreaches in neighbouring areas and beyond, HIV/AIDS relief programmes, and public education on various health issues (Federal Medical Centre Makurdi, 2020). The hospital is also involved in the production of teaching videos about hydrocephalus, spina bifida, cleft lips, and other disabilities for parents with such children (Federal Medical Centre Makurdi, 2020).Federal Medical Centre Makurdi also produces a comprehensive annual report distributed among its various publics and publishes a full-colour calendar that is beautifully designed (Theaker & Yaxley, 2013). In various bulletin boards, health information, education, and communication materials are well positioned, some originating from the Ministry of Health, among others (Federal Medical Centre Makurdi, 2020). However, some handwritten materials are poorly designed and contain grammatical errors—a reflection of the resource constraints and capacity limitations facing public relations practice in Nigerian healthcare institutions (Theaker & Yaxley, 2013).

The hospital maintains suggestion boxes at various locations and makes religious tracts available (Federal Medical Centre Makurdi, 2020). In one of the boxes is a questionnaire for a service delivery survey the hospital is conducting an indication of efforts to gather patient feedback and evaluate service quality (Ivwighren et al., 2024). However, the hospital lacks distinct corporate colours, though its vehicles spot white and red colours (Theaker & Yaxley, 2013). This absence of coordinated visual identity suggests gaps in strategic public relations planning and implementation (Cornelissen, 2020).For public relations to be effective in healthcare practice, several principles must be religiously observed (Nwodoh et al., 2019). First, convincing clients that they will receive the best health services in the facility goes beyond the health services rendered to include previous relationships with clients outside the organisation (Kehinde & Igbozuruike, 2016). How health professionals are perceived by clients and significant others in their places of dwelling determines whether these people will seek their services in their place of work or not (Amiresmaili et al., 2012).

Second, striving to establish and maintain a high level of competency and public trust is essential (Fawkes, 2006). Trust is built upon previous relationships, and health professionals should do as much right as they can to earn clients' trust, knowing that "trust is about reliability and doing the right thing" (Fawkes, 2006). Therefore, health professionals should be equipped with necessary cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills to render competent and proficient services to their clients (Nwodoh et al., 2019).Third, having good and adequate interpersonal communication with clients is paramount (Amiresmaili et al., 2012). Public relations cannot be deemed effective if any form of communication with clients is defective. Impoliteness, unguarded utterances, negative body language of any sort, and any form of negative emotional outburst towards actions and inactions of clients cannot be within the realm of effective public relations in health practice (Nwodoh et al., 2019).

Fourth, handling clients' complaints promptly and satisfactorily is essential (Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024). Timely response to clients' needs and desirous attention to their complaints by frontline health professionals represent effective public relations in health practice. To have a tenacious grip of this virtue, health professionals need to immerse themselves in empathy and consistently place themselves in the shoes of their clients (Amiresmaili et al., 2012).Fifth, rendering healthcare services as and when due is critical (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). This concerns routine health services in various health facilities. It is no longer an acceptable excuse to blame organisational management or other health professionals for failure to provide regular health services to clients at the most appropriate time, especially as excessive waiting time is one of patients' major frustrations in healthcare facilities (Ivwighren et al., 2024).

Empirical Studies on Public Relations in Healthcare

Kehinde and Igbozuruike (2016) conducted a study on "Public Relations as a Tool for Effective Healthcare Management: A Study of Hetta Medical Centre, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria." The objective was to discover relationships between good public relations and indices of Hetta's management performance. The survey research design was adopted, with questionnaire as instrument for data collection. Findings revealed a positive relationship between good public relations and the growing number of patients seeking medical services at Hetta, as well as a positive relationship between good public relations and improving financial performance of Hetta Medical Centre. The study recommended that private hospitals should practice good public relations, train and retrain both medical and non-medical staff in professional patient care, and invest in state-of-the-art medical equipment.Amiresmaili et al. (2012) conducted a study on "Measuring Levels of Public Relations in Hospitals," examining perceived levels of public relations in hospitals in Zarand town, Iran. The study sought to examine the role of public relations in improving efficiency and productivity of hospitals. Descriptive analytical research was carried out with questionnaires distributed to patients. Findings revealed that 27% of respondents mentioned that the hospital kept all its promises and had the ability to perform all its promises. Most respondents (25%) said the hospital worried about patients' welfare, asked patients to participate in decision-making processes, and helped those with low income. Most patients (24%) were satisfied with employees' and managers' fair behaviour. The study concluded that there was a significant relationship between satisfaction level and personnel behaviour, recommending that the public relations department be equipped adequately for maximum performance.

Chiakaan et al. (2023) evaluated public relations strategies in relationship management of selected government hospitals in Jalingo metropolis, Nigeria. The study examined how public relations strategies were deployed to manage relationships with various stakeholders. Findings revealed both strengths and weaknesses in public relations practice, with recommendations for improved strategic communication, enhanced staff training, and greater integration of public relations into hospital management structures.Ivwighren and Egbi (2024) investigated the synergy between public relations and hospital management for healthcare delivery in selected hospitals in Delta State, Nigeria. The study found that effective collaboration between public relations and hospital management significantly enhances healthcare delivery outcomes. The study recommended that hospital management should recognise public relations as a strategic partner in achieving organisational objectives and should provide adequate resources for public relations activities.

Bamidele (2025) examined public relations as a tool for effective healthcare service delivery at the National Eye Centre, Kaduna. The study found that public relations activities significantly influenced patient satisfaction and organisational image. Recommendations included enhanced training for public relations staff, improved use of digital communication channels, and greater emphasis on patient feedback mechanisms.Eke and Alikor (2025) investigated the enhancement of public relations expertise for improved medicare delivery and management at Rivers State University Teaching Hospital. The study found that professional development for public relations practitioners significantly improved their capacity to contribute to healthcare delivery and management. The study recommended systematic investment in public relations capacity building as a strategy for improving healthcare outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the **Public Relations Transfer Process Model** propounded by Frank Jefkins in 1988. According to Nweke (2001), the model is an antidote against negative developments in organisations. Jefkins (1988) notes that when a negative situation is converted into positive achievements through knowledge, the result predictably is the primary objective of public relations practice—understanding. The model explains how practitioners can use and apply public relations tools and strategies towards changing hostility among an organisation's target publics to sympathy, converting prejudice into acceptance, developing interest where there is apathy, and communicating effectively to achieve knowledge where there is ignorance.

The Jefkins Transfer Process Model identifies four negative attitudes that publics may hold towards organisations—hostility, prejudice, apathy, and ignorance—and four corresponding positive attitudes that public relations can cultivate—sympathy, acceptance, interest, and knowledge (Jefkins, 1988). Through effective communication, the public relations practitioner can convert these negative attitudes into positive ones, thereby building goodwill and reducing crisis potential (Nweke, 2001).

The model's relevance to this study lies in its recognition that organisations are bound to experience hostility, apathy, and prejudice from members of their publics, and once an organisation experiences any of these, the transfer process model becomes applicable (Jefkins, 1992). By implication, with the Jefkins transfer model, when

people are put in a position to understand what a particular situation portends, their hostile attitudes towards the whole situation can be won to sympathy (Nweke, 2001).

In the context of healthcare institutions, the Jefkins Transfer Process Model provides a framework for understanding how public relations can transform negative public attitudes towards healthcare providers. Patients who are hostile or prejudiced against a healthcare institution may be converted to sympathy and acceptance through effective communication that addresses their concerns and demonstrates the institution's commitment to quality care (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). Similarly, publics that are apathetic or ignorant about available health services can be educated and engaged through strategic public relations activities (Nwodoh et al., 2019).

The model has been criticised, however, for its linear and somewhat simplistic conceptualisation of attitude change (Heath, 2013). Contemporary public relations scholarship emphasises the dialogic and relational nature of public relations, suggesting that attitude change is not merely a matter of information transmission but involves genuine engagement and relationship building (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Nevertheless, the Jefkins model remains useful as a heuristic framework for understanding the transformative potential of public relations in healthcare settings (Vujadinovic, 2020). Figure 3 shows how public relations transforms negative public attitudes such as hostility, prejudice, apathy, and ignorance into positive attitudes including sympathy, acceptance, interest, and knowledge through effective communication tools and strategies. The model demonstrates that strategic public relations activities such as information sharing, education, persuasion, media relations, and community engagement can build understanding and goodwill between an organisation and its publics.

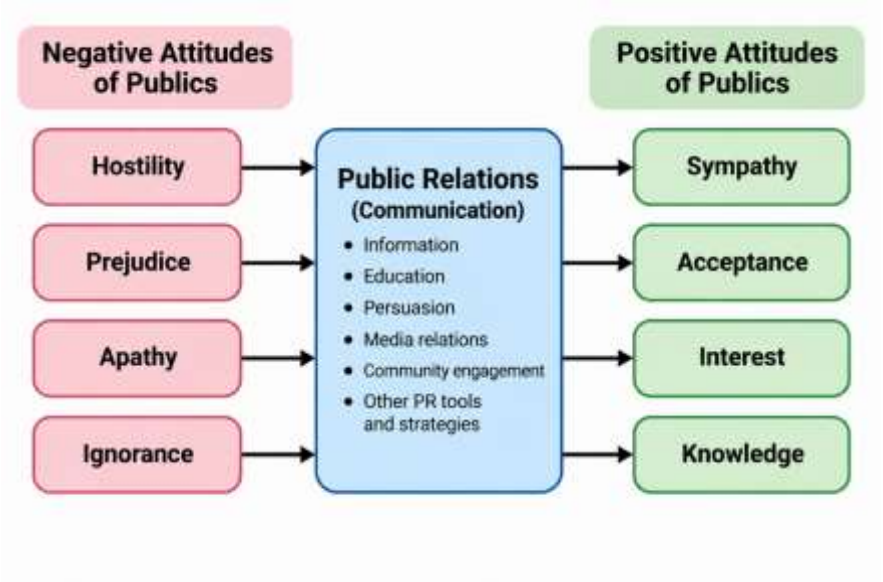


Figure 3: Jefkins Public Relations Transfer Process Model

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts the qualitative case study design, which Yin (2018) defines as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for in-depth exploration of public relations practices within the specific organisational context of Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The rationale for the qualitative approach lies in the study's objective to understand the experiences, perceptions, and practices of public relations staff at the hospital. As Patton (2015) argues, qualitative methods are particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena, capturing participants' perspectives, and generating rich, contextualised data. The case study design enables the researcher to examine public relations practices holistically, considering the interplay between various organisational, cultural, and environmental factors (Stake, 1995).

Population and Sampling

The population of this study comprises all staff of the Information Unit of Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi. According to the Registry Department of the hospital (2025), the population of the unit is twenty (20) staff. Given the manageable size of the population, census sampling technique was adopted, meaning all twenty staff members were included in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). This approach eliminates sampling error and ensures comprehensive coverage of the target population (Kothari, 2004).

Instrument of Data Collection

The instrument used for data collection was the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide. A four-item FGD guide was developed for the twenty respondents, who were divided into four groups of five respondents each. The FGD was conducted once a week with each group based on appointments given by respondents of the public relations unit at Benue State University Teaching Hospital.

Focus Group Discussion was chosen as the data collection method due to its numerous advantages in qualitative research (Krueger & Casey, 2015). As Kunle and Popoola (2003) note, the FGD method standardises the researcher's questions, ensures that the interviewer asks exactly the same questions in the same way, and guarantees, as much as possible, uniformity of answers through open discussions. The FGD method also allows for interaction among participants, which can generate insights that might not emerge in individual interviews (Morgan, 1997).

Procedure for Data Collection

In administering the FGD guide, one research assistant was employed and trained for the job to assist in administration. The method of administration was face-to-face discussion. The duration for the exercise was six days. Each FGD session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected through FGDs were analysed using thematic analysis, which Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Direct quotations from participants are used to illustrate themes and provide rich, contextualised insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully briefed on the purpose and procedures of the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time was respected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Presentation and Analysis

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study involved twenty (20) staff members of the Information Unit at Benue State University Teaching Hospital. Of these, eleven (11) were females and nine (9) were males. Regarding marital status, fourteen (14) were married while six (6) were single. The age range of participants was between 28 and 52 years, with a mean age of 38 years. All participants had at least a bachelor's degree, with five holding master's degrees. Their work experience at the hospital ranged from 3 to 15 years.

Research Question One: How has Benue State University Teaching Hospital used public relations in managing its internal and external publics?

Focus Group One: All respondents agreed that public relations use has helped in managing internal and external publics at Benue State University Teaching Hospital through crisis communication management. One participant stated:

"Whenever there is any issue, whether internal or external, the public relations unit is usually at the forefront of managing the situation. We coordinate with relevant departments to ensure that accurate information is disseminated and that the hospital's image is protected."

This finding aligns with Heath's (2013) assertion that crisis communication is a critical function of public relations in healthcare organisations. Effective crisis communication can mitigate reputational damage and maintain stakeholder trust during challenging situations (Ajayi & Aloba, 2025).

Focus Group Two: This group agreed that public relations use has helped Benue State University Teaching Hospital in managing its internal and external publics through effective management of communication programmes both inside and outside the healthcare services. A participant noted:
"We have developed communication protocols that ensure consistent messaging to both staff and external stakeholders. This has helped in reducing misunderstandings and building trust."

This finding resonates with Cornelissen's (2020) conceptualisation of corporate communication as involving coordinated messaging across various channels and audiences. Effective communication management is essential for maintaining organisational coherence and stakeholder alignment (Doorley & Garcia, 2020).

Focus Group Three: All participants in this group stated that public relations use has helped Benue State University Teaching Hospital in managing its internal and external publics by publicising the hospital's responses to different health issues. One respondent explained:
"When there are health outbreaks or issues of public concern, we ensure that the hospital's position is clearly communicated to the public through various media channels. This helps in managing public perception and preventing misinformation."

This finding underscores the media relations function of public relations, which involves proactively engaging with media organisations to communicate organisational perspectives (Hendrix & Hayes, 2019). In healthcare settings, media relations is particularly important for disseminating accurate health information and countering misinformation (Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015).

Focus Group Four: It was revealed that public relations use has helped Benue State University Teaching Hospital in managing its internal and external publics through awareness creation and publicity. A participant stated:
"We organise regular health awareness campaigns and public events that showcase the hospital's services. This not only creates awareness but also builds goodwill among the public."

This finding aligns with Hallahan's (2004) concept of community relations as a foundation for public relations practice. Community engagement activities help healthcare organisations build relationships with host communities and demonstrate their commitment to community health (Ivwighren et al., 2024).

Synthesis: The findings from all four focus groups indicate that public relations use has helped Benue State University Teaching Hospital in managing its internal and external publics through diverse mechanisms including crisis communication management, effective communication programme management, publicity of hospital responses to health issues, and awareness creation on health-related matters. This diversity of public relations activities reflects the multifaceted nature of public relations practice in healthcare settings (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020; Bamidele, 2025).

Research Question Two: What is the perceived impact of public relations use on the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital?

Focus Group One: Concerning the impact of public relations use in the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital, all participants presented the same view. They stated that the impact of public relations use was conducting formal and informal research surveys to determine public opinion and attitudes as a basis for planning and action. One participant explained:
"We regularly conduct surveys to understand what our patients and the community think about our services. This helps management make informed decisions about service improvements."

This finding aligns with Watson and Noble's (2014) emphasis on research and evaluation as essential components of public relations practice. Formative and summative research enables public relations practitioners to understand stakeholder expectations and measure the effectiveness of communication strategies (Watson & Noble, 2014).

Focus Group Two: Participants in this group also confirmed that the impact of public relations use in the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital was conducting formal and informal research surveys to determine public opinion. A participant noted:
"Through our research activities, we have been able to identify areas where the hospital needs to improve. Management has used our findings to implement changes that have enhanced patient satisfaction."

This finding underscores the role of public relations as a management function that provides intelligence about public opinion and attitudes (Broom & Sha, 2013). By serving as the "eyes and ears" of the organisation, public relations practitioners contribute to evidence-based management decision-making (Chiakaan et al., 2023).

Focus Group Three: All participants in this group agreed that creating awareness of the unique services of the healthcare was the impact of public relations use in the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital. One respondent stated:
"Many people in Makurdi and surrounding areas were not aware of the specialised services we offer. Our public relations activities have helped to create awareness and attract more patients to the hospital."

This finding resonates with Fortenberry and McGoldrick's (2016) argument that relationship marketing in healthcare involves communicating the value of services to potential patients. Awareness creation is a fundamental public relations function that contributes to organisational visibility and market positioning (Cornelissen, 2020).

Focus Group Four: Participants in this group also agreed that creating awareness of the unique services of the healthcare was the major impact of public relations use in the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital. A participant explained:
"Through our outreach programmes and media campaigns, we have been able to showcase what makes our hospital special. This has improved our reputation and attracted patients from beyond Benue State."

This finding aligns with Kehinde and Igbozuruike's (2016) finding that good public relations is positively related to growing patient numbers and improved financial performance. Effective public relations can enhance organisational competitiveness by differentiating services and building reputation (Fombrun, 1996).

Synthesis: The findings indicate that the impact of public relations use in the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital encompasses conducting formal and informal research surveys to determine public opinion and attitudes as a basis for planning and action, as well as creating awareness of the unique services of the healthcare institution. These findings reflect the dual role of public relations in providing intelligence for management decision-making and communicating organisational value to external stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham, 2003).

Discussion of Findings

Management of Internal and External Publics

The finding that public relations use has helped Benue State University Teaching Hospital manage its internal and external publics in diverse ways aligns with contemporary public relations scholarship emphasising the importance of stakeholder relationship management (Ledingham, 2003; Kent & Taylor, 2002). As Fatima (2014) observes, public relations departments have become essential in the health sector. In recent years, the Ministry of Health has focused on the subject seriously, yet hospitals are still not efficiently satisfying in terms of public relations service. At hospitals, reaching the target community and supplying high-quality communication based on respect and sympathy—and thereby establishing a positive image—are possible through planned and organised communication studies (Fatima, 2014).

The diverse public relations mechanisms identified by participants—including crisis communication management, communication programme management, publicity of hospital responses, and awareness creation—reflect the multifaceted nature of public relations practice in healthcare settings (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020; Vujadinovic, 2020). Crisis communication, in particular, is critical for healthcare organisations given the potential for medical errors, disease outbreaks, and other crises that can damage reputation and erode public trust (Heath,

2013; Ajayi & Aloba, 2025). Effective crisis communication requires proactive planning, rapid response, and transparent communication with stakeholders (Coombs, 2015).

The emphasis on effective communication programme management resonates with Cornelissen's (2020) conceptualisation of corporate communication as involving coordinated messaging across various channels. Healthcare organisations must manage communication with diverse stakeholders including patients, employees, media, government agencies, and host communities, each with distinct information needs and expectations (Doorley & Garcia, 2020). Strategic communication management ensures consistency and coherence in organisational messaging (Hendrix & Hayes, 2019).

Publicity of hospital responses to health issues reflects the media relations function of public relations, which involves proactively engaging with media organisations to communicate organisational perspectives (Hendrix & Hayes, 2019). In the Nigerian context, where media coverage significantly influences public perception of healthcare institutions (Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015), effective media relations is essential for managing organisational reputation and countering misinformation (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020).

Awareness creation and publicity activities align with Hallahan's (2004) concept of community relations as a foundation for public relations practice. Community engagement activities help healthcare organisations build relationships with host communities and demonstrate their commitment to community health (Ivwighren et al., 2024). Such activities are particularly important in Nigeria, where healthcare institutions often serve as anchors for community health promotion and disease prevention (Nwodoh et al., 2019).

Impact of Public Relations Use on Management

The finding that public relations use impacts management through conducting formal and informal research surveys to determine public opinion aligns with Watson and Noble's (2014) emphasis on research and evaluation as essential components of public relations practice. Formative research enables practitioners to understand stakeholder expectations and inform strategy development, while summative research measures the effectiveness of communication initiatives and demonstrates return on investment (Watson & Noble, 2014).

This finding also resonates with Rostami and Isfahani's (2012) finding that public relations plays a pivotal role in improving hospital efficiency and productivity. Their study revealed that about 27% of respondents mentioned that hospitals kept all their promises and had the ability to perform all their promises, while 25% indicated that hospitals worried about patients' welfare, asked patients to participate in decision-making processes, and helped those with low income. These findings suggest that effective public relations contributes to patient satisfaction and organisational performance (Amiresmaili et al., 2012).

The emphasis on creating awareness of unique services as an impact of public relations use aligns with Kehinde and Igbozuruike's (2016) finding that good public relations is positively related to growing patient numbers and improved financial performance. In competitive healthcare markets, public relations helps organisations differentiate their services and attract patients (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2016). This is particularly important for teaching hospitals like Benue State University Teaching Hospital, which offer specialised services that may be unknown to potential patients (Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024).

The finding that public relations contributes to management through research and awareness creation underscores the strategic value of public relations as a management function (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Broom & Sha, 2013). Public relations practitioners serve as boundary spanners who facilitate communication between organisations and their environments, providing intelligence that informs strategic decision-making (Cornelissen, 2020). This boundary-spanning function is particularly critical in healthcare settings, where understanding patient needs and community health concerns is essential for effective service delivery (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020).

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study provide support for the Jefkins Transfer Process Model, which posits that public relations can transform negative public attitudes (hostility, prejudice, apathy, ignorance) into positive attitudes (sympathy, acceptance, interest, knowledge) through effective communication (Jefkins, 1988; Nweke, 2001). The diverse public relations activities identified by participants—including crisis communication, awareness creation, and research—can be understood as mechanisms for effecting this attitudinal transformation (Jefkins, 1992).

The finding that public relations helps manage internal and external publics through various mechanisms supports the relationship management theory of public relations (Ledingham, 2003). This theory posits that the central purpose of public relations is to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. The emphasis on research surveys to determine public opinion reflects the dialogic orientation of contemporary public relations practice, which prioritises listening and engagement over one-way persuasion (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

The findings also highlight the importance of understanding public relations as a strategic management function rather than merely a tactical communication activity (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The involvement of public relations in research, crisis management, and stakeholder relationship management demonstrates its strategic value to healthcare organisations (Doorley & Garcia, 2020). This aligns with the growing recognition that public relations contributes to organisational effectiveness by managing critical relationships and facilitating adaptation to environmental changes (Heath, 2013).

Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for healthcare institutions in Nigeria and beyond. First, the study underscores the importance of establishing and maintaining robust public relations functions within healthcare organisations (Nwodoh et al., 2019). Public relations should be adequately staffed, funded, and integrated into management structures to enable effective performance of its diverse functions (Chiakaan et al., 2023).

Second, the study highlights the need for public relations practitioners in healthcare settings to possess diverse competencies including crisis communication, media relations, research, and community engagement (Eke & Alikor, 2025). Professional development opportunities should be provided to enhance these competencies and keep practitioners abreast of evolving communication technologies and strategies (Ivwighren et al., 2024).

Third, the study suggests that healthcare institutions should invest in research to understand patient and community perceptions, needs, and expectations (Watson & Noble, 2014). Such research provides evidence for management decision-making and helps ensure that services are responsive to stakeholder needs (Bamidele, 2025).

Fourth, the study underscores the importance of awareness creation and public education about available health services (Kehinde & Igbozuruike, 2016). Many potential patients may be unaware of specialised services offered by teaching hospitals, and public relations can play a critical role in bridging this information gap (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020).

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, the study concludes that there is a high level of public relations use at Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi, and that public relations significantly impacts the management of the institution. The study concludes that public relations use has helped in managing internal and external publics at the hospital in diverse ways, including through crisis communication management, effective communication programme management, publicity of hospital responses to health issues, and creation of awareness on health-related issues. The study further concludes that the impact of public relations use in the management of Benue State University Teaching Hospital includes conducting formal and informal research surveys to determine public opinion and attitudes as a basis for planning and action, as well as creating awareness of the unique services of the healthcare institution.

The study's findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship on public relations in healthcare settings (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020; Vujadinovic, 2020; Bamidele, 2025) and provide empirical evidence supporting the theoretical proposition that public relations is a strategic management function that contributes to organisational effectiveness (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Broom & Sha, 2013; Ledingham, 2003). The findings also validate the Jefkins Transfer Process Model's applicability to healthcare settings, demonstrating how public relations activities can transform public attitudes and build organisational goodwill (Jefkins, 1988; Nweke, 2001).

However, the study also reveals areas for improvement. The absence of a distinct corporate identity, as evidenced by the lack of coordinated corporate colours and inconsistent quality of informational materials (Theaker & Yaxley, 2013), suggests gaps in strategic public relations planning. Additionally, the study's limitation to a single institution and a relatively small sample restricts generalisability of findings. Future research should expand to

multiple healthcare institutions and employ mixed methods to provide more comprehensive insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, the study makes the following recommendations:

i. **Enhanced Involvement of Public Relations Experts:** Public relations experts should be fully involved in the delivery of healthcare to Makurdi residents. There is need for greater extent and frequency of the use of public relations tools for healthcare delivery. Healthcare organisations should recognise public relations as a strategic partner in achieving organisational objectives and should involve public relations practitioners in decision-making processes at all levels (Nwodoh et al., 2019; Eke & Alikor, 2025).

ii. **Adequate Funding for Public Relations Units:** The study recommends that the public relations unit at Benue State University Teaching Hospital should be properly funded to enable it support management in healthcare delivery through deliberate, planned strategies and actions on effective communication. Adequate funding is essential for implementing comprehensive public relations programmes, including research, media relations, community engagement, and crisis communication (Watson & Noble, 2014; Chiakaan et al., 2023).

iii. **Professional Development for Public Relations Staff:** Healthcare institutions should invest in continuous professional development for public relations practitioners to enhance their competencies in emerging areas such as digital communication, data analytics, and strategic communication management (Eke & Alikor, 2025; Ivwighren et al., 2024).

iv. **Expansion of Research:** Studies of this nature should be carried out or expanded to cover more healthcare organisations in Makurdi metropolis and beyond for better generalisation. Comparative studies across different types of healthcare institutions (teaching hospitals, federal medical centres, private hospitals) would provide valuable insights into contextual factors influencing public relations effectiveness (Chiakaan et al., 2023).

v. **Development of Strategic Communication Plans:** Healthcare institutions should develop comprehensive strategic communication plans that articulate objectives, identify target publics, specify strategies and tactics, and establish evaluation mechanisms (Hendrix & Hayes, 2019; Cornelissen, 2020).

vi. **Strengthening of Community Relations:** Given the importance of community relations in healthcare public relations (Hallahan, 2004), healthcare institutions should strengthen their community engagement activities through regular outreach programmes, health education initiatives, and collaborative partnerships with community organisations (Ivwighren & Egbi, 2024).

vii. **Integration of Digital Communication Channels:** Healthcare institutions should leverage digital communication channels, including social media, websites, and mobile applications, to enhance reach and engagement with diverse stakeholders (Batta & Iwokwagh, 2015; Udenze & Temple, 2023).

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Agricultural Extension Messages to Local Farmers for Enhanced Productivity through Orature: Prospects and Constraints

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Abstract

Agricultural extension in Nigeria and much of sub-Saharan Africa remains trapped in a paradox: despite decades of investment, smallholder productivity continues to stagnate, and the extension agent-to-farmer ratio stands at approximately 1:25,000. This review critically synthesises 61 credible academic and institutional sources to examine the prospects and constraints of deploying orature, the traditional oral communication forms of folk songs, proverbs, folktales, town criers, and drama, as vehicles for agricultural extension messages to local farmers. The review interrogates the theoretical foundations of orature, the evolution and documented failings of conventional extension models, and the empirical evidence for orature's effectiveness in Nigerian and African contexts. It finds that while orature is culturally resonant, participatory, and accessible to non-literate farmers, its systematic deployment is constrained by translation and dialect challenges, the orality-literacy divide, the absence of documentation and standardisation, institutional weaknesses, and unresolved tensions between indigenous knowledge and scientific agriculture. The review concludes that orature offers genuine prospects for