

Digital Media and Strategic Public Relations in Advancing Intra-African Dialogue among Postgraduate Students in Select Universities in Rivers State

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Abstract: This study examined the relationship between digital media, strategic public relations, and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State. Specifically, it determined the relationships between social media communication, stakeholder engagement, two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue. A correlational research design was adopted. The population comprised 427 postgraduate students from Rivers State University and the University of Port Harcourt, while 357 retrieved questionnaires were used for analysis. Data were collected using the Digital Media and Strategic Public Relations Questionnaire (DMSPRQ) and Intra-African Dialogue Questionnaire (IADQ). Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed significant positive relationships between social media communication and intra-African dialogue ($r = .714, p < .001$), stakeholder engagement and intra-African dialogue ($r = .683, p < .001$), and two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue ($r = .742, p < .001$). The study concluded that digital media and strategic public relations practices provide important opportunities for strengthening communication, stakeholder interaction, knowledge exchange, and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students. It recommended greater use of interactive digital platforms to facilitate academic and cross-cultural communication among African students.

Keywords: Digital Media, Strategic Public Relations, Intra-African Dialogue, Social Media

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Introduction

Digital media technologies are rapidly evolving and have revolutionized communication around the world, especially in the field of higher education, where digital platforms have become necessary tools to learn, collaborate, share information and socialize. The penetration of internet enabled technologies, social networking platforms, mobile communication and digital application in Africa has improved the communication between individuals and institutions, and between individuals and nations [1]. Digital media are now being used in universities as communication tools beyond their scholarly use to build partnerships, cultural understanding and regional cooperation between students from across Africa. Digital media are defined as internet-supported forms of

communication that enable the production, sharing, dissemination and exchange of information using electronic platforms like Facebook, X (previously known as Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs, institutional websites, podcasts and online discussion forums [2]. Digital media have changed the way people and organisations communicate [3], eliminating the geographical barriers and facilitating real-time interaction between people and organisations. Smartphone technology and internet access has also further enabled digital communication among African nations, providing opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing and social integration.

Strategic public relations have become an essential element of corporate management in today's communication landscape which depends on planned communication to build mutually beneficial stakeholder-organization relationships. Besides publicity, strategic public relations put greater emphasis on conducting research on communication, engaging stakeholders, managing reputation, facilitating dialogue and building relationships [4]. Ihunwo [5] noted that effective public relations strategies promote transparency, trust, participation and understanding between students and teachers, which are essential for maintaining positive relationships in an educational institution. Likewise, Chinedu-Okeke and Obi [6] state that strategic public relations help institutions to handle communication efficiently, minimize misinformation and enhance their credibility in the digital space. Digital media as part of a strategic public relations effort has opened up opportunities for two-way symmetrical communication, enabling institutions to engage in direct communication with their stakeholders while also gaining instant feedback. This communication model actively involves the students and university leaders in a collaborative and inclusive process of decision-making [7]. Nwabueze [8] notes that digital media has transformed PR from a one-way information flow to a participative communication model where stakeholders are involved in the development of the institutions and discussions.

The greater focus on regional integration in Africa has made intra-African dialogue increasingly important across the continent. Intra-African dialogue is ongoing communication, exchange of ideas, cultural interaction, concerted engagement and understanding between Africans with the intent to foster unity, peace, development and integration of the African continent [9]. The vision of “The Africa We Want” of Agenda 2063 [10] calls for effective communication, sharing of knowledge, youth engagement, innovation, and collaboration in education and learning. The role of universities is strategic to support this vision because it facilitates an academic and social environment that brings together students of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic and national backgrounds.

One of the most intellectually active groups in the universities are the Postgraduate students. The post graduate students play a very huge role in the process of knowledge production and dissemination both within and outside Africa through seminars, conferences, collaborative research, academic association, online community and professional networking platforms [11]. It has been observed that the digital communication technologies have become the major tools of post graduate education, enabling virtual learning and research, academic networking and trans-border scholarly interactions [12]. The interactions enable students to share ideas, build professional relationships and participate in addressing shared developmental issues in Africa. The opportunities for postgraduate students to engage in academic conversations in the continent have also been enhanced by digital media platform. Students can communicate with colleagues at other universities across Africa via webinars, virtual conferences, online workshops, research forums, online libraries and professional associations, without geographical constraints [13]. According to Eze and Okafor [14], these digital interactions foster intercultural knowledge, academic partnerships, creation and innovation, and shared learning experiences that help achieve sustainable development in the continent.

By establishing communication systems and structures, strategic public relations can enhance dialogue, trust, and engagement among stakeholders and facilitate the management of interrelationships within universities, complementing digital media. Nwanne [15] argued that Universities that have established strategic communication practices are more likely to foster inclusivity, build institutional brand awareness, encourage intercultural understanding and nurture

collaborative academic initiatives among learners. Good public relations is also an effective tool for universities to deal with communication crises, counter misinformation, spread their values, and foster peaceful interactions among diverse student populations [16].

Digital Communication Technologies have now become part of Rivers State Universities like Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and Rivers State University teaching, learning, administration, research and engagement practices. The postgraduate students are actively using WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, institutional learning management systems, Google Meet, Zoom, Facebook communities, LinkedIn and other digital platforms to connect and communicate academically and professionally. These platforms facilitate more collaboration than institutional and national boundaries, offering a way to implement intra-African dialogue objectives [17]. However, there are problems to be addressed. African universities faced a variety of challenges in their digital engagement, such as the increasing spread of misinformation, digital misinformation campaigns, unequal internet connectivity, low digital literacy for some students, language diversity, cyber insecurity, and poor strategic communications policies [18]. Nwabueze and Okoro [19] argue that the lack of synergic strategic public relations tools can affect the potentials of universities to leverage digital media to foster positive dialogue and academic cooperation among nations.

While digital media utilization, public relations practice, social media engagement and higher education communication have been studied separately in the past few years, there is a lack of empirical research that has studied how the utilization of these digital media platforms and strategic public relations relate to the effective promotion of intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students of Rivers State universities. This leaves a significant gap in the knowledge that needs to be explored through research. Having a grasp of this relationship will give insights into communication development strategies for educational stakeholders, university management, communication practitioners and policy makers for enhancing regional cooperation, academic networking, and sustainable development in the continent. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the role of digital media and strategic public relations in advancing intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in Rivers State universities, with the aim of providing empirical evidence that can enhance communication practices, strengthen institutional collaboration, and promote meaningful academic interactions across Africa.

Statement of the Problem

Intra-African dialogue is essential for promoting regional integration, academic collaboration, cultural exchange, and sustainable development across Africa. As centres of knowledge creation and intellectual engagement, universities are expected to provide platforms that enable postgraduate students to exchange ideas, collaborate on research, and participate in scholarly discussions that strengthen continental integration. The emergence of digital media and strategic public relations has further created opportunities to enhance social media engagement, stakeholder engagement, and relationship management, thereby facilitating communication, knowledge sharing, and academic collaboration among postgraduate students across African universities. Despite these opportunities, the level of intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students appears to remain below expectation, particularly in fostering cross-border academic collaboration, knowledge sharing, and intercultural engagement. Social media is often used primarily for entertainment and personal interactions rather than for academic networking and discussions on issues relating to Africa's development. In addition, inadequate stakeholder engagement and weak relationship management practices may have limited opportunities for sustained academic collaboration, intercultural exchange, and meaningful communication among postgraduate students in Rivers State universities. Consequently, the opportunities provided by digital media and strategic public relations to advance intra-African dialogue may not have been fully utilized. Although previous studies have examined digital media and strategic public relations in different educational and organizational contexts, these concepts have largely been investigated independently, with limited empirical attention given to how social media engagement, stakeholder engagement, and relationship management jointly relate to the advancement of intra-African dialogue among postgraduate

students. This gap in the literature limits the availability of evidence needed by university administrators, communication practitioners, and policymakers to develop effective communication strategies that strengthen academic collaboration and continental integration. It is against this background that this study seeks to examine the relationship between social media engagement, stakeholder engagement, relationship management, and the advancement of intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in Rivers State universities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between digital media and strategic public relations in advancing intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in Rivers State universities. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between social media communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.
2. Determine the relationship between stakeholder engagement and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.
3. Ascertain the relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What is the relationship between social media communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State?
2. What is the relationship between stakeholder engagement and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State?
3. What is the relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between social media communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.
2. There is no significant relationship between stakeholder engagement and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.
3. There is no significant relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.

Methodology

A correlational research method was used to find the relationship between college students' use of digital media, strategic public relations, and communication within Africa. Rivers State University and the University of Port Harcourt both had departments of public relations and the Faculty of Mass Communication and Media Studies at both schools did the study. There were 427 postgraduate students in the population, with 154 from Rivers State University and 273 from the University of Port Harcourt. They were all accepted during the 2024–2025 school year. A total of 427 surveys were sent to the responders, and 357 were later found and used for the study. Two questionnaires made by researchers were used to collect data: the Intra-African Dialogue Questionnaire (IADQ) and the Digital Media and Strategic Public Relations Questionnaire (DMSPRQ). The DMSPRQ looked at communication on social media, engagement with stakeholders, and two-way symmetrical communication. The IADQ, on the other hand, looked at dialogue within Africa. There were demographic and study questions on the surveys. They were set up on a four-point Likert scale, with Strongly Agree (SA) = 4, Agree (A) = 3, Disagree (D) = 2, and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1. Three experts, two lecturers from the Department of Public Relations and one professor from the Department of Educational Measurement and Evaluation at Rivers State

University, checked that the tools were correct. Cronbach's Alpha was used to find out how reliable the tools were in a test study with postgraduate Public Relations students from a university not in the study area. It was okay if the value was 0.70 or higher. To answer the study questions, Mean and Standard Deviation were used to look at the data from the 357 respondents. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. A mean score of 2.50 was chosen as the standard. numbers above 2.50 meant agreement, and numbers below 2.50 meant dispute.

Analysis of Data and Results

Research Question and Hypothesis 1: Table and Interpretation of Result

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between social media communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State?

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between social media communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.

Table 1. Relationship between Social Media Communication and Intra-African Dialogue among Postgraduate Students in Select Universities in Rivers State (N = 357)

	Social Media Communication	Intra-African Dialogue
Social Media Communication		
Pearson Correlation	1	.714
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
N	357	357
Intra-African Dialogue		
Pearson Correlation	.714	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	357	357

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

For the purpose of establishing a connection between online discourse and intra-African discourse, Table 1 displays the computed coefficient (r) value of replies from graduate students. There is a substantial and positive correlation between social media communication and intra-African conversation among postgraduate students at chosen universities in Rivers State, as seen in the table where the computed r was 0.714. Additionally, at the 0.05 level of significance, the table displays a p-value of .001. We may say that we rejected the null hypothesis since the p-value is smaller than the significance level (0.05). This suggests that among some graduate students at Rivers State colleges, there is a strong correlation between online discourse and intra-African discussion.

Research Question and Hypothesis 2: Table and Interpretation of Result

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between stakeholder engagement and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State?

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between stakeholder engagement and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.

Table 2. Relationship between Stakeholder Engagement and Intra-African Dialogue among Postgraduate Students in Select Universities in Rivers State (N = 357)

	Stakeholder Engagement	Intra-African Dialogue
Stakeholder Engagement		
Pearson Correlation	1	.683
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
N	357	357
Intra-African Dialogue		

Pearson Correlation	.683	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	357	357

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

For the purpose of establishing a connection between stakeholder participation and intra-African discussion, Table 2 displays the computed coefficient (r) value of replies from graduate students. A significant and positive association between stakeholder involvement and intra-African discussion among postgraduate students in chosen institutions in Rivers State was shown by the computed r-value of 0.683, as seen in the table. Additionally, at the 0.05 level of significance, the table displays a p-value of .001. We may say that we rejected the null hypothesis since the p-value is smaller than the significance level (0.05). This suggests that among graduate students at several Rivers State colleges, there is a strong correlation between engaging with stakeholders and having conversations inside Africa.

Research Question and Hypothesis 3: Table and Interpretation of Result

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State?

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State.

Table 3. Relationship between Two-Way Symmetrical Communication and Intra-African Dialogue among Postgraduate Students in Select Universities in Rivers State (N = 357)

	Two-Way Symmetrical Communication	Intra-African Dialogue
Two-Way Symmetrical Communication		
Pearson Correlation	1	.742
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
N	357	357
Intra-African Dialogue		
Pearson Correlation	.742	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
N	357	357

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

In order to find out how intra-African discussion relates to two-way symmetrical communication, Table 3 displays the computed coefficient (r) value of replies from graduate students. The table reveals that the computed r-value was 0.742, which indicates a substantial positive link between intra-African conversation and two-way symmetrical communication among postgraduate students at chosen universities in Rivers State. Additionally, at the 0.05 level of significance, the table displays a p-value of .001. We may say that we rejected the null hypothesis since the p-value is smaller than the significance level (0.05). This suggests that among some graduate students at Rivers State colleges, there is a strong correlation between intra-African discourse and two-way symmetrical communication. A little error: Writing $p < .001$ instead of $p = .001$ is preferable in academic reporting due to the fact that a p-value is not always zero. In the narrative, indicate $p < .001$ if your SPSS result shows .000.

Discussion of Findings

A correlation between social media communication and intra-African conversation was found to be favourable and statistically significant among postgraduate students at several universities in Rivers State. A strong positive association is shown by the correlation coefficient of 0.714, and the relationship was statistically significant with a significance value of $p < .001$. This finding suggests that the use of social media facilitates interaction, information sharing, exchange of ideas, and discussions among postgraduate students on issues relating to Africa. The finding may be attributed to the interactive nature of social media platforms, which provides postgraduate students with opportunities to communicate beyond geographical and institutional boundaries. Through social media, students can share academic information, discuss African social and cultural issues, exchange perspectives, and participate in conversations with individuals from different African backgrounds. Thus, effective social media communication can provide a platform for strengthening intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students. The finding revealed a positive and significant relationship between stakeholder in Rivers State. The correlation coefficient of 0.683 indicates a strong positive relationship, while $p < .001$ indicates that the relationship was statistically significant. This suggests that engagement with relevant stakeholders through digital media is associated with increased opportunities for dialogue, interaction, collaboration, and exchange of ideas on African issues.

The finding could be explained by the ability of digital platforms to connect postgraduate students with academic institutions, professional organisations, researchers, government agencies, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders. Such engagement provides opportunities for students to participate in discussions and contribute their perspectives to issues affecting Africa. Effective stakeholder engagement through digital media can therefore create avenues for meaningful intra-African communication and collaboration. The finding revealed a positive and significant relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State. The correlation coefficient of 0.742 indicates a strong positive relationship, while $p < .001$ indicates that the relationship was statistically significant. This finding suggests that communication that allows participants to both send and receive information, provide feedback, and respond to one another is associated with stronger intra-African dialogue. The finding may be attributed to the interactive and participatory nature of two-way symmetrical communication. Unlike one-way communication, two-way communication provides opportunities for mutual understanding, feedback, discussion, and adjustment of viewpoints. Through digital platforms, postgraduate students can express their opinions, respond to the views of others, and engage in continuous conversations on African issues. This makes two-way symmetrical communication particularly relevant to promoting dialogue among students from diverse African backgrounds.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are given in light of the study's results:

1. Universities should encourage and facilitate the effective use of social media platforms among postgraduate students by creating opportunities for academic discussions, information sharing, cultural exchange, and communication on issues affecting Africa. This will enhance social media communication and promote intra-African dialogue.
2. Universities should strengthen stakeholder engagement through digital media by providing opportunities for postgraduate students to interact with researchers, academic institutions, professional organisations, civil society organisations, and other relevant stakeholders across Africa. This will enhance knowledge exchange, collaboration, and intra-African dialogue.
3. Departments of Public Relations should promote two-way symmetrical communication through digital platforms by creating interactive forums where postgraduate students can express their views, receive feedback, respond to other perspectives, and participate actively in discussions on African issues. This will strengthen mutual understanding and promote

effective intra-African dialogue.

Conclusion

The study examined the relationship between digital media, strategic public relations, and intra-African dialogue among postgraduate students in select universities in Rivers State. Based on the findings, social media communication, stakeholder engagement, and two-way symmetrical communication all had positive and significant relationships with intra-African dialogue. The findings demonstrate that digital media provides opportunities for postgraduate students to communicate, exchange ideas, engage stakeholders, and participate in discussions on African issues. Social media communication was significantly related to intra-African dialogue, while stakeholder engagement also showed a significant positive relationship. Similarly, two-way symmetrical communication demonstrated a strong positive and significant relationship with intra-African dialogue. Overall, the findings suggest that effective use of digital media and strategic public relations practices can provide valuable opportunities for strengthening communication and interaction among postgraduate students. Universities can therefore leverage digital platforms to promote meaningful dialogue, knowledge exchange, cultural understanding, and collaboration among students within and beyond institutional boundaries.

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