

## **Comparative Analysis of Public Relations Roles, Practitioners' Functions and Communication Models in Public and Private Organizations in Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study offers a comparative analysis of public relations (PR) practice in public and private organizations in Nigeria, with evidence from Akwa Ibom State. The study main objectives investigate the PR roles, practitioners' functions, and communication models adopted across both sectors. Rather than merely describing PR activities, the study explores how organizational structures, power dynamics, and leadership orientations shape PR effectiveness. A qualitative research design was employed, with data generated through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 22 purposively selected PR professionals, including communication managers, directors, and public relations managers. Interview questions were informed by the study objectives, relevant literature, and Structuration Theory, which provided analytical lens for examining the interaction between agency and structure. Interview data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed using Atlas.ti 8. Although PR supports stakeholder engagement and crisis management in both sectors, the study revealed sectoral divergence in practice. Public organizations were constrained by bureaucratic control and hierarchical decision-making, reactive crisis management practices and technician-dominated roles. In contrast, private organizations display flexible structures that enable proactive Public Relations strategies and integration of managerial and technician roles. Public sector communication was predominantly linear and one-way, reflecting information dissemination priorities, whereas private organizations apply transactional, two-way models that promote feedback, participation, and strategic alignment. These differences reflect deeper institutional logics that shape professional legitimacy and influence, rather than simple variations in practice. The study contributes a structural explanation of PR practice in Nigeria, indicating that organizational context outweighs competence, and calls for autonomy, strategic integration, and stronger professional regulation.

**Keywords:** *public relations roles, practitioner's roles, communication models, organizational communication, public and private sector organizations*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Public Relations (PR) is essential for fostering strong stakeholder relationships and enhancing organizational image, reputation, and effective communication. As PR continues to evolve, understanding how PR roles, practitioner functions, and communication models adapt across different sectors is crucial to achieving organizational excellence (Yue et al., 2025). Given the complex nature of organizations, operational differences, leadership, socio-cultural and

economic peculiarities, how practitioners navigate this dynamic situation and environment highlight the specific functions and roles and importance of PR in an organization. Research findings reveals that PR practitioners play critical role in shaping communication strategy, relationship management, and influencing public perception (Etuk & Udonde, 2023; Udowo et al., 2023). Historically, the evolution of PR roles is grounded in Broom and Smith (1979) foundational study of PR roles. In Nigeria, PR's history is rooted in both colonial administrative system and the nationalist struggle for independence. Consequently, PR in Nigeria has since evolved, from serving the image-laundering needs of military regimes to facilitating the legitimate goals of civil governance (Elewomawu, 2023; Sule, & Ridwanullah, (2023).

However, PR in Nigeria still struggles with professional legitimacy due to socio-cultural dynamics and controlled communication practices in the country (Eyo, 2025). Despite its relevance, few empirical studies compare how PR functions in public versus private sectors in Nigeria. Most studies on PR practices in Nigeria focus on general PR concepts in specific industries with limited comparative studies. For instance, Eyo and Onyewuchi (2025) noted a concentration of PR studies on the banking sector, government agencies (Maiwada et al.,2025), police (Dapiya, & Obateru, 2025), with no sectoral contrast. Similarly, Iyinoluwa et al. (2023) noted that studies on PR in Nigeria largely employ survey or desk research methods, with limited use of inductive approaches. Bridging this gap is essential to identify best practices that aligns PR with strategic goals and improve stakeholder communication within Nigeria's complex socio-cultural and political context.

In view of the scarcity of cross-sectoral research on PR practices, existing PR research in Nigeria mainly examined the adoption of public relations models (Eyo, & Onyewuchi 2025; Maiwada et al.,2025). Thus, most of these studies fall short of ascertaining whether these entities rely solely on publicity, information, persuasion, or symmetrical dialogue in their operations. Consequently, existing literatures tend to overlook the underlying communication processes, context or circumstance through which these models are enacted. As such, this study seeks to address this gap by explicitly examining communication models and not merely PR models to understand how messages flow, how feedback is enabled or constrained, and how power and participation shape organizational communication in public and private sector in Nigeria.

Likewise, it is pertinent to note that public relations models mainly describe the orientation of organizational public relationships, whereas communication models reveal the mechanisms through which meaning is produced, negotiated, or silenced in practice. By foregrounding communication models, this study moves beyond categorizing PR approaches to explain how structural conditions and communicative processes determine whether publics are treated as passive targets or as active partners whose voices influence decisions in an organization. Consequently, the core objectives of the study are to comparatively examine the role of PR, practitioners' function and responsibilities, as well as communication models deployed in public and private organizations in Nigeria with particular reference to Akwa Ibom State. In doing so, the study offers a clearer, process-based explanation of sectoral differences in

PR practice and responds directly to calls for more context-sensitive and analytically grounded PR research in Nigeria. Consequently, the study aims to generate empirical insight into sector-based differences in PR practice and to deepen understanding of how contextual socio-political realities shape the strategic relevance of public relations in Nigeria.

#### *Issues and challenges of public relation in Nigeria*

Public Relations has played significant role in Nigeria's socio-cultural, political and economic development. Despite its contributions, PR in Nigeria faces systemic challenges, including bureaucratic bottlenecks, rigid organizational culture, and unethical practices (Thomas & Omojunikanbi, 2023). In many Nigerian organizations, PR is confined to routine communication, media and publicity tasks, thus sidelining its strategic value. As such, many practitioners lack specialization, training and certification which undermine the credibility of the field (Nytse & Agbele, 2023; Nwanmuoh et al., 2024). This problem is made worst by weak regulation and poor enforcement of standards by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), leading to what scholars describe as an identity crisis in PR (Okocha, & James, 2025). Although Decree No. 16 of 1990 recognizes PR as a profession under the preview of NIPR, the reality is bleak as less than 10% of Nigeria's federal MDAs employ certified PR professionals (Nwakanma, 2013). This opens the field to unqualified individuals and dilutes PR practice into media and publicity with minimal involvement in organizational decision-making (Adama et al., 2025). Compounding the issue further is Nigeria's rigid hierarchical workplace culture which encourages top-down communication and limits employee (practitioners) voice (Adisa et al. 2024). Furthermore, most PR departments are often subsumed under unrelated units like HR or Marketing which restricts independence (Matthew et al., 2024). This leads to weak internal communication, poor employee engagement and management, job dissatisfaction, and workplace conflicts (Adama et al., 2025).

Consequently, Garba (2024) observed that existing scholarship on PR in Nigeria tend to focus more on public institutions which prompts the need for comparative studies across sectors. While existing studies (Iyinoluwa et al., 2023; Maiwada et al., 2025; Eyo & Onyewuchi, 2025) focus largely on comparing the adoption of public relations models in public and private organizations, they do not explicitly differentiate between PR models and the communication models through which PR activities are implemented. This present study addresses this gap by focusing and examining communication models distinctly from PR models even though they are related analytical constructs, alongside practitioners' roles and functional responsibilities, thereby offering a more comprehensive and context-sensitive account of PR practices across sectors in Nigeria.

## LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

### *The role and practices of public relations in Nigeria*

Public Relations have been central to service delivery in the Nigerian polity since the colonial era (Mu'azu, & Gapsiso, 2024). However, the practice in Nigeria remains limited to media-related functions, information dissemination, and marketing rather than strategic management (Eyo, 2025). Despite Suárez-Monsalve (2022) observation of growing empirical studies on the evolution, professionalization, and global integration of PR practices, however most Nigerian practitioners still perform largely media-oriented functions with minimal strategic contribution (Yusuf, 2024). Also, Sule and Ridwanullah (2023) and Thomas and Omojunikanbi (2023) both noted that most entities with PR departments in Nigeria often misunderstand the strategic role of public relations thus leading to poor stakeholder engagement and service delivery. Consequently, a limited understanding of strategic PR functions hinders policy acceptance and reforms meant to improve public welfare due to poor stakeholder engagement (Nhedzi, & Azionya, 2023).

Similarly, Adedeji (2025) highlighted the value of inter-governmental relations (IGR) in promoting accountability in governance. However, reoccurring exclusion of stakeholders in decision making has contributed to deplorable state of inter-governmental relations with citizens in Nigeria. Similarly, attempts by some Nigerian entities, such as banks, to adopt a two-way asymmetrical communication model are geared towards prioritizing profit over genuine dialogue (Setoutah et al., 2024). As such, PR in Nigeria remains a low-budget, peripheral function categorized under miscellaneous expenses with Achilike, (2025) and Chukwu, (2025) noting that practitioners in Nigeria facing lack of funds and resource needed to effectively carry out their functions. In addition, Eyo and Onyewuchi (2025) argued that although PR in Nigeria is fundamentally communication-driven, proper funding and integration of PR into core organizational strategy can enhance organization reputation and overall communication effectiveness. Hence, the first research question is RQ1: What are the roles of Public Relations in public and private establishments in Nigeria.

#### *Role and functions of public relations practitioners*

The roles and functions of PR professionals have evolved significantly, transitioning from traditional media functions to more strategic, technology-driven functions. Early research by Broom and Smith (1979) identified PR roles, later refined by Broom (1982) into expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solver, and technician. Dozier and Broom (1995) redefined PR role into two broad categories of managerial and technician roles. The technician role is concerned with communication tasks of information dissemination and implementation of management decisions. In contrast, the managerial role emphasizes strategic communication planning, involvement in organizational decision-making for organizational effectiveness. Beyond foundational PR roles, new dimensions have emerged such as legal, economic, and ethical frameworks highlighted by Sesen (2015), social and digital media functions as well as the

role of ethical counselor (Neill, 2023) further reflecting the dynamic nature of PR in a technologically driven environment. Consequently, digital technologies have made PR more proactive, data-driven, and measurable in organizational impact (Udomah et al., 2023; Adenuga, 2025). While research indicates that specific roles and functions of PR professionals is shaped by organizational culture (Said, 2024), in Nigeria, rigid hierarchies and unclear job boundaries often limit PR practitioners to perform mainly technician roles and reduce their strategic input (Adama et al., 2025). Additionally, communication models adopted by Nigerian organizations are often determined by management which strengthen control over partnership (Nytse & Agbele, 2023). Similarly, in a control-oriented setting, feedback is used to secure compliance rather than co-creation, further marginalizing PR's role, function and open communication (Mu'azu, & Gapsiso, 2024; Ejiogu et al., 2024). Thus, this leads to the second research question RQ2: What are the specific roles of public relations practitioners in public and private organizations in Nigeria?

#### *Models of communication*

Communication models offer structured frameworks for understanding how information and meaning are exchanged between individuals or groups. Chukwuaguzie et al., (2023) describes communication models as methodical descriptions of the process by which information and metaphorical meaning is exchanged between individuals or groups. By outlining key elements such as sender, message, channel, receiver, and feedback, models of communication simplify complex interactions across various contexts (Akarika et al., 2023). In organizational settings, effective communication is critical for aligning stakeholders, promoting collaboration, and driving performance (Chirwa & Boikanyo, 2023). It involves both formal and informal channels and uses verbal, nonverbal, and digital media to foster understanding and transparency. Accordingly, Bukar et al., (2025) observed that organizations with open and integrative communication models enhance message clarity and audience responsiveness. Thus, the linear model as the earliest framework, conceptualizes communication as a one-way transmission from sender to receiver, with limited feedback or interaction (Omojuwa, 2025). Although criticized for its simplicity and lack of dynamism, however it laid the groundwork for more advanced models like Berlo's SMCR, which elaborates on message components of communication (Tomar et al., 2023). In contrast, transactional models of communication views communication as participatory and contextually driven (Sabila, & Yuliawati, 2025). Communication effectiveness in transactional model hinges on interactive engagement and mutual understanding rather than mere message transmission (Chukwuaguzie et al., 2023). The transactional model of communication acknowledges the influence of feedback loops and contextual factors on communication outcomes (Surya, & Pratama, 2024). However, the efficiency of a communication model can be inhibited through information silos, lack of feedback, culture barriers, technology gap and

management or business interest (Chew et al. 2024). Thus, failure to identify and respond to these dynamics risks miscommunication, diminished morale, and inefficiencies. This underscores the need for communication to be a deliberate and adaptive process and thus leading to the third research question. RQ3: what are the communication models deployed in public and private organizations in Akwa Ibom State?

#### *Theoretical Framework*

Structuration Theory, developed by Anthony Giddens, examines the dynamic relationship between individuals (agency) and social structures (Anam, 2025). The theory posits that structures shape and constrains behaviors however individuals possess the ability to act and make impactful choices within these structures (Giddens, 1991). While agency centers on individual's capacity to act effectively within social contexts, by contrast, structure consists of rules and norms that regulate social interactions (Dayrobi et al., 2024). These norms are produced and reinforced through human actions and serve to delineate and legitimize appropriate actions. Consequently, the interplay of social structure and behaviors provides a framework for understanding reasons behind people's action (Raza, 2024).

This interplay is evident in PR as practitioners operate within hierarchical systems that can constrain or enable their strategic actions. As such, whether in public or private entities, PR professionals as employees are subject to organizations leadership and management. And as such, their strategic function and roles in decision-making highlight the interface between human agencies and structural constraints. Thus, the theory underscores how PR roles and communication strategies are shaped by organizational norms, policies, and power structures within a firm. In the context of PR roles, practitioners' functions and communication models, Structuration Theory provides a lens to examine the interplay between agency and structure thus highlighting the tension between individual and systemic constraints. While organizational culture and expectations shape PR practices (Zhang et al., 2023), practitioners are positioned as active agents within broader institutional and societal systems, with the ability to navigate structural constraints and leverage opportunities. Hence, the study is aimed at offering insights into communication strategies (model) across public and private sectors in Nigeria.

#### METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative design to explore PR roles, practitioner functions, and communication models in public and private organizations. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 22 purposively selected senior PR professionals including communication managers and directors in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. Uyo was chosen due to its concentration of PR professionals and its role as host of the state chapter of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations which facilitated access to experienced participants. The interview guide

informed by the study's objectives and Structuration Theory, focused on professional background, role performance, decision-making, and communication models. Interviews, conducted in English between October and December 2024, lasted 20–30 minutes. Participants were recruited via workplace visits and NIPR referrals, with eligibility confirmed through ID and NIPR membership checks. All participants provided written informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The interview guide was pilot tested with seven PR professionals for clarity. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, including nonverbal cues such as pauses, laughter, and filler words, to preserve response richness (McMullin, 2023). This approach enhanced contextual understanding and ensured findings authentically reflected participants' views. Data were analyzed using Atlas.ti 8, beginning with line-by-line coding to identify roles, functions, and communication models. Codes were organized into categories and refined into themes. Member checking was conducted by returning transcripts to participants for verification, enhancing the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Lloyd et al., 2024). Thematic interpretation followed a constructivist approach, supported by direct participant quotes to ensure authenticity and transparency.

**Table 1: Demographic of Respondents**

| Participants | Age | Gender | Experiences | Sector                      | Organizations/Institutions                   | Position                           |
|--------------|-----|--------|-------------|-----------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| KI1          | 48  | Female | 10 Years    | Public                      | Local Government Council                     | Media and Information Officer      |
| KI2          | 55  | Male   | 20 Years    | Public                      | Government Ministry (Information & Strategy) | Public Relations Officer           |
| KI3          | 40  | Male   | 6 Years     | NGO                         | Non-governmental Organization                | Media and Publicity Representative |
| KI4          | 52  | Male   | 15 Years    | Private                     | Telecommunications                           | Marketing Executive Officer        |
| KI5          | 35  | Male   | 5 Years     | Public & Private Enterprise | Hospitality (Hotel & Golf Resort)            | Public Relations Officer           |
| KI6          | 55  | Female | 18 Years    | Private                     | Financial Institutions (Bank)                | Customer Relations Officer         |
| KI7          | 42  | Male   | 8 Years     | Public                      | Radio  | Media Relation Officer             |
| KI8          | 54  | Female | 12 Years    | Private                     | Telecommunication                            | Marketing and Promotions Manager   |
| KI9          | 34  | Female | 5 Years     | Private                     | Consultancy Firm                             | Brand Manager                      |
| KI10         | 42  | Male   | 7 Years     | Public                      | University                                   | Public Relations Officer           |

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|      |    |        |          |         |   |                                       |
|------|----|--------|----------|---------|---|---------------------------------------|
| KI11 | 30 | Female | 4 Years  | Private | Educational Institution (Polytechnic)             | Marketing & Communication Director    |
| KI12 | 50 | Male   | 12 Years | Public  | State Water Company                               | Publicity Secretary                   |
| KI13 | 40 | Female | 7 Years  | NGO     | Non-governmental Organization                     | Media and Publicity Manager           |
| KI14 | 38 | Male   | 5 Years  | Public  | National Electric Power Authority                 | Public Relations Director             |
| KI15 | 30 | Female | 4 Years  | Private | International Schools                             | Public Relations Officer              |
| KI16 | 62 | Male   | 20 Years | Public  | Government Ministry (Youth and Sport Development) | Public Relations Officer              |
| KI17 | 52 | Male   | 15 Years | Private | Financial Institution (Bank)                      | Corporate Communications Director     |
| KI18 | 55 | Male   | 6 Years  | Private | Private School                                    | Communications and Publicity Director |
| KI19 | 60 | Female | 18 Years | Public  | Library   | Information Director                  |
| KI20 | 40 | Male   | 8 Years  | Public  | Television Station                                | Marketing and Promotions Manager      |
| KI21 | 45 | Female | 10 Years | Public  | Media Print                                       | Publicity Manager                     |
| KI22 | 42 | Male   | 5 Years  | Private | Hospitality                                       | Marketing Manger                      |

### *Findings/Results*

The first research question examined the roles of Public Relations in public and private sector organizations. Two dominant themes, namely Public Engagement and Issue Management, emerged. Notably both public and private organizations in the study involved PR in their operations. All 22 key informants in the study confirmed that they used PR for engagement with their respective publics.

### *Public Engagement*

According to KI-2: *“As a ministry we cannot afford to lose sight of the role of public relations because it makes it easy for us to engage with the general public and particularly youth and so, with press releases, social media platforms and community events we promote and publicize government-sponsored youth entrepreneurship programs, sports initiatives to ensure broad participation and community awareness”*. In the same manner KI-4 states: *“We take pride*

*in being the most preferred telecommunications network in the country as our customer-centric initiatives, such as 'Customer Feedback Day' in urban and rural areas, allow us to address issues like network quality and pricing plans, while understanding customer experiences, challenges and expectations". Aah...so these PR opportunities help us engage with customers, fostering trust and transparency by involving the public in shaping our policies and services". Also, KI-3 equally stated thus: "Our goal is not profit, but to serve those in need and so we rely on PR to advocate for them and raise funds through events, collaborating with public and so Media coverage and press releases are essential to showcase our achievements, ensure accountability to partners and donors and at the same time increase awareness and engagement with our sponsors, donors and partners"*

#### *Issue Management*

Issues management emerged as the second theme regarding the roles of public relations in public and private establishments in Akwa Ibom State Nigeria. All 22 participants in the study stated that PR plays a huge role in crisis management both internally and externally in their respective establishments. According to KI-10: *"For example, timely announcements of resumption dates or class postponements prevent academic disruptions as well as addressing complaints on tuition hikes, poor infrastructure, or menace of cultism and so through press releases, media engagement, and stakeholder meetings, we need PR to manage these crises effectively and safeguard the university's image. So, our success anchors on public relations and communication because it drives every aspect of our operations"*.

In the same vein, KI-9 stated thus: *"My job requires anticipating potential issues and threats which is why we maintain constant communication with clients. Their feedback helps us address concerns promptly before they escalate and when service complaints arise, we implement tailored resolution plans with regular updates and to counter negative media coverage, we leverage our media relationships to share our stories and reinforce our reputation against misinformation"*.

The findings reveals that although public relations are present in both public and private organizations, its significance and strategic depth differ markedly across sectors. In public organizations, public engagement and issue management are constrained by bureaucratic and political imperatives that prioritize information dissemination, visibility, and institutional legitimacy over sustained dialogue and thus reducing PR to a tool for compliance and public reassurance within hierarchical systems instead of fostering relationships. By contrast, private organizations treat public engagement as a strategic resource tied to competitiveness and organizational survival, thereby positioning PR as an interactive process that enables continuous feedback, adaptation, and relationship building. Here, PR and by extension communication is positioned as a driver of organizational value rather than a support function.

A similar divide is evident in issue management wherein public sector PR remains largely reactive due to rigid approval structures that constrain timely response and weaken PR's advisory

capacity as strategic counselor. Conversely, private sector PR emphasizes anticipation, rapid decision-making, and early intervention through real-time communication. These differences reflect deeper institutional logics rather than simple efficiency gaps. Thus, public sector PR is embedded in political-administrative structures that privilege hierarchy and control, while private sector PR operates within market-driven environments that reward flexibility and stakeholder responsiveness. Consequently, this finding aligns with prior studies highlighting bureaucratic constraints in public institutions and greater communicative agility in the private sector (Adeyinka, & Adewumi, 2023; Ndubuisi, & Oko, 2023).

The second research question examined the specific roles and functions of PR practitioners in public and private organizations in Nigeria. The findings revealed two major roles: technician and managerial. Participants described a broad range of responsibilities, including publicity, press release writing, speech preparation, event coordination, media relations, social media management, issue and crisis communication, staff training, marketing research, and budget planning.

#### *Technician Roles*

Ten participants from the public sector indicated that their primary responsibilities (role and functions) involve communication and information dissemination. Participants emphasized that they mainly execute, implement, and convey decisions made by management (bosses, managers, or CEOs) to publics. According to KI-1: *"My role is to communicate and information to our internal and external stakeholders by relaying message directly from executive council to audience as intended...Ann...while I am responsible for crafting messages to captures the attentions of the public, I don't decide the content, medium or communication decisions, so I simply execute directives"*. Similarly, KI-16 stated thus: *"Although I oversee public communication for the ministry, I am not fully independent and everything must be approved by the director, who reports to the commissioner but at the same time.... Aah..., I don't need constant supervision while follow instructions and respect the chain of command regardless of the urgency of the situation"*.

#### *Managerial Role*

Responding to questions on their roles and functions, nine participants, especially those from private establishments, said that besides handling communication and information roles, they also perform managerial duties, using their discretion to act in urgent situations even without their boss being present. According to KI-8: *"We operate in a competitive environment where delays can your hurt business and reputation and so sometimes, I make spontaneous decisions to address customer concerns without formal approval after assessing the situation first and later explain and justify my actions to management because we prioritize business performance and corporate integrity."* In the same tone KI-18 stated: *"I oversee PR, marketing, social media, and publicity, and I report directly to management, advising them on communication strategies. Although I sometimes disagree with their agenda, I must follow"*

*directives. However, if my decisions are ethical and financially beneficial to the company, I may proceed without prior approval, and it allows me to move beyond shaping communication strategies to actively contributing to policy and managerial decisions”.*

The findings suggest that differences in PR roles across public and private organizations are not simply functional variations but reflections of profound institutional arrangements that shape professional authority and discretion. In the public sector, the dominance of technician roles indicates that PR practice is structurally positioned as an administrative tool for transmitting decisions rather than influencing them. This limited autonomy reflects a governance culture anchored in hierarchy, political control, and procedural compliance, where communication and communicators are subordinated to authority with little room for creativity (Neill, 2023) and adherence to ethical code (Oduenyi & Etumnu, 2025). As a result, PR practitioners operate within narrowly defined boundaries that restrict their capacity to function as strategic advisors or ethical gatekeepers.

In contrast, the prominence of managerial roles in private organizations reflects a market-oriented logic that values speed, flexibility, and reputational management. Here, PR practitioners are embedded within decision-making structures, enabling them to interpret stakeholder signals and act proactively, especially in time-sensitive situations. This integration positions PR as a strategic resource rather than a support function. These findings reinforce earlier studies (Ejiofo et al., 2023; Bakare et al., 2025), which argue that the marginalization of PR in Nigerian public institutions undermines trust and policy acceptance. By contrast, private sector practices demonstrate how structural empowerment enhances PR's strategic relevance and organizational impact.

Consequently, through the lens of Structuration Theory, findings of this study indicates that PR practitioners' agency is not absent, rather constrained or enabled by institutional structures thus explaining and highlighting why PR functions as administrative compliance in the public sector but as strategic influence in private organizations.

The third research question examined communication models employed in public and private organizations. Two main models emerged: Linear and Transactional Communication Models. Linear Model is characterized by one-way information flow from top management to employees or publics with minimal feedback, mainly used for operational communication. In contrast, Transactional Model supports two-way, interactive exchanges that encourage feedback and engagement.

These models shape how messages are crafted, transmitted, and processed within organizations. Notably, eleven participants, ten from government bodies and one from a public-private partnership reported that their organizations primarily rely on the Linear Model. According to KI-20: *"Instructions often come through memos, emails, calls, or notice boards with an expectation of compliance and little room for immediate feedback. Even valid delays require written justification and a lengthy approval process, just like press releases, ads, and jingles are sent out with the expectation that the audience will receive, hear, and act on them via specified channels and timeframes"*. Similarly, KI-14 also asserted thus: *"My office receives hundreds of complaints, but all communication with our organization goes directly to the general manager's office and the management board reviews everything first after which decisions they make are passed down to us with instructions to draft and send out messages to our customers"*

#### *Transactional Communication Model:*

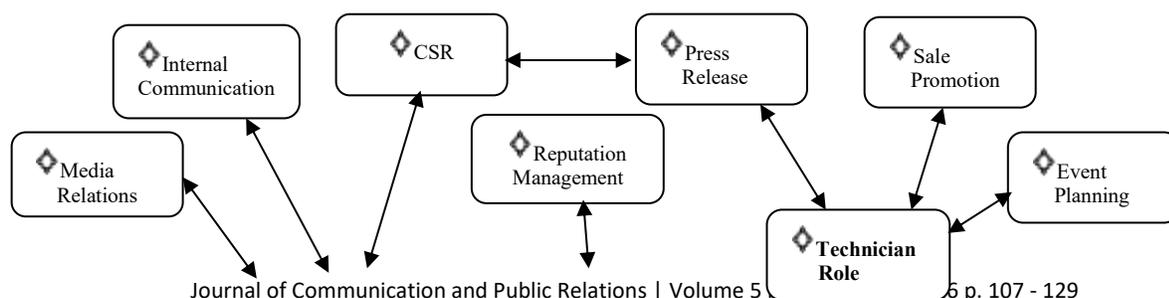
Transactional Communication Model emerged as the second dominant model, predominantly used by private organizations. It emphasizes profitability, performance, and maintaining a competitive edge. As a result, private entities invest in and establish structured communication units that operate independently while collaborating closely with management. All nine private sector participants confirmed that their organizations adopt two-way communication approach.

According to the views of KI-17: *"In today's competitive market, effective communication is vital, as customers know what they want and have choices and our participatory communication approach allows us to engage, listen, and respond promptly to them. Sooo...relying on employee insights and direct customer feedback on products, pricing, and placement is our greatest strength in shaping policies that better serve both our clients and staff"*. In similar tone KI-15 echoed the sentiment stating: *"In a competitive business environment like ours, discretion to take risk and act is key to success although occasionally there is clash of ideas with my CEO, but I'm not afraid to be creative or step outside my job scope like using Twitter or Face book for quick updates pending management meeting and approval. So, if something makes my job easier, I will surely go for it and so far, I haven't been wrong yet.... [Laughter]"*. Distinctively, communication in public organizations is largely linear and characterized by one-way information flow. It mainly focuses on directing employees to act or inform the public with minimal interaction or timely feedback. Conversely, private organizations adopt a model that fosters two-way engagement and promotes feedback that aligns communication with organization goals. Consequently, transactional communication plays an important role in driving organizational success via continuous and responsive communication.

The dominance of the Linear Communication Model in public organizations reflects deeper structural and cultural logics rather than mere communication preference. One-way communication aligns with bureaucratic governance systems that prioritize control, hierarchy, and procedural compliance, limiting opportunities for feedback and dialogue. Within this context, communication functions as an instrument of authority and regulation, reinforcing top-down power relations and reducing PR to message transmission rather than sense-making or engagement. This supports earlier observations that public sector communication in Nigeria remains largely administrative and directive (Oke, & Awoyemi, 2024).

By contrast, the adoption of the transactional communication model in private organizations reflects a market-driven logic where responsiveness, interaction, and stakeholder feedback are essential for competitiveness and survival. Two-way communication enables organizations to continuously negotiate meaning with employees and customers, allowing PR to function as an adaptive and strategic resource. This finding aligns with Maiwada (2025) assertion that symmetrical and interactive communication enhances organizational effectiveness. Accordingly, the results from the study demonstrate that communication models are shaped by institutional environments, not simply managerial choice, underscoring the structural constraints and opportunities that define PR practice across sectors in Nigeria. Similarly, from a Structuration Theory perspective, the dominance of particular communication models shows how everyday communication practices are shaped by institutional rules and power relations, while still leaving room for practitioners to exercise agency. Where structures are rigid, PR practitioners tend to reinforce top-down control through one-way communication. And when and where structures are more flexible, they are able to experiment with dialogue, feedback, and participatory engagement that meaningfully influences organizational decisions.

**Figure 1: Thematic Map**





practitioners (staff) further entrench this marginal status, thus reinforcing a culture of control rather than dialogue. By contrast, private organizations' proactive, dialogic crisis handling shows PR has been internalized as a management function, consistent with research that two-way, feedback-driven communication improves trust, decisions, and employee outcomes. Their use of integrated digital and traditional tools mirrors global trends where real-time, interactive communication is central to effective crisis management and CSR engagement. Consequently, as showcased in the above figures, the persistence of linear, one-way models in the public sector therefore reflects deeper institutional logics hierarchy and political control rather than mere inefficiency, reinforcing calls for structural reform and professionalization of PR in Nigeria.

### *Implication of Study*

The study reveals that leadership style, management priorities, organizational hierarchies, corporate politics and organizational culture impacts PR and its practices in Nigeria. These structural factors often limit PR professionals' autonomy thereby reinforcing technician functions over strategic managerial contributions. This raises the question of who defines PR functions and communication approaches within organizations in Nigeria? Practically, repositioning public relations as a strategic management function grounded in core competencies is more crucial than ever. As noted by Christianah and Olayinka, (2023) and Inobemhe, (2025), hierarchical control and centralization restrict PR's strategic value, resulting in reduced credibility and poor stakeholder engagement. The study equally reveals that practitioners often feel compelled to prioritize institutional loyalty over public interest due to internal pressures, further weakening PR's advocacy role.

The study advocates for policy change in the realm of professionalization of PR practice in Nigeria. The autonomy of the NIPR to enforce ethical standards and mandate certification to ensure the deployment of trained PR professionals is more pertinent now than ever for repositioning public relations for greater impact. Theoretically, this study challenges Structuration Theory's notion of mutual influence between structure and agency by highlighting how rigid hierarchies and bureaucracy constrain practitioner autonomy in the public sector. The study is limited to Uyo and involves mainly senior-level PR professionals, which may lead to overemphasis on managerial roles despite performing mainly technic functions. While inductive approach impacts generalizability of findings, future research can include mid- and junior-level practitioners across regions to better explore how communication models shape stakeholder engagement and organizational reputation across sectors.

Consequently, this study has important theoretical and practical contribution for public relations scholarship and practice in Nigeria. Theoretically, the study extends existing PR research by demonstrating through Structuration Theory how PR roles, functions, and communication models are not merely adopted, but are actively shaped by the interaction between organizational structures and practitioner agency. This help explain why PR practice differs across public and private sectors in Nigeria, rather than simply documenting those differences. Practically, the findings reveal that improving PR effectiveness in public organizations requires more than technical capacity; it demands structural reforms that reduce rigid hierarchies and formally empower PR units to participate in strategic decision-making, particularly in stakeholder engagement and crisis management. For private organizations, the study reinforces the value of integrating or embedding PR and its practitioners within managerial processes and sustaining two-way communication models that enhances responsiveness, trust, and organizational performance. Consequently, the link between theory and practice in this paper provides a framework for understanding sector-specific PR dynamics and guiding more effective PR practice in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates clear sector-based differences in the roles, functions, and communication models of public relations practice in Nigeria. While PR activities are present in both public and private organizations, public sector practice is largely characterized by reactive, one-way communication patterns that restrict dialogue and meaningful stakeholder engagement. In contrast, private organizations tend to adopt more proactive, two-way communication models that emphasize trust, transparency, and mutual understanding principles consistent with the Excellence Theory in public relations (Grunig et al., 2002). These differences are reflected in role execution: PR practitioners in public organizations are predominantly confined to technical and routine communication tasks, whereas their counterparts in the private sector participate more actively in managerial decision-making and strategic planning processes.

The findings suggest that the professional marginalization of PR within public institutions is not merely structural but also cultural. Thus, PR is often perceived as an auxiliary or ceremonial function rather than as a strategic management resource. To address this gap, professionalization must move beyond broad policy advocacy to targeted institutional reforms. Specifically, public organizations should formally embed PR units within top management structures by mandating PR representation in executive meetings, policy formulation committees, and crisis management teams. This structural inclusion would enable PR practitioners to contribute proactively to organizational decision-making rather than reacting after decisions have already been made.

Furthermore, the appointment of PR personnel in public institutions should be guided by clearly defined professional criteria. This study recommends the adoption of standardized role descriptions that specify minimum academic qualifications, professional certification (such as NIPR membership status), and relevant experience for PR positions. Such criteria should be enforced through civil service regulations to reduce politically motivated appointments that undermine professional competence and credibility.

Capacity-building efforts also require a more focused approach. Rather than generic training programmes, continuous professional development should prioritize strategic communication planning, stakeholder analysis, crisis communication simulations, and digital media management, reflecting the actual demands of contemporary PR practice. At the academic level, PR curricula should be updated to integrate applied modules in crisis communication, digital engagement, and public sector communication, supported by industry-based internships that expose students/practitioners to real organizational contexts.

Likewise, professional bodies such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) have a critical role to play beyond advocacy. The study recommends that NIPR actively develop and enforce sector-specific practice guidelines for public and private organizations, including performance benchmarks and ethical compliance mechanisms. By doing so, the Institute can strengthen professional autonomy, clarify role expectations, and reinforce the strategic value of PR practice across organizational contexts in Nigeria.

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