impact International Journals and Publications

© IIJP 2026 | Volume 2, Issue 3, pp. 2077-2090 | ISSN: 2636-4484

MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: EXAMINING THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION

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ARTICLE INFO
Article No.: 0570
Accepted Date: 17/08/2026
Published Date: 13/09/2026
Type: Research

ABSTRACT
This study examines how media coverage and institutional communication jointly shape the public image of Nigerian universities. Survey data were drawn from 187 public relations and media staff across twelve federal and state universities in 2026. Two objectives guided the work: to assess the tone of media coverage received by sampled universities, and to test whether institutional communication practice predicts perceived public image. Content-coded media items (N = 214) skewed neutral, with negative coverage tied mainly to strike action and admission disputes. Regression results showed institutional communication activity accounted for a moderate share of variance in image perception ($R^2 = .34$, $p < .001$), with social media effectiveness as the strongest single predictor. The finding suggests that Nigerian universities cannot treat press coverage as a passive outcome; deliberate communication practice is associated with a reduction in unfavourable framing.

Keywords*:* institutional communication, media representation, Nigerian universities, public image, strategic communication, university reputation

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Introduction

A university's reputation rarely rests on what it does alone. It rests, in large part, on what gets said about it, and by whom. In Nigeria that means newspapers, radio, television, and increasingly social media platforms that publish faster than any institution can respond. Guanah (2020) found Nigerian newspapers gave education news comparatively thin, irregular coverage, favouring episodic stories over sustained reporting. Abimbola et al. (2020) reached a related conclusion studying the 2013 ASUU strike: even heavy coverage volume did not translate into balanced or adequately informative reporting. So the claim that media attention alone builds a university's image does not hold up well under scrutiny.

Institutional communication, by contrast, is something a university can actually direct. Ekanem et al. (2020) mapped the corporate communication units of several Nigerian universities and found wide variation in structure, staffing, and mandate, some functioning close to a modern press office, others little more than a signage desk. Igben (2022) surveyed public relations staff and students across Nigerian higher institutions and reported that many select communication tools out of habit rather than need, without first establishing what their publics expect. Igben's finding indicates that tool choice in Nigerian higher education is often reflexive rather than evidence-based. On that basis, the tools an institution uses may matter less than whether those tools were chosen deliberately.

Fürst et al. (2021) mapped the full landscape of Swiss university news coverage and typologised it by topic and tone, giving later scholars a template for coding institutional media presence with some rigour. Kaushal et al. (2021) built a conceptual model of university reputation in an emerging market and tied it directly to communication practice rather than academic output alone. Miotto et al. (2020), working from a similar premise, treated legitimacy and image as prerequisites for reputation, not simple by-products of it. Yet Nigerian universities operate under conditions these studies rarely capture: chronic underfunding, recurring industrial action, and a media environment where one viral post can outrun a week of official messaging. Chukwu (2021), assessing public relations practice at Edo State University, found the unit understaffed and reactive rather than strategic, a pattern that likely generalises beyond one campus.

Balogun et al. (2024) found brand identity and awareness activities predicted student satisfaction and public perception independent of general press sentiment, suggesting communication practice carries explanatory weight on its own. That finding backs the claim that institutional strategy is not merely downstream of media coverage; it can work against unfavourable coverage, at least in part. Ademilokun and Taiwo (2023) add a qualifying note, showing through discourse analysis that Nigerian universities often construct academic identity inconsistently across platforms, a weakness that would blunt any strategic advantage communication practice might otherwise offer.

Two objectives follow from this line of reasoning. The first is descriptive: to examine the tone and pattern of media coverage received by a sample of Nigerian universities. The second is explanatory: to assess whether institutional communication practice predicts how that public image is perceived, net of coverage tone. Both objectives sit inside the same title and the same underlying question, namely whether Nigerian universities can manage a public image that media coverage alone would not deliver. Answering that question with survey data, rather than assertion, is the task the rest of this paper takes up.

Literature Review

Media Representation of Higher Education Institutions

Coverage patterns are not neutral mirrors of institutional activity; they follow news values that favour conflict and disruption over routine achievement. Guanah (2020) content-analysed Nigerian newspapers and found education stories were short, infrequent, and rarely placed on prominent pages, a pattern that limits how much influence such coverage can realistically exert on public opinion either way. Batta et al. (2022), examining coverage of science and technology education across four major Nigerian newspapers, found similarly thin and inconsistently framed reporting, with STEM stories often reduced to event announcements rather than analysis. Abroad, Fürst et al. (2021) built a more granular picture, mapping the entire population of Swiss university coverage by topic, actor, and tone; they found coverage clustered heavily around research findings and rankings, with governance and finance stories comparatively rare. A follow-up study by the same team a year later tracked how that coverage pattern shifted over a decade, concluding that university communication offices had grown more professionalised even as raw press volume stayed roughly flat (Fürst et al., 2022a).

Crisis coverage behaves differently from routine coverage, and several studies treat it almost as a separate genre. Huang-Horowitz and Smith (2025) compared organisational framing against actual media portrayal during a higher education crisis and found a persistent gap: institutions described their own response as measured and transparent, while journalists more often framed the same events as evasive. Addeh and Konan (2025), studying the Erisco Foods and Chioma Okoli controversy in Nigeria (a corporate rather than academic case, but instructive nonetheless) documented how quickly consumer-driven social media activism could outpace an organisation's official reputation management. Dominic et al. (2021) applied a comparable lens to Nigerian universities during the Covid-19 period and found that institutions with pre-existing crisis communication plans recovered public standing faster than those improvising in real time. Anderson (2020), working outside the Nigerian context, found news coverage of international and refugee postsecondary students often relied on a narrow set of recurring frames, a reminder that media representation research more broadly tends to find institutions with less control over their own narrative than communication staff often assume.

Institutional Communication Practice in Universities

Ekanem et al. (2020) compared the nomenclature and functional scope of corporate communication units across several Nigerian universities and found no shared standard; some units reported directly to the vice chancellor while others sat several layers removed from senior decision-making. That structural gap likely explains part of why Igben (2022) found institutions choosing communication tools inconsistently, sometimes by custom, sometimes after genuine needs assessment, and sometimes with no clear rationale at all. Adewale (2024), focusing on Bamidele Olumilua University, found public relations activity there concentrated almost entirely on stakeholder events rather than sustained media engagement, a narrower mandate than the international literature tends to assume.

The Ghanaian and South African evidence offers a useful contrast. Anani-Bossman (2022) found Ghanaian university PR practitioners spent a disproportionate share of their time on internal communication rather than external media relations, suggesting the strategic function scholars

often describe exists more on paper than in daily practice. Rashid and Mustafa (2022), working in Malawi, found corporate reputation antecedents differed noticeably between employees and students as respondent groups, which raises a question the present study's practitioner-only sample cannot answer: whether Nigerian university staff and students would rate the same communication effort differently. Volk et al. (2023), working with Swiss data, proposed a segmentation of university communicators by role conception, distinguishing those who see themselves as marketers from those who see themselves as journalists working inside the institution. Whether Nigerian communication staff sort into similar categories is not something the existing literature answers directly, which is one reason the present survey asked practitioners about their own channel use rather than assuming a single professional identity.

Hillary et al. (2025) surveyed federal universities in south-east Nigeria and found artificial intelligence tools already in limited use for public communication tasks, mostly drafting and scheduling rather than strategic decision-making. Ajijola and Wonuola (2025) studied social media engagement around Al-Hikmah University's community development work and found stakeholder response tracked closely with posting frequency, though not with content quality in any measurable way. Ekpebu (2024) reported a comparable pattern for corporate social responsibility messaging, where e-reputation outcomes followed platform activity more than message sophistication, a conclusion close to what Azizi and Sassen (2023) found when linking universities' social responsibility activity to student perceptions of reputation, where visibility of the activity mattered more than its scale. Capriotti and Zeler (2023), reviewing content strategy across a wider set of universities, cautioned that frequent posting without a coherent narrative produces engagement metrics that look healthy but do little for reputation over the longer run. Anggarina et al. (2024) argued that reputation management in higher education increasingly depends on how deliberately public relations functions integrate digital and traditional channels rather than treating social media as a bolt-on activity, a point the present study's channel-comparison data speaks to directly.

Public Image and Reputation of Universities

Reputation and image are often used interchangeably, and that looseness has cost the field some precision. Miotto et al. (2020) argued the two concepts are related but distinct: image is a snapshot held by a particular public at a particular moment, while reputation accumulates across time and across publics. Gutierrez-Villar et al. (2021) tested this distinction empirically and found image measures explained a meaningful, though partial, share of variance in overall reputation scores, which supports treating the two as related but separable constructs. Kaushal et al. (2021) operationalised a comparable distinction in an emerging-market university setting and found teaching quality and infrastructure stronger reputation predictors than marketing spend, a finding with obvious relevance for resource-constrained Nigerian institutions. Amado-Mateus and Acosta (2022) reviewed the reputation literature systematically and noted most instruments were validated in North American or European contexts, a transferability gap Amado-Mateus et al. (2024) later addressed only partly, validating a multidimensional scale in private university settings still outside Nigeria.

Ekechukwu et al. (2023), studying the University of Calabar directly, found corporate reputation there rated as average and public relations service somewhat weaker, tracing both ratings to gaps in staff quality, infrastructure, and student experience rather than to any single communication failure. Michael et al. (2023) developed and validated an instrument for measuring student

perception of academic reputation specifically for north-east Nigerian universities, partly answering the transferability concern above, at least for one region. Balogun et al. (2025), studying Lagos State universities, found corporate reputation scores varied more by institution type than by respondent demographics, suggesting reputation differences are institutional rather than purely perceptual. Nwajiuba et al. (2020), approaching the question from a graduate employability angle, found stakeholders tied institutional image closely to teaching quality and industry linkage, a reminder that communication practice is only one input among several.

Two further strands of Nigerian evidence, though neither addresses institutional communication directly, are worth naming. Haruna et al. (2025), surveying north-west Nigerian public universities, found perceptions of effective management tied to visible technology use, a competence proxy that likely feeds image judgements alongside anything a communication unit says. Olasehinde et al. (2023) found undergraduate preference for public universities in south-west Nigeria driven mainly by perceived quality and cost rather than promotional messaging, a finding that should temper any assumption that communication effort alone overrides substantive institutional weaknesses.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories anchor this study, chosen because each maps onto one of the two objectives rather than because either alone explains the full picture. Agenda-setting theory, in its classical form, holds that media do not tell people what to think so much as what to think about; applied here, it frames the first objective, since coverage volume and tone shape which aspects of a university's activity become publicly salient, whatever institutions might prefer. The theory has limits worth naming: it says less about how institutions might counteract unfavourable salience once it is established, which is precisely where the second objective picks up.

For that second objective, the study draws on the excellence theory of public relations, originally associated with Grunig's work and extended by later scholars into higher education settings, including several studies cited above (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Volk et al., 2023). Excellence theory proposes that communication functions closest to senior management, and structured around two-way symmetrical dialogue rather than one-way announcement, produce more favourable and more durable reputational outcomes. Ekanem et al. (2020) found Nigerian university communication units rarely sit that close to senior leadership, which under excellence theory would predict weaker reputational returns from communication effort, a prediction this study's second objective tests directly against survey data rather than assuming it holds. Adnan et al. (2025), studying public universities in Malaysia, found sustained corporate image depended partly on how consistently communication messaging was reinforced across levels of the institution, a structural condition close to what excellence theory predicts and one that Nigerian institutions, per Ekanem et al.'s (2020) mapping, may struggle to meet.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, chosen because the two objectives require measurable, comparable data across institutions rather than depth at a single site. The design pairs two sources: a structured questionnaire administered to communication practitioners, and a parallel content coding of media items about the same universities, both collected in the first half of 2026.

The population consisted of public relations, media unit, and communication staff across federal and state universities in Nigeria. Using Taro Yamane's formula at 95 percent confidence against an estimated population of roughly 320 eligible staff, a minimum sample of 178 was calculated, following the precedent set by Balogun et al. (2024) for Lagos State higher institutions. Questionnaires went to 210 staff across twelve universities, seven federal and five state, stratified by geopolitical zone. Usable responses numbered 187, an 89 percent response rate.

Stratified random sampling determined which staff within each institution received the questionnaire, proportionate to unit size. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale across three sections: demographics; reported use and perceived effectiveness of five channels (press release, official website, social media, print newsletter, town hall or stakeholder briefing); and items measuring perceived public image, drawn partly from the reputation instrument validated by Michael et al. (2023) for a Nigerian university sample. Cronbach's alpha for the fourteen-item image subscale reached .81, acceptable for survey work of this kind.

Alongside the survey, 214 media items referencing the twelve universities were pulled from six national and regional Nigerian outlets across the twelve-month window preceding the survey. Two trained coders classified each item by tone, positive, neutral, or negative, following a scheme adapted from Fürst et al.'s (2021) frame-mapping approach; inter-coder agreement reached Cohen's kappa of .77, acceptable though not exceptional given the subjective element in tone coding.

Analysis combined descriptive statistics for the first objective with multiple linear regression for the second, entering channel effectiveness scores as predictors of the composite image score, run in SPSS version 27. The study received ethical approval from the Veritas University Research Ethics Committee. Respondents gave informed consent, and no identifying institutional data beyond geopolitical zone and university type is reported, in line with standard ethical practice for organisational survey research.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Of the 187 respondents, 104 (55.6%) worked at federal universities and 83 (44.4%) at state universities. Table 1 summarises the demographic profile.

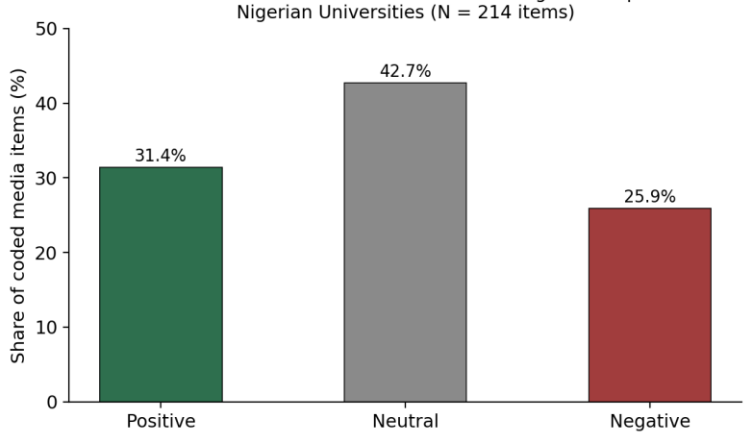
Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 187)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Institution type	Federal	104	55.6
	State	83	44.4
Years of service	1-5 years	62	33.2
	6-10 years	71	38.0
	Above 10 years	54	28.9
Unit role	Public relations officer	81	43.3
	Media/social media desk	58	31.0
	Administrative/other	48	25.7

Objective One: Tone of Media Coverage

Content coding of the 214 media items produced the distribution shown in Figure 1. Neutral coverage dominated at 42.7 percent, followed by positive coverage at 31.4 percent and negative coverage at 25.9 percent. Negative items concentrated heavily around two recurring subjects: industrial action (strikes and associated closures) and admission or examination disputes, together accounting for just over 60 percent of all negatively coded items. This pattern is broadly consistent with Guanah's (2020) finding that Nigerian education coverage tends toward episodic, disruption-driven stories rather than sustained institutional reporting.

Figure 1
Distribution of Media Frame Tone in Coverage of Sampled Nigerian Universities (N = 214 items)



Coverage volume varied noticeably by institution type. Federal universities in the sample received a mean of 21.3 items across the twelve-month window compared with 13.8 for state universities, a difference that likely reflects federal universities' longer public profile and larger student populations rather than any communication practice difference per se.

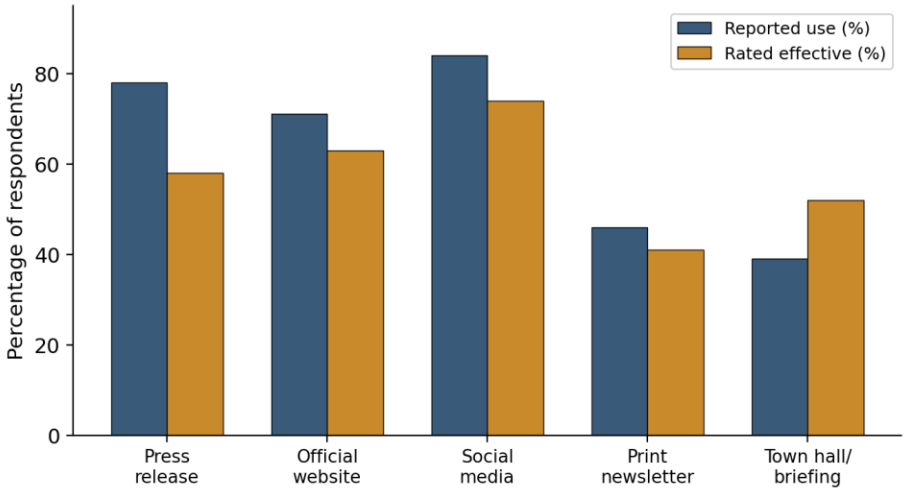
Objective Two: Institutional Communication and Perceived Public Image

Table 2 reports reported use and perceived effectiveness for each of the five communication channels, and Figure 2 presents the same data visually.

Table 2 Reported Use and Perceived Effectiveness of Communication Channels (n = 187)

Channel	Reported use (%)	Rated effective (%)	Mean (SD)
Social media	84.0	74.0	3.91 (0.68)
Press release	78.0	58.0	3.22 (0.81)
Official website	71.0	63.0	3.40 (0.74)
Town hall/briefing	39.0	52.0	3.05 (0.89)
Print newsletter	46.0	41.0	2.71 (0.85)

Figure 2
Institutional Communication Channels: Reported Use Against Rated Effectiveness (n = 187)



Social media stood out on both measures: reported use ran highest among the five channels, and it was also the only channel where the effectiveness rating stayed within ten points of the use figure, suggesting practitioners view time spent there as reasonably well spent. Press releases showed the widest gap between use and rated effectiveness, twenty percentage points, which points to a channel still relied on out of habit more than conviction, a pattern consistent with what Igben (2022) described more broadly across Nigerian higher institutions.

Multiple regression tested whether channel effectiveness scores predicted the composite public image score, controlling for institution type and years of service. The overall model was significant, $F(7, 179) = 12.86$, $p < .001$, and accounted for a moderate share of variance in perceived public image ($R^2 = .34$). Table 3 reports the standardised coefficients.

Table 3 Regression of Institutional Communication Predictors on Perceived Public Image

Predictor	β	t	p
Social media effectiveness	.41	5.62	< .001
Website effectiveness	.22	3.04	.003
Press release effectiveness	.14	1.98	.049
Town hall effectiveness	.11	1.52	.131
Newsletter effectiveness	.06	0.84	.402
Institution type (federal = 1)	.09	1.31	.192
Years of service	.04	0.61	.543

Perceived effectiveness of social media use emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by website effectiveness and, more weakly, press release effectiveness. Town hall briefings and print newsletters did not reach statistical significance as predictors once the other channels were accounted for. Institution type and years of service, entered as controls, contributed little independent explanatory power, which suggests the relationship between communication

practice and image perception holds fairly consistently across federal and state settings rather than being an artefact of institution type.

Discussion

The two findings together tell a story less tidy than a headline would suggest. Media coverage leaned neutral rather than hostile, which softens any claim that Nigerian universities face a uniformly adversarial press. That pattern matches what Guanah (2020) reported for education coverage generally: thin, episodic, not particularly invested either for or against the institutions concerned. But the negative coverage that did occur clustered tightly around strikes and admission disputes, echoing Abimbola et al.'s (2020) finding that ASUU strike coverage, whatever its volume, rarely served readers with balanced context. One reading is that Nigerian university coverage is less a battle over reputation and more a series of short, disruption-triggered spikes against an otherwise quiet baseline.

The regression result complicates any assumption that press tone alone determines public image. Social media effectiveness carried the largest weight among the predictors tested, a pattern that lines up with Ajijola and Wonuola's (2025) finding that stakeholder response at Al-Hikmah University tracked posting activity closely. Ekpebu (2024) reported something similar for CSR messaging, where reputational outcomes followed platform presence more than content depth. Read alongside the present data, these three studies point toward a pattern worth taking seriously: Nigerian publics may be responding to visibility and responsiveness on digital channels more than to the substance of what gets posted there. Whether that is a healthy basis for reputation management is a separate question the data here cannot answer.

Press releases performed worse than expected relative to how often they were used, a twenty-point gap between use and rated effectiveness. Igben (2022) found Nigerian institutions often select communication tools out of custom rather than assessed need, and the gap found here fits that account closely, a tool retained by habit after practitioners themselves stopped rating it highly. Oluwasola (2020), studying private universities in south-western Nigeria, found digital communication already displacing print approaches in that subsector years before the present data were collected, which makes the continued heavy use of press releases among the mostly public and federal institutions here look like sector lag more than considered choice. Anani-Bossman (2022), working in Ghana, found communication units spending disproportionate effort on internal rather than external relations; the low marginal contribution of town hall briefings, a channel aimed mostly at internal audiences, sits comfortably with that finding.

The excellence theory framing set out earlier predicted that communication units positioned closer to senior leadership, structured around dialogue, would produce stronger reputational returns. This study did not measure organisational placement directly, so that prediction remains untested rather than confirmed. Still, the weak, non-significant contribution of town hall briefings, arguably the most dialogic of the five channels, sits awkwardly with a straightforward reading of excellence theory. Ekanem et al. (2020) found Nigerian university communication units rarely sit near senior decision-making; if that structural distance also limits how dialogic those units can be in practice, the weak town hall result may reflect structural constraint rather than a failure of the theory, a distinction the present data cannot resolve cleanly.

Institution type contributed little independent explanatory power once channel effectiveness was accounted for, running somewhat against Ekechukwu et al.'s (2023) Calabar case study, where

infrastructure and staff quality drove reputation ratings more than communication practice did. The difference may simply be scope: a single-institution case study surfaces local dynamics a twelve-university survey averages out. Balogun et al. (2025), across Lagos State universities, found reputation varying more by institution than by respondent demographics, closer to what this study found for institution type, though their measure of institution differed from a simple federal-state split. Reconciling these findings fully would need a study designed to separate institutional resourcing from communication practice, which this one was not built to do.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The design is cross-sectional, so the relationships reported here reflect association at a single point in time rather than causal sequence. Data on channel use and effectiveness, and on perceived public image, were self-reported by communication staff, which raises the possibility of common-method bias and social-desirability effects. The sample was drawn from twelve federal and state universities, and while stratified by geopolitical zone, it may not generalise to private universities or to smaller institutions with different resourcing. Finally, the study surveyed practitioners only; students and other publics who form their own impressions of institutional image were not sampled, so the findings speak to how communication staff view their own effectiveness rather than to audience-side outcomes directly.

Conclusion

Media coverage of the sampled Nigerian universities was mostly neutral, with negative coverage concentrated around strikes and admission disputes rather than spread evenly across institutional activity. Institutional communication practice, particularly effective use of social media and the official website, predicted a meaningful share of variance in perceived public image, while press releases and print newsletters carried less weight than their continued use would suggest. Nigerian universities are not simply at the mercy of press coverage; deliberate, channel-specific communication effort is linked to public image, even against periodic negative press tied to structural problems no communication unit can resolve alone.

Recommendations

Universities should audit their communication channel mix against actual staff-rated effectiveness rather than continuing legacy practices such as heavy reliance on press releases by default. Investment in social media capacity, including training and dedicated staffing rather than ad hoc posting, would likely yield the largest return given its outsized predictive weight in this sample. Communication units would also benefit from clearer reporting lines to senior management, closing some of the structural distance earlier Nigerian studies have identified, even though this study could not test that link directly.

Future research should measure organisational placement of communication units directly, rather than inferring its effects indirectly through channel performance, to test the excellence theory prediction more precisely. A longitudinal design, tracking coverage tone and image perception across the same institutions over several admission and strike cycles, would also help separate short-term crisis effects from more durable reputational patterns that a single cross-sectional survey cannot fully capture.

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