



## EVALUATING PR STRATEGIES FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA INSTITUTE OF TRANSPORT TECHNOLOGY (NITT), ZARIA

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### Abstract

This study examined the impact of public relations challenges on the institutional reputation of Nigerian Institute of Transport Technology (NITT), Zaria. The study applied the Stakeholder Theory to explain how public relations strategies impacted on the reputation of NITT. The study population comprised staff and students of NITT numbering 1,141 employees across the seven departments of NITT, Zaria. Using convenience sampling, 142 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 130 were retrieved and analyzed. The findings indicated that NITT's public relations strategies for promoting institutions services are diversified, with social media being the most widely used (34.6% effectiveness rate). However, the effectiveness of these strategies is perceived differently among respondents, with 30.8% indicating a need for clearer communication about NITT's strategies. Also, funding constraints significantly erode trust with internal stakeholders. The study recommended the need for improved communication between NITT and its publics to enhance visibility and reputation.

**Keywords:** Strategies, institution, reputation, stakeholder engagement.

### Introduction

Critical Public Relations issues in organizations may arise from different sources. Internal factors such as employee misconduct, financial irregularities, or operational failures can trigger organizational crises. External factors such as political pressure, economic instability, regulatory actions, or negative media coverage can also create critical issues for organizations. Examples of critical issues include product defects, workplace accidents, labour disputes, allegations of corruption, environmental pollution, or negative social media campaigns against an organization (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2013).

Public relations play a vital role in shaping the reputation of institutions, including transport institutions like the Nigerian Institute of Transport Technology (NITT), Zaria. An effective public relations is crucial for building trust, credibility, and strong relationships with stakeholders. However, transport institutions faces significant public relations challenges, including inadequate communication, insufficient resources, and lack of transparency. These challenges can have severe consequences on reputation and relationships with stakeholders (Public Relations Society of America, 2012).

Public relations involve managing communication between an organisation and its publics to achieve mutual understanding, build relationships, and influence behaviour change. The practice of public relations is underpinned by four models: the Press Agency Model, the Public Information Model, the Two-

Way Asymmetric Model, and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. Understanding these models is essential for developing effective public relations strategies that engage critical stakeholders and promote organisational goals (Coombs and Holladay, 2020).

Over time, public relations has transformed into a critical management function, integrating communication, relationship-building, and reputation management to maintain image and reputation (Freeman *et al.*, 2018). Today, public relations practitioners in transport institutions, such as NITT, Zaria, are challenged to develop knowledge and skills for managing complex stakeholder relationships, digital landscapes, and crisis communication. This is imperative because the Nigerian transport sector is highly competitive, with institutions competing for attention, resources, and market share. Research has shown that many transport institutions in Nigeria lack effective public relations strategies to publicise the sector's potential, leading to poor communication and mistrust among stakeholders (Ojo, 2014; Assemah, 2016). This lack of effective public relations strategies can have severe consequences for NITT, including a negative impact on its reputation, relationships with stakeholders, and overall competitiveness.

Effective public relations is crucial for transport institutions like NITT, as it enables them to differentiate themselves, build trust with stakeholders, and maintain a competitive edge in the marketplace. In today's digital age, public relations practitioners must be adaptable and innovative, leveraging virtual event planning, digital communication, and online engagement to achieve their goals (Coombs, 2020). Also, it is essential to note that public relations encompasses various functions, including media relations, crisis management, reputation management, internal communication, government lobbying, and community relations. Understanding these functions is crucial for developing public relations strategies that engage critical stakeholders and promote organisational goals (Kiely, 2024). This study, therefore addressed this knowledge gap by investigating public relations challenges in NITT, Zaria, with the aim of providing insights and recommendations for improving PR practice in transport institutions.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its contribution towards understanding of public relations strategies as well as challenges in transport institutions and their impact on institutional reputation. The findings will identify the various PR strategies as well as challenges facing NITT and other transport institutions in Nigeria.

### **Research Aim and Objectives**

This study identified the various public relations challenges facing NITT Zaria, examine their communication strategies with a view to identify their impact on NITT's reputation using survey research method to collect data. The specific objectives include:

1. Identify PR strategies used by NITT to promote image of the institution
2. Ascertain the influence of the strategies used by PR unit towards boosting the institution's image
3. Examine the level of improvement as a result of applying these PR strategies in maintaining reputationthe institutional image
4. Ascertain the challenges in using PR strategies to boost image of the institution

## Literature Review

### Concepts of Public Relations

Public relations is a dynamic and multifaceted field that has been defined in various ways by various scholars and practitioners. At its core, public relations involves managing relationships between organisations and their stakeholders to achieve mutual benefits (Cutlip & Center, 2015; Grunig & Hung, 2015). Cornelissen (2017) provides a comprehensive definition, highlighting public relations as a strategic management function that enables organisations to build and maintain relationships with their stakeholders and communicate effectively to achieve their goals.

Crisis communication is another critical aspect of public relations in transport institutions. Coombs (2019) highlights the importance of developing crisis communication plans, managing media relations during a crisis, and maintaining transparency and accountability to uphold stakeholder trust and reputation. Measuring and evaluating public relations efforts is important in transport institutions. Wright and Hinson (2015) note the importance of setting goals and objectives, tracking key performance indicators (KPI) or metrics, and conducting regular evaluations to assess the effectiveness of public relations efforts.

### Empirical studies

#### The Role of Public Relations in Transport Institutions

Public relations plays a vital role in transport institutions, such as the NITT, Zaria. Effective public relations enables transport institutions to build and maintain a positive reputation, foster trust, and establish strong relationships with stakeholders (Stacks, 2022). This includes students, staff, industry partners, and the broader community. By communicating institutional goals, achievements, and values, public relations helps to promote a positive image and enhance credibility.

Reputation management, which involves maintaining a positive institutional reputation through strategic communication and stakeholder engagement (Grunig & Kim, 2021) needs public relations to thrive. This helps to build trust and credibility with stakeholders and ultimately contributes to the institution's long-term success. In times of crisis, such as accidents or controversies, public relations plays a key role in responding effectively to minimise reputational damage (Coombs, 2020).

Furthermore, public relations facilitates stakeholder engagement by building collaborations and relationships with students, staff, and industry partners (Kent & Li, 2020). Additionally, public relations ensures timely and accurate dissemination of information to stakeholders, promoting transparency and trust. By performing these roles, public relations contribute significantly to the success and sustainability of transport institutions like NITT, Zaria (Stack, 2022).

#### Public Relations Strategies in Transport Institutions

Effective public relations strategies, the planned approaches used to achieve specific communication goals and objectives are essential for transport institutions, such as the Nigerian Institute of Transport Technology (NITT), Zaria. They are central to maintaining a positive reputation, engaging with stakeholders, and responding promptly to crises. Jiang and Luo (2020) recommend the adoption of a stakeholder-centric approach in public relations for identifying, building and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders. However, existing literature on public relations strategies in transport institutions is limited, particularly in the context of Nigerian institutions. A few studies (e.g. Okoro, 2015) have explored the public relations strategies employed by NITT, highlighting the need for improved stakeholder engagement, crisis

communication planning, and social media management. These studies also have methodological limitations, relying on qualitative approaches that lack external validity.

The integration of digital technologies into planning public relations strategies is becoming increasingly important, particularly in the transport sector (Alwi & Willey, 2020). Kim and Lee (2020) note that digital technologies can enhance stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and reputation management in transport institutions. However, the effectiveness of such strategies in Nigeria remains understudied.

### **Challenges of Public Relations in Transport Institutions**

The Nigerian Institute of Transport Technology (NITT), Zaria, faces unique public relations challenges that can significantly impact its reputation, stakeholder trust, and customer loyalty. Effective management of these challenges is critical to building trust, credibility, and reputation with stakeholders.

Social media has become a significant challenge to transport institutions, as they struggle to effectively manage their online presence and respond effectively to crises (Taylor & Perry, 2019). Kim and Lee corroborate, noting that social media can worsen crisis situations if not managed properly.

Stakeholder engagement is also crucial to the success of transport institutions. However, stakeholder engagement in the transport sector can be challenging, especially in the context of crisis communication (Jiang & Luo, 2020).

Crisis communication is a critical challenge for transport institutions as they must develop effective strategies to manage crises and maintain stakeholder trust. According to Coombs (2019) crisis communication refers to the process of exchanging information between an organisation and its stakeholders during a crisis situation, aiming to maintain or restore the organisation's reputation, trust, and legitimacy.

### **Gaps in Existing Literature in Public Relations in Transport Institutions**

Existing literature on public relations in transport institutions provides valuable insights, but significant gaps remain. One notable gap is the lack of context-specific studies on public relations in transport institutions, particularly in developing countries (Taylor & Perry, 2015). This gap is concerning, as transport institutions in developing countries face unique challenges and opportunities that require tailored public relations strategies.

The limited exploration of digital media's role in public relations in transport institutions is another significant gap (Alwi & Willey, 2020). Digital media has transformed stakeholder engagement, crisis communication processes, and reputation management. However, few studies have examined its impact on public relations in transport institutions, highlighting the need for more research on effective digital media strategies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Stakeholder Theory**

The Stakeholder Theory was developed by **R. Edward Freeman in 1984** in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. The **Theory** explains that organizations should consider the

interests and expectations of all individuals or groups that are affected by their activities. These groups, known as stakeholders, may include employees, customers, government agencies, community members, media organizations, and the general public.

The theory argues that organizations achieve long-term success when they maintain strong relationships with their stakeholders and address their concerns through transparent and responsible communication.

### **Assumptions of the Theory**

The Stakeholder Theory is based on the following assumptions:

1. Organizations operate within a network of relationships involving multiple stakeholders.
2. Stakeholders have legitimate interests in organizational decisions and activities.
3. Organizations should balance the interests of different stakeholders when making decisions.
4. Effective communication helps organizations maintain positive relationships with stakeholders.
5. Organizational success depends on the ability to satisfy stakeholder expectations.

### **Critique of the Theory**

The Stakeholder Theory has also received several criticisms:

- a. Critics argue that it may be difficult for organizations to balance the competing interests of multiple stakeholders.
- b. The theory does not always provide clear guidance on which stakeholders should be prioritized in decision-making.
- c. Some scholars believe that the theory may place too many obligations on organizations, making management decisions more complex.

### **Relevance to the Study**

The Stakeholder Theory is relevant to this study because public relations practice involves managing communication between organizations and their stakeholders. In the context of local government public relations, stakeholders include citizens, community groups, government officials, media organizations, and development partners.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts descriptive survey research method to collect data from 142 respondents using questionnaire. The study population comprised staff and students of NITT numbering 1,141 employees across the seven departments of NITT, Zaria. The study used convenience sampling to identify respondents for distribution of questionnaire. The sample size for this study was determined using the Krejcie (1970) Distribution Table to arrive at 142 questionnaires, out of which 130 were retrieved and analyzed. The data was collected from both the staff and students of NITT, Zaria through convenient sampling technique and analysed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages to summarise data identity

patterns. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse that data, and thematic analysis was used to analyse responses to open-ended questions.

### Data Presentation and analysis

A total of 142 copies of questionnaire were distributed out of which 130 were retrieved and analyzed. The questionnaire results are presented below, organised by seven questions drawn from study objective:

### PR strategies used by NITT to promote image of the institution

**Table 1: Public Relations Challenges**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Funding Constraints	77	59.2
Inadequate Infrastructure	24	18.5
Poor Communication with Stakeholders	9	6.9
Management Malpractice	2	1.5
Inadequacy of well-trained staff	18	13.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The study's findings in Question 1, Table 1, reveal that funding constraints (59.2%), inadequate infrastructure (18.5%), poor communication with stakeholders (6.9%), and inadequacy of trained staff (13.8%) are among the top public relations challenges NITT Zaria's internal public face the most.

**Table 2: Frequency of Public Relations Challenges**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Always	22	16.9
Often	56	43.1
Rarely	41	31.5
Never	11	8.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The study reveals in Table 2, that public relations challenges are prevalent in NITT, Zaria, with 43.1% of respondents reporting they "often" encounter these issues and 16.9% stating they "always" do. This indicates that public relations challenges frequently impede effective communication and stakeholder engagement.

**Table 3: Extent to Which Inadequate Resources Hinders Effectiveness of Public Relations:**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neutral	15	11.5
Somewhat Agree	14	10.8
Somewhat Disagree	4	3.1
Strongly Agree	84	64.6
Strongly Disagree	13	10.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The findings in Table 3 indicate that inadequate resources significantly hinder the effectiveness of public relations at NITT, Zaria, with 64.6% of respondents strongly agreeing that funding and personnel constraints are major obstacles. This constraint limits the institution's capacity to invest in public relations infrastructure, staff training, and stakeholder engagement.

**Table 4: Difficulty in Communicating Effectively with Internal stakeholders Due to Limited Resources:**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Extremely Difficult	32	24.6
Extremely Easy	2	1.5
Somewhat Difficult	40	30.8
Somewhat Easy	6	4.6
Very Difficult	50	38.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 4 findings reveal that the difficulty in communication with internal stakeholders at NITT, Zaria, is substantial, with 38.5% of respondents finding it very difficult and 30.8% finding it somewhat difficult, primarily due to limited resources.

**Influence of the Strategies Used By PR Unit towards Boosting the Institution’s Image**

**Table 5: How do PR challenges influence NITT's relationships with stakeholders:**

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Mistrust and negative publicity	31	23.8
loss of credibility	20	15.4
financial losses	13	10.0
Low Student and Trainee Enrolment	12	9.2
Decline in Industry Collaboration and Partnerships.	10	7.7
Reduced International Visibility	44	33.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

In Table 5, respondents reported having experienced public relations challenges recently in varying degrees. Percentage-wise, 23.8% experienced communication breakdown, 15.4% faced resource constraints, and 10.0% faced public awareness and reputation challenges, 9.2% faced internal challenges, while 7.7% faced miscellaneous challenges.

**Table 6: Strategies and practices currently used by NITT to address PR challenges**

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Experimentation with technology in PR	8	6.2
Institutional partnerships and external outreach	11	8.5
Stakeholder engagement forums	28	21.5
Dedicated Press and Public Relations Unit	37	28.5
Use of digital channels	46	35.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Data from table 6 shows that NITT use dedicated Press and Public Relations Unit that handles media relations, releases and communications. Its official website is nitt.gov.ng with 37%. It also uses proactive stakeholder engagement such as stakeholder engagement forums and national summits to bring transport operators, regulators and industry together with 8.5%

It also Use of digital channels / social media such as official website, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to publish news, statements and event coverage with 35.4%. Others include institutional partnerships and external outreach to pursues strategic partnerships. Recently with World Maritime University and other

international bodies which it promotes publicly as evidence of institutional credibility. NITT also utilised experimentation with technology in PR toutilise AI tools and other digital aids for PR tasks with 6.2%.

**Level of Improvement as a Result of Applying these PR Strategies in Maintaining Reputation of the Institutional Image**

**Table 7: Improvements made in NITT's PR practices to better manage challenges and enhance reputation**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Foster a culture of transparency and accountability	47	36.2
Investing in public relations infrastructure	38	29.2
Leverage digital media to enhance stakeholder engagement	19	14.6
Stakeholders have access to accurate and timely information	25	19.2
Train PR staff on digital & AI tools	1	0.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 7 shows that 36.2% of respondents foster a culture of transparency and accountability, Investing in public relations infrastructure 29.2%, Stakeholders have access to accurate and timely information 19.2%, Leverage digital media to enhance stakeholder engagement 14.6% and finally 0.8% suggest Training PR staff on digital & AI tools.

**Discussion of Findings**

The study’s findings in table 1 identify challenges facing NITT such as inadequate communication, insufficient resources, and lack of transparency. It specifically identified funding constraints (59.2%) as the major challenge, followed by inadequate infrastructure (18.5%), poor communication with stakeholders (6.9%), and inadequacy of trained staff (13.8%) are among the top public relations challenges NITT, Zaria’s internal public face the most. This aligns with Tuan et al. (2022). Further, findings showed that the major PR challenge for NITT is Resource Scarcity. The institution cannot effectively manage its public image if it cannot satisfy its internal operational needs. PR efforts should likely focus on advocacy for funding and internal transparency to bridge the gap between expectations and available resources.

Findings on table 5 show that the challenges lead to mistrust, negative publicity, capable of damaging Institutional Reputation and decline in stakeholder confidence, loss of credibility and even financial losses. Others include Low Student and Trainee Enrolment, decline in Industry Collaboration and Partnerships and finally decline in Industry Collaboration and Partnerships. These findings aligned with Loss (2025) who argues that in the current institutional landscape, PR is no longer a separate department—it is the lens through which all operations are judged. If the PR lens is cracked, the entire operation appears broken to stakeholders, regardless of the actual quality of the training provided. Based on the findings from Table 5, the PR challenges facing NITT create a destructive feedback loop. When an institution lacks the resources or communication strategies to engage its public effectively, the damage moves from "internal frustration" to "external institutional decay."

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Others include institutional partnerships and external outreach to pursues strategic partnerships. Recently with World Maritime University and other international bodies which it promotes publicly as evidence of institutional credibility. NITT also utilised experimentation with technology in PR to utilise AI tools and other digital aids for PR tasks

The strategies identified in Table 6 show that NITT is moving toward a "High-Engagement, Tech-Driven" PR model by diversifying their approach from traditional press releases to international partnerships. It further indicates that NITT are attempting to bridge the "credibility gap" identified in the earlier findings of this research.

In essence, NITT's current PR strategies are proactive and modern, specifically designed to counter the negative impacts found in RQ 2. The shift toward Internationalism and Technology suggests that NITT is trying to "innovate its way out" of its PR challenges. However, for these strategies to be 100% effective, they must be backed by a solution to the "funding constraints" as identified as the major PR challenge. Data from table 7 suggested ways that NITT can adopt to better manage challenges bedevilling the institution such as investing in public relations infrastructure (Stacks, 2022). Examples of public relations infrastructure are communication channels, PR team or unit, tools and software, content creation, crisis management plan, media and stakeholder relationship, etc.

NITT can foster a culture of transparency and accountability, ensuring that stakeholders have access to accurate and timely information (Hirschhorn et al., 2020). Finally, the institution can leverage digital media to enhance stakeholder engagement and reputation management (World Economic Forum, 2020). By adopting these strategies, NITT, Zaria, can build trust, maintain a positive reputation, and achieve its goals. Train PR staff on digital & AI tools. The findings support the assumptions of Stakeholder Theory. The theory emphasizes that organizations must consider the interests and expectations of multiple stakeholders including students, staff, industry partners, government regulators, and the public when making strategic decisions. NITT's use of stakeholder engagement forums, national summits, and partnerships with international institutions demonstrates efforts to involve these stakeholder groups in institutional communication and development.

The path forward for NITT, Zaria, lies in Professionalization. By shifting PR from a "support unit" to a "strategic asset" equipped with modern infrastructure and digital tools, NITT can move from managing "mistrust" to leading the conversation in the transport and logistics sector.

## Conclusions

This study examined the impact of public relations challenges on the institutional reputation of NITT, Zaria. Study findings revealed that inadequate communication, insufficient resources, and lack of transparency were significant public relations challenges facing NITT as an institution, has led to a decline in trust and confidence among stakeholders.

Inadequate communication is a significant challenge, leading to mistrust and misinformation among stakeholders. Insufficient resources also hinder effective public relations, limiting the ability to respond promptly to stakeholders' needs. Lack of transparency can further exacerbate reputation risks, as stakeholders demand accountability and openness from transport institutions. These challenges are known to have severe consequences on organisational reputation, including loss of trust, decreased stakeholder engagement, and financial loss.

The findings have significant implications for NITT and similar transport institutions. Transport institutions globally face various public relations challenges that can impact their reputation with stakeholders. The findings of this study have significant implications for NITT, Zaria. This is evident in prevalence of inadequate communication, insufficient resources, and lack of transparency as shown by results from the study, thus highlighting the need for the institution to prioritise public relations and reputation management. The negative impact of these challenges on NITT's reputation underscores the importance of effective communication and stakeholder engagement.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on study findings:

1. The Nigerian Institute of Transport Technology (NITT), Zaria, should prioritise addressing funding constraints, upgrading infrastructure, and investing in staff training and development to enhance communication and stakeholder engagement. This will enable the institution to effectively manage its public relations practices and promote a positive reputation.
2. NITT, Zaria, should enhance its communication channels to equip staff and students with the necessary skills to effectively communicate and engage with stakeholders. This can be achieved through training programmes, workshops, and seminars that focus on developing skills in communication, crisis management, and stakeholder engagement.
3. The institution should allocate sufficient resources, including increasing budget and hiring additional competent public relations staff, to support effective public relations practices and promote the institution's reputation and stakeholder relationships, to enable the public relations unit to function effectively and respond to the needs of various stakeholders.
4. NITT, Zaria, should adopt a multi-faceted approach to managing public relations, including digital strategies, staff training, and stakeholder engagement. This approach will enable the institution to leverage technology, build strong relationships with stakeholders, and promote a positive image. By adopting these recommendations, NITT, Zaria, can enhance its reputation, build trust with stakeholders, and achieve its goals.
5. The need for prioritisation of public relations and reputation management in transport institutions is therefore highlighted.

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