Public Relations Strategies in Managing Political Parties' Crises in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This study investigated public relations strategies for managing political party crises in Rivers State. Guided by two objectives, it examined the PR strategies adopted by political parties and the benefits derived from them. Two research questions were raised. Anchored on Agenda Setting and Excellence Theories, the study adopted a survey design with a population of 9,898,470 residents. A sample of 400 was determined using Taro Yamane's formula through multi-stage sampling. Questionnaire was used for data collection, and data were analysed using Weighted Mean Score. Of 400 copies administered, 380 were retrieved and analysed. Findings revealed that crisis communication, social media engagement and stakeholder engagement were the dominant strategies adopted, while shaping public opinion, rebuilding credibility and securing stakeholder support were major benefits. The study concludes that PR is functional but often reduced to propaganda and recommends regular evaluation of PR strategies and institutional frameworks promoting good governance, transparency and accountability.

Keywords: *Public Relations, Political Crisis, Political Parties, Rivers State, Crisis Communication*

Introduction

Political crises have become a recurring and destabilising feature of governance and public administration, particularly in emerging democracies like Nigeria. These crises manifest in multiple forms, including electoral violence, inter-party conflict, executive-legislative rifts, protests, and intra-governmental breakdowns. In many cases, political crises lead to widespread instability, economic downturns, and eroded public trust in democratic institutions. Political crises do not occur in a vacuum; they often stem from communication breakdowns, misinformation, unmet public expectations, lack of accountability, and poorly managed political messaging. In such complex scenarios, public relations [PR], as a strategic communication discipline, has been recognised as a critical tool for conflict prevention, reputation management, and crisis resolution. [Adegbite, 2022] Public relations are practically as old as society itself, but the modern practice dates back to the early 20th century with initial focus on press agentry and publicity. Since then, rapid developments have occurred both in conceptualisation and practice, driven by deeper appreciation of its relevance to organisational performance. Modern definitions incorporate concepts of engagement and relationship building as a reflection of the instrumentality of technological advances and social relationships to the success of PR practice [Okafor & Malizu,

2014]. Chmielecki and Lisowski noted that PR is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Ledingham and Bruning asserted that public relations serves a strategic communications function for relationship management. Many organisations have found PR attractive due to its high credibility, high dispersion rate of message, and relatively low cost compared to advertising. [2019]

According to Sheyigari, public relations is tasked with not only communicating on behalf of institutions but also fostering mutual understanding, stakeholder engagement, and public trust, which are key ingredients for political stability. The modern practice encompasses more than media relations or image management; it involves a two-way communication process where feedback is valued, public concerns are addressed, and organisational actions are aligned with societal expectations. In a political setting, public relations strategies are vital for clarifying policies, responding to crises, engaging citizens, and building democratic legitimacy. This is particularly important during political upheavals, when trust in institutions is fragile and the risk of misinformation is high. [2023]

Furthermore, public relations strategies play a crucial role in shaping political communication and maintaining stability during periods of political unrest. According to Adeyemi, in times of political crisis characterised by uncertainty, misinformation, conflict, and public anxiety, public relations becomes a strategic tool for conflict resolution and image management. According to Kalu, Igyuve and Akase, one of the foremost impacts of PR in political crisis management is its ability to foster open, transparent, and credible communication between political actors and the public. Through two-way symmetrical communication grounded in Excellence Theory, PR professionals can promote mutual understanding and collaboration between government and citizens, reduce rumours, address grievances, and improve trust. Another key contribution lies in agenda-setting and perception management. According to Heavens & Emenike, media and communication professionals, including PR experts, help determine the salience of issues by emphasising certain topics and narratives. Through utilisation of media relations, press briefings, opinion editorials, and strategic social media campaigns, PR efforts can reframe crises from being solely about conflict to being about solutions and collective action [Odigbo, Samaila & Okonkwo, 2024]. This study, drawing from the foregoing, seeks to explore public relations strategies in managing political crisis in Rivers State. [2021)

Statement of Problem

Political crises have become a recurring phenomenon in Rivers State, Nigeria, manifesting in forms such as electoral violence, party factionalism, legislative-executive clashes, and youth unrest. These crises often lead to breakdowns in governance, destruction of public property, disruptions in economic activities, and a decline in public trust in political institutions. Despite existence of communication structures and public engagement mechanisms, the recurring nature of these crises suggests a failure in effectively managing stakeholder perceptions and expectations. Public relations, as a strategic communication tool, is expected to play a pivotal role in crisis management by fostering mutual understanding, building public trust, and promoting dialogue between political actors and citizens. However, in practice, there appears to be a disconnect between PR strategies and mitigation of political tensions in Rivers State.

Moreover, the political landscape in Rivers State is deeply polarised, with high levels of partisanship, media manipulation, and public cynicism, which further complicate crisis communication efforts. While PR is supposed to offer conflict-sensitive strategies such as stakeholder engagement, transparent messaging, image repair tactics, and crisis contingency

planning, its application within political sphere has been reduced to propaganda and damage control. Recent crises, particularly the 2023-2024 confrontation between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his predecessor, Nyesom Wike, exposed critical gaps in crisis management approaches. While existing studies have examined political crises in Nigeria, there remains a paucity of research focusing specifically on role and effectiveness of PR strategies in managing subnational political conflicts, particularly in resource-rich states like Rivers State. This motivates this study.

Research Objectives

The broad objective of the study is to examine public relations strategies in managing political parties' crises in Rivers State. The specific objectives are:

To find out different public relations strategies adopted by political parties in managing political crises in Rivers State.

2. To find out the benefits political parties derived from the public relations strategies adopted to resolve political crises in Rivers State.

Research questions

1. What are the different public relations strategies political parties adopted in managing political crises in Rivers State?
2. What benefits do political parties derive from the public relations strategies adopted to resolve political crises in Rivers State?

Literature Review

Political crisis in Rivers State from 1999 to 2026 has been a recurring problem since the return to democracy.

From 1999 to 2007, under Governor Peter Odili, the state experienced relative political stability, but there were underlying issues of cultism, youth restiveness and struggle for control of resources in the Niger Delta. The main crisis during this period was between political elites over who would succeed Odili. From 2007 to 2015, under Governor Chibuike Amaechi, the crisis became more visible at the national level. There was a major split between Amaechi and his former political ally Nyesom Wike. The conflict also involved the Presidency under Goodluck Jonathan and his wife Patience Jonathan. This led to problems in the state House of Assembly, defection of lawmakers, court cases, and division of the People's Democratic Party [PDP] and the All Progressives Congress [APC] in the state. Politics became about loyalty to either Amaechi or Wike.

From 2015 to 2023, under Governor Nyesom Wike, Rivers State remained politically polarized. Wike maintained strong control over the PDP structure in the state, while Amaechi controlled the APC structure. Elections in 2015 and 2019 were marked by violence, accusations of rigging, and heavy security presence. Governance was stable, but opposition parties complained of intimidation and lack of level playing ground. From 2023 to 2026, the most serious crisis happened. Governor Siminalayi Fubara, who was supported by Wike to become governor, fell out with his predecessor. The conflict split the Rivers State House of Assembly into two factions, one loyal to Fubara and one loyal to Wike. There were attempts at impeachment, defection of 27 lawmakers from PDP to APC, burning of the Assembly complex, and several court judgments from State High Court, Appeal Court and Supreme Court. The crisis also divided local government leadership and affected governance, with President Bola Tinubu intervening at different times to broker peace deals.

It is worthy to say that, the pattern of Rivers State crisis from 1999 to 2026 is about godfatherism, control of party structure, control of state resources, and struggle for political succession. Each

governor has tried to produce a successor and maintain influence after leaving office, which often leads to confrontation with the new governor.

Public Relations Strategies in mitigating this crisis

Public relations (PR) encompasses strategic communication processes that build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Organizations—whether public, private, or non-governmental—employ a variety of public relations strategies to shape perception, manage reputation, and maintain effective communication with stakeholders. These strategies are not rigid categories, but rather flexible approaches that can be adapted depending on objectives, audiences, media channels, and crises. This paper discusses eight major types of public relations strategies, explaining their characteristics, applications, and effectiveness in various organizational contexts.

Media Relations Strategy: Media relations is one of the most traditional and widely used public relations strategies. It involves building and maintaining strong relationships with journalists, editors, broadcasters, and other media gatekeepers to ensure favorable coverage of an organization's activities. The goal is to influence the way the media portrays the organization and to disseminate key messages to a broader audience through press releases, interviews, press conferences, and op-eds. Effective media relations strategies are based on transparency, credibility, and timely responsiveness. Organizations use media kits, embargoed stories, and exclusive content to incentivize coverage while providing factual, verifiable information. In times of crisis, good media relations are essential for damage control, allowing an organization to clarify its position quickly and accurately. However, media relations also pose risks: biased reporting or misquotes can harm reputations. Thus, training spokespersons and establishing media protocols are critical components of this strategy (Newsom, VanSlyke Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2010).

Community Relations Strategy: Community relations focus on establishing and nurturing mutually beneficial relationships with local communities in which an organization operates. This strategy is especially important for companies with significant physical footprints—such as factories, refineries, or retail chains—that impact local employment, environment, or culture. The aim is to demonstrate corporate social responsibility (CSR), encourage goodwill, and earn a social license to operate. Community relations tactics may include sponsoring local events, supporting education or health initiatives, partnering with community-based organizations, or engaging in philanthropy. For example, oil companies in the Niger Delta often employ community liaison officers to mediate with host communities and manage expectations. A successful community relations strategy not only improves public image but also reduces conflicts and fosters loyalty. However, tokenistic or exploitative approaches can backfire and lead to mistrust. (Eweje, 2006).

Crisis Communication Strategy: Crisis communication is a critical public relations strategy employed during emergencies, scandals, product failures, or reputational threats. The primary objective is to contain the damage, communicate effectively with stakeholders, and protect the organization's credibility. According to Coombs (2007), the effectiveness of a crisis communication strategy depends on the speed, consistency, empathy, and accountability of the messages conveyed. This strategy involves developing a crisis communication plan in advance, establishing a crisis response team, and preparing holding statements. In times of crisis, transparency is crucial: attempting to cover up information often worsens the situation. A case

study of Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol crisis in the 1980s illustrates exemplary crisis communication, where swift action and honest communication helped restore trust (Fearn-Banks, 2016). Conversely, BP's delayed and defensive response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill drew heavy criticism. Thus, a proactive and ethically grounded crisis communication strategy can significantly mitigate reputational loss.

Government Relations (Lobbying) Strategy: Government relations, also known as lobbying, refers to the deliberate engagement with government officials, policymakers, and regulatory agencies to influence legislation, policy, or public programs in favor of an organization's interests. This strategy is prevalent in industries like pharmaceuticals, energy, and telecommunications, where government regulation significantly affects business operations. Tactics include submitting policy briefs, testifying at legislative hearings, attending political fundraisers, or joining industry coalitions. While lobbying is legal in many countries, it is often viewed with skepticism due to potential ethical concerns about access, favoritism, and regulatory capture. Therefore, ethical lobbying practices—backed by data, policy analysis, and transparency—are essential. Organizations that engage in government relations must comply with lobbying regulations and publicly disclose their activities to maintain trust and accountability (McGrath, 2007).

Social Media and Digital Strategy: With the proliferation of digital platforms, social media has become a dominant PR strategy for real-time engagement, brand visibility, and audience analytics. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok allow organizations to craft narratives, respond directly to users, and humanize their brands. Social media public relations strategies are particularly valuable for engaging younger demographics and mobilizing public support. Effective social media strategies involve creating consistent, engaging content; leveraging influencers; monitoring sentiments; and responding to feedback or crises swiftly. They also require clear social media policies to prevent reputational risks from employee misuse or insensitive posts. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the interactive nature of social media enhances relational symmetry, allowing users to co-create content and feel heard. However, the same openness also exposes organizations to trolling, misinformation, and viral backlash, making social media a double-edged sword.

Employee Relations/Internal Public Relations Strategy: Internal or employee relations strategies focus on maintaining good communication and morale among staff and internal stakeholders. Employees are critical brand ambassadors; their satisfaction, engagement, and alignment with organizational values affect productivity and external reputation. Organizations use internal newsletters, town hall meetings, suggestion boxes, intranets, and employee recognition programs to foster a positive internal culture. Transparent communication during organizational changes such as mergers, layoffs, or restructuring is vital. According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), internal public relations helps in building trust, reducing rumors, and aligning employees with the organizational vision. Inadequate internal communication, on the other hand, can lead to low morale, resistance to change, and internal crises. Therefore, an inclusive, two-way communication culture is a hallmark of effective internal public relations strategies.

Investor Relations Strategy: Investor relations (IR) target shareholders, financial analysts, and potential investors to maintain confidence in the organization's financial health and future prospects. This strategy is especially crucial for publicly traded companies that must comply with

regulatory disclosures and cultivate investor goodwill. Investor relations professionals prepare earnings reports, host quarterly calls, manage investor briefings, and issue shareholder communications. An effective investor relations strategy aligns financial transparency with strategic vision. It is governed by regulations such as the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) rules or Nigeria's Corporate Governance Code. Investor relations is not just about reporting profits; it involves telling the company's growth story, managing expectations, and reinforcing long-term value (Marston & Straker, 2001). A breakdown in investor communication can lead to stock volatility, shareholder lawsuits, or capital flight.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Strategy: Corporate social responsibility-based public relations strategies emphasize an organization's commitment to ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities beyond profit-making. Corporate social responsibility programs may include sustainability initiatives, fair labor practices, charitable donations, educational scholarships, or disaster relief efforts. Corporate social responsibility professionals play a key role in communicating these efforts to stakeholders and aligning them with corporate values. Corporate social responsibility strategies improve reputation, differentiate brands, and foster emotional connections with stakeholders. They are particularly important in industries with high environmental or social impacts. For example, multinational oil firms in Nigeria have adopted corporate social responsibility strategies to reduce community tensions and build goodwill, although critics argue that these initiatives are often symbolic rather than systemic (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, & Amao, 2006). Authentic corporate social responsibility must be integrated into core business strategy and measured through impact assessments to avoid charges of greenwashing or public relations stunts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theories, this:

Agenda Setting Theory

Propounded by McCombs and Shaw, the theory holds that the media may not tell people what to think, but it tells them what to think about. The theory explains how media and PR professionals determine the salience of issues by emphasizing certain topics and narratives. In context of political crises, PR professionals can shape public discourse in a way that highlights peace, national unity, and reconciliation, rather than division and hostility. Through press briefings, opinion editorials, and strategic social media campaigns, PR efforts can reframe crises from being about conflict to being about solutions and collective action, thereby reducing public tension and mobilising support for political resolution. [1972] Agenda Setting Theory is important to this study because it explains how political parties use public relations strategies to determine what the public thinks about during a crisis. The theory, propounded by McCombs and Shaw, holds that the media does not tell people what to think, but what to think about. In the context of Rivers State political crises, PR practitioners use crisis communication, press briefings, and social media engagement to emphasize peace, unity, reconciliation and solutions rather than division and hostility. Through, setting the agenda around positive narratives, political parties are able to shape public opinion, reduce tension, mobilize support for resolution, and strengthen institutional legitimacy.

Excellence Theory

Propounded by Grunig and Hunt, the theory advocates for four models of public relations, with the two-way symmetrical model being the ideal. This model emphasizes mutual understanding,

dialogue, feedback, and responsiveness between organization and publics. In political crisis management, the theory provides framework for evaluating how political parties engage citizens. Through open, transparent, and credible communication, PR can reduce rumours, address grievances, and improve trust in political institutions, all essential to de-escalating conflict. The theory argues that excellent PR departments manage relationships strategically to achieve organizational goals while respecting public interest. [1984]

Excellence Theory is important to this study because it shows that effective public relations during political crises should be based on two-way communication. Instead of just telling people what to believe, political parties should listen to citizens, have dialogue, and respond to their concerns. When parties communicate openly and honestly, it helps to build trust, clear rumours, and reduce tension in Rivers State.

Empirical Review

Kalu, Igyuve and Akase (2024) examined public relations strategies and political stability in Benue State. The study used survey design with 384 respondents and was anchored on Excellence Theory. Findings revealed that two-way symmetrical communication, timely press briefings and stakeholder dialogue significantly reduced political tension and rebuilt trust. This study relates to the current study because it validates the use of Excellence Theory and dialogue, but it was limited to Benue State and focused only on government communication, not political parties. The present study fills this gap by focusing on political parties' strategies in Rivers State.

Odigbo, Samaila and Okonkwo (2024) investigated media framing and political crisis management in South-East Nigeria. Using content analysis and survey of 400 residents and anchored on Agenda Setting Theory, the study found that reframing crises from conflict to solution through press releases and social media campaigns strengthened legitimacy and reduced tension. The gap is that it focused on general media framing without isolating specific PR strategies of political parties. The current study builds on it by identifying specific strategies such as crisis communication, social media engagement and stakeholder engagement adopted by parties in Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted survey research design. This design is appropriate for studying opinions, attitudes and behaviours of large populations. The area of study is Rivers State, Nigeria, comprising 23 Local Government Areas across three senatorial districts. The population of the study comprised residents of Rivers State estimated at 9,898,470 according to National Bureau of Statistics projections. The sample size of 400 was statistically determined using Taro Yamane's formula: n = N / 1+N2. Multi-stage sampling technique was employed. Stage one involved clustering the state into three senatorial districts. Stage two involved purposive selection of two Local Government Areas per district, making six LGAs. Stage three involved simple random selection of communities within the LGAs, and stage four involved availability sampling of adult residents who have lived in the state for at least two years and are familiar with political dynamics.The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled Public Relations Strategies and Political Crises Questionnaire. The instrument was divided into Section A and Section B [research questions] structured on a 5-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. The instrument was face validated by experts in Mass Communication and measurement. Reliability was tested via Cronbach Alpha with coefficient of 0.86, indicating high reliability. 400 copies were administered with help of research assistants, and

380 copies were correctly completed, retrieved and analysed, representing 95% return rate. Data collected were analysed using frequency tables and Weighted Mean Score [WMS]. The formula is WMS = ΣFX / N. Decision rule: Mean score of 3.0 and above was accepted as positive, while below 3.0 was rejected. Operational terms defined include Conflict Resolution as process of addressing disagreements through dialogue, and Crisis Management as proactive process of dealing with crisis before, during and after.

Different public relations strategies adopted by political parties in managing political crises

S/N	Different public relations strategies adopted by political parties in managing political crises	SA	A	D	SD	Total	(x)	Remark
1.	Crisis communication was the strategy the political party adopted in managing a political crisis	112 448	153 459	87 174	46 46	398 1127	2.8	Agreed
2.	Press briefing and releases were the strategy political party adopted in managing political crisis.	88 352	119 357	122 244	69 69	398 1022	2.5	Agreed
3.	Social media engagement was the strategy political party adopted in managing political crisis..	51 204	132 396	32 64	180 180	398 884	2.1	Disagreed
4.	Stakeholders engagement was the strategy political party adopted in managing political crisis.	79 316	156 468	109 218	54 54	398 1056	2.7	Agreed

Criterion Mean =2.5; n=398.

The data in Table 4.1.1. indicated that the crisis communication Social media and stakeholders' engagement were the public relations strategies adopted in managing political crisis in Rivers State.

The functionality of public relations strategies resolution of the political crisis

S/N	The functionality of public relations strategies resolution of the political crisis	SA	A	D	SD	Total	X	Remark
5.	The extent of the functionality of public relations strategies in managing political crisis is very high..	93 372	146 438	131 262	28 28	398 1102	2.7	Agreed

6.	The extent of the functionality of public relations strategies in managing political crises is high.	124 496	162 486	86 172	26 26	398 1182	2.9	Agreed
7.	The extent of the functionality of public relations strategies in managing political crises is low.	46 184	118 354	84 168	150 150	398 856	2.1	Disagreed
8	.The extent of the functionality of public relations strategies in managing political crises is very low	27 108	137 411	89 178	145145	398 842	2.1	Disagreed

Criterion Mean =2.5; n=398.
The data in Table 4.1.2 indicated that the extent of the functionality of public relations strategies resolution of the political crisis in Rivers State is significantly high.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What were the different public relations strategies political parties adopted in managing political crises in Rivers State?

The finding is related to that of Coombs (2007), who found that effective crisis communication depends heavily on delivering accurate information rapidly to affected stakeholders. Through press briefings, official statements, and media engagement, PR professionals help political actors present their positions clearly, dispel misinformation, and prevent panic or misinformation from worsening the crisis. Meaning that strategic public relations efforts of the State Government underestimated the power of digital media in stoking the embers of violence. Thus, there was a loophole in the strategies adopted (Abaleye & Adelakun, 2024).

The finding is in agreement with the Agenda-setting theory used in the study. The theory presupposes that the media have the power to influence people's thinking by taking a lead in the debate of important issues in society. The theory further posits that the media may not always determine what we think, but what we think about. Severin and Tankard (1979) viewed the agenda-setting theory as "the capability of the mass media to select and emphasise certain issues and thereby cause those issues to be perceived as important by the public. The implication of this is that public relations plays a significant role in conflict management in in Nigerian public sector (Ogbu, 2021).

What is the functionality of such public relations strategies in the resolution of political crises in Rivers State?

The study also discovered that the extent of the functionality of public relations strategies in resolution of the political crisis in Rivers State is significantly high. The finding similar to the finding of Sheyigari (2023), whose results show that PR strategies support and strengthen global disaster risk reduction efforts by safeguarding communities from the impacts of disasters and promoting sustainable development. Oluwakemi (2023) confirmed that public relations plays a vital role in crisis management during crises.

The finding agrees with the Excellence theory used in the study. Theory posits that public relations is most effective when it is practised strategically and contributes to organisational goals. The theory identifies several key principles: first, public relations should be a management function,

not just a support function; second, it should be led by professionals who are part of the dominant coalition (senior decision-makers) in an organization; third, the function should use two-way symmetrical communication, meaning that dialogue—not persuasion—should be the basis for relationships between an organization and its publics (Grunig, 2001).

Conclusion

The public relations strategies are crucial for the effective crisis's management in political parties. This is reason political parties in Rivers State adopted; the crisis communication, social media and stakeholders' engagement as public relations strategies in managing political crises in Rivers State. The essence of this, is to shape public opinions, rebuilding credibility and seek stakeholders support. Although, the lack of political control, crisis escalation, stakeholder distrust and resource constraint were challenge public relations strategies faced in managing political crisis in Rivers State.

Recommendations

The following were recommended:

1. Political parties should regularly evaluate the effectives of public relations strategies and make adjustments as needed to improve the mechanism of crisis resolutions.
2. Political parties should leverage diplomatic efforts, such as mediation and negotiation to resolve conflict peacefully.

Contributions to Knowledge

The research provides insights into effective public relations strategies for managing political crises, which can inform policy and practice. The study also highlights the importance of stakeholders' engagement and relationship-building in crisis management. It provides a nuanced understanding of political crisis in Rivers State, Nigeria, and the role of public relations in managing these crises.

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