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Evaluating Websites as Instruments for Effective Public Relations Practice: A Comparative Analysis of Four Mainstream Banks in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study evaluated websites as instruments of effective public relations practice through a comparative analysis of the websites of four key Nigerian banks: First Bank of Nigeria Plc (FBN), United Bank of Africa Plc (UBA), Guaranty Trust Holding Company Plc (GTCO) and Access Bank Plc (ACCESS). The objectives of the study were to examine the nature and scope of public relations content, assess stakeholder engagement and interactivity features, and compare the effectiveness of the banks' websites as strategic mechanisms for organisational public relations. The study was anchored on Kent and Taylor's Dialogic Communication Theory. It adopted a quantitative research method, employing cross-sectional content analysis of the Banks' websites. The study population comprised the official websites of the four selected banks. Data were collected through direct observation using a content analysis checklist. The data collected were analysed using content analysis and presented in frequency tables. Findings revealed that all four banks provided extensive public relations content and maintained highly effective websites. ACCESS recorded the highest interactivity score. The study recommends increasing and strengthening interactive features and sustaining updated public relations content to enhance stakeholder engagement and relationship building.

KEYWORDS: Public Relations, Corporate Website, Interactivity, Comparative Analysis, Banking Sector

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital communication technologies has greatly influenced public relations (PR) practice globally for good. In response, public relations practitioners, organisations and businesses have adopted online platforms as a means of communicating with their stakeholders, managing reputation and enhancing mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders and organisations. Website is one of the tools offered by digital technology, which is a core element around which a corporation's PR activities revolve. Websites create an avenue for organisations to share information, engage stakeholders and convey corporate identity in a controlled environment (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Capriotti & Mareno, 2017).

According to Enrique et al. (2018), a website is a crucial tool for a firm to establish a strong online presence because it combines informative, relational and transactional functionality with online commercial transactions. The focus of digital platform usage has tilted toward a more active and collaborative community, making static websites outdated. Users of digital platforms engage by sharing their views and experiences. Therefore, interactive services and websites that enable communication and exchange of information with users are necessary, especially in today's digital environment. Enrique et al. (2018) note that organisations have progressively adopted not only these dynamic web services but also new features.

In today's world where trust, transparency and credibility are critical elements for the survival of organisations, websites play a crucial role in shaping public perception and narrative. A robust and efficient public relations engagement is crucial for sustaining stakeholders' confidence and corporate reputations, even as the Nigerian banking sector has become very competitive.

Waters et al. (2012) declare that banks use their websites to share corporate values, financial performance, corporate social responsibility activities and service innovations to different stakeholders, which include customers, investors, regulators and the general public. Through a website, stakeholders can familiarise themselves with the organisation, providing an opportunity for them

to interact and gain further information in addition to the information they might have acquired through traditional channels (Enrique et al., 2018).

FBN, UBA, GTCO and ACCESS banks are prominent commercial banks in Nigeria with robust national and international presence. These banks maintain official websites that function as essential communication platforms. The effectiveness of these websites as public relations tools may vary according to content, interactivity, transparency, intensity, and engagement techniques. This study assesses the banks' organizational websites as successful instruments for public relations practice by conducting a comparative examination of their websites. Despite the increasing significance of websites in public relations, numerous organizations continue to underutilize their websites as strategic communication tools. Some websites are largely intended for transactional or informational purposes, with minimal focus on relationship-building, stakeholder engagement, and dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Men & Bowen, 2017).

In the Nigerian banking sector, public trust has been challenged at various times by issues such as service failures, regulatory sanctions, and economic instability. As a result, banks are expected to adopt effective public relations strategies that promote transparency, accountability, and two-way communication. While these banks maintain functional websites, it is not clear whether these websites are optimally utilised to support public relations objectives beyond providing basic information.

Previous studies on public relations in Nigeria have focused largely on traditional media relations and corporate social responsibility, with limited attention given to digital website-based public relations practices, particularly in comparative contexts (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019). This gap creates uncertainty about how effectively Nigerian banks are using their websites to manage relationships with stakeholders. Consequently, there is a need to systematically evaluate and compare the websites of these foremost banks in Nigeria to determine their effectiveness as tools for public relations practice.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The broad aim of this study is to evaluate organisational digital website as a useful tool for public relations practice; in specific terms, the study sets out to:

i. examine the nature and scope of public relations content obtainable on the websites of FBN, UBA, GTCO and ACCESS banks.
ii. ascertain the extent of stakeholders' participation and interactivity features on the websites of the banks.
iii. compare the effectiveness of the websites in promoting the corporate image of the banks.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Public Relations

Public relations (PR) is a strategic communication process that seeks to build relationships between organisations and their publics that are mutually beneficial for both (Grunig & Hunt, 2016). It is a deliberate, planned and continuous effort to establish and preserve mutual understanding between an organisation and its diverse stakeholders. PR is a consciously designed effort and continuous in nature. It is a carefully planned approach and not random, aimed at influencing opinion, building trust, and managing organisational reputation through responsible communication practices (Sanjay et al., n.d). Contemporary public relations advances beyond information dissemination and media engagement to include stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, corporate social responsibility, and digital communication (Men & Bowen, 2017).

Good PR not only creates a positive reputation for organisations but can enable them to attain desired objectives. It makes a significant contribution in helping to form and communicate effectively an organisation's core values, mission and vision to its publics (Sanjay et al., n.d). Efficient public relations underscores the importance of a dialogic approach, which is a two-way communication, where organisations not only disseminate information but also consider and respond to stakeholder concerns. This dialogic approach is particularly important in service-oriented industries such as banking, where customer trust and satisfaction are essential for organisational survival.

Website

Website refers to an official online platform owned and controlled by an organisation for the purpose of communication, information sharing, and interaction with stakeholders. Websites provide organisations with the opportunity to present consistent messages, control content, and reach a global audience without the constraints of time and space (Capriotti & Moreno, 2017). Unlike traditional media, digital websites allow for continuous updates, multimedia content, and interactive features such as feedback forms and live chats. These features make websites valuable tools for public relations practice, particularly in facilitating transparency and stakeholder engagement (Waters et al., 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have examined the role of digital media and websites in public relations practice. Kent and Taylor (1998) introduced the dialogic theory of public relations, emphasising the importance of two-way communication in online environments. Their work laid the foundation for evaluating websites based on interactivity and relationship-building potential. Capriotti and Moreno (2017) found that many corporate websites prioritise information dissemination over stakeholder engagement, limiting their effectiveness as public relations tools. Similarly, Waters et al. (2012) observe that although organisations increasingly use websites for communication, interactive features that promote dialogue are often underutilised.

In the banking context, Adegbola and Gearhart (2019) note that Nigerian banks use digital platforms primarily for service delivery, with limited emphasis on strategic public relations. This finding suggests a gap between the potential and actual use of websites in PR practice within the Nigerian banking industry. While existing studies provide useful insights into website-based public relations, few have adopted a comparative approach focusing on specific organisations within Nigeria. This study addresses this gap by comparatively analysing the websites of First Bank Nigeria Plc, United Bank of Africa Plc, Guaranty Trust Bank Plc and Access Bank Plc to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting public relations practice.

Websites as Public Relations Tool

A corporate website is a very crucial communication tool which organisations use for keeping interactions with stakeholders updated, providing information to the media, obtaining information about the public, improving and strengthening total image and augmenting public relations related functions (Alemdar, 2006 cited in Fray, 2016). Corporate websites serve diverse public relations purposes, such as information sharing, reputation management, relationship building and crisis communication. Websites that support PR practices by enabling two-way communication and providing wider and richer content to target groups help organisations to build stronger relationships with the public by encouraging feedback, responsiveness and ongoing interaction (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Fray, 2016)

In public relations practice, websites that effectively provide timely information, promote organisational values, and offer opportunities for stakeholder participation are considered a public relations tool. One key advantage of a website to public relations is that it removes time and space limits in communication between the organisation and stakeholders and enhances interactivity.

Public Relations Practice in the Banking Sector in Nigeria

Public relations practice in the banking sector in Nigeria focuses on building trust, ensuring transparency, and maintaining positive relationships with customers and regulators. Banks operate in highly regulated environments, making clear and accurate communication essential (Cornelissen, 2020). Websites are particularly important for banks because they serve as official sources of information for financial reports, corporate announcements, and policy updates. When effectively managed, bank websites can enhance corporate credibility and strengthen stakeholder confidence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on Dialogic Communication Theory, which was developed in 1998 by Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor. The theory was established to show how organisations can use digital media, particularly websites, to establish and preserve relationships that are collectively favourable with their stakeholders through interaction rather than non-interactive information dissemination (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

The theory is based on the premise that effective public relations is relationship-centered rather than message-centered. It suggests organisations and their stakeholders engage in two-way, ethical, and interactive communication that allows both parties to listen and respond to each other (Kent & Taylor, 1998). It also assumes that digital platforms, such as websites, have the capability to promote dialogue when they are intentionally designed to do so. In this regard, the theory suggests that organizational websites should be interactive platforms that facilitate feedback, responsiveness and unfolding communication rather than just existing as online brochures (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The theory also posits that mutuality, openness, empathy, risk and commitment are essential elements for sustaining dialogue between organisations and stakeholders.

The strengths of the dialogic communication theory are that it prioritizes two-way communication, which is a key feature of modern public relations best practices. By emphasizing engagement and building relationships, it establishes a concrete structure or model for analysing how organisations interact with their publics online (Grunig, 2013). Another strength is its suitability to online communication, especially websites. The dialogic precepts, such as ease of interface, usefulness of information, conservation of visitors, generation of return and feedback loop offer strong parameters for evaluating website efficacy (Kent & Taylor, 1998). This makes the theory especially useful for empirical studies and content analysis of organizational websites.

Just like all theories, criticism of the dialogic communication theory also exists. One of its criticisms is weakness in its idealistic nature; not every organisation is desirous or capable of participating in genuine dialogue as a result of concerns about control, confidentiality, or regulatory constraints, especially in highly regulated sectors such as banking (Cornelissen, 2020). The theory also places heavy emphasis on organizational intent while paying limited attention to public participation levels. Although organisations

may provide interactive features on websites, the public may choose not to engage, which can limit the practical effectiveness of dialogic communication (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

The theory is, however, highly relevant to this study since the study evaluates websites as tools of public relations. The theory provides an appropriate framework for evaluating whether the websites of FBN, UBA, GTCO and ACCESS banks, Nigeria promote dialogue or merely disseminate information. The dialogic principles by Kent and Taylor (1998) serve as useful indicators for assessing features such as feedback mechanisms, interactive content, ease of navigation and responsiveness on the websites of these banks. By using this theory, the study can examine the extent to which the banks' websites support relationship building, stakeholder engagement and two-way communication.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a quantitative research methodology with a cross-sectional design for data collection and analysis. Cross-sectional data analysis is appropriate for this study as it enables a systematic assessment of website content to determine how organizational websites function as instruments for public relations practices (Krippendorf, 2018). The cross-sectional design facilitates the assessment of similarities and disparities between the websites of the banks under study, elucidating how each institution employs its website for public relations objectives.

The study population comprised the official websites of four mainstream banks in Nigeria. The units of data analysis included PR-related content and features found on the websites, such as corporate information and organisational profile, press releases and news updates, stakeholder engagement tools (contact forms, feedback platforms), corporate social responsibility information, and usability and interactivity features, among other indicators.

Data were collected through direct observation and systematic evaluation of the banks' websites within a study period of two weeks. A content analysis checklist was used to identify and categorise public relations-related content and features upon established PR and digital communication literature (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Waters et al., 2012). Data collected were analysed using content analysis and presented in tables of frequency. Identified themes were compared across the banks' websites to determine how effectively each website functioned as a public relations tool.

Descriptive interpretation was employed to explain patterns and variations in PR practices observed on the websites as follow:

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Nature and scope of public relations content available on the websites of FBN, UBA, GTCO and ACCESS banks.

BANK	UNIT OF ANALYSIS										TOTAL
	About us	History of bank	Mission, Vision and core values	Press release/ News section	Media Gallery (photos/videos)	CSR activities/sustainability report	Investor relations information	Leadership and management profile	Award and recognition	Career opportunities section	
FBN	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10/10
UBA	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10/10
GTCO	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10/10
ACCESS	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10/10
Total	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	40/40

Source: Researchers' content analysis, 2026

0-3 = low PR content
4-7 = moderate
8-10 = high

RATING
FBN = 10/10
UBA = 10/10
GTCO = 10/10
ACCESS = 10/10

Data from table 1 above shows that all 4 banks FBN, UBA, GTCO and Access Bank score 10/10 on PR content indicators, showing high level of public relations information available on their websites. The findings indicate that all four banks place significant emphasis on online public relations communication. Each of these websites provide wholistic corporate information, stakeholder-oriented content, investor information, sustainability reports, and media resources, suggesting a strong commitment to transparency and corporate communication.

Table 2: Level of stakeholder engagement and interactivity features

BANK	UNIT OF ANALYSIS										TOTAL
	Contact information available	Contact form/email option	Live chatbot	Social media links integration	News-letter subscription	Feedback/complaint mechanism	FAQ section	User comment review feature	Multilingual options	Mobile responsiveness	
FBN	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	7/10
UBA	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	8/10
GTCO	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	7/10
ACCESS	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	9/10
Total	4/4	4/4	3/4	4/4	2/4	4/4	4/4	1/4	1/4	4/4	30/40

Source: Researchers' content analysis, 2026

Rating
FBN = 7/10
UBA = 8/10
GTCO = 7/10
ACCESS = 9/10

Data from Table 2 above shows that all four banks provide contact information, contact form/email options, social media integration, feedback mechanism, FAQ section, and mobile responsiveness. User comment/ review feature was only found on the website of Access Bank under news articles and blog posts but absent on the websites of the other three banks. Multilingual option appeared only on FBN's website, while newsletter subscription feature is available on UBA and Access Bank's websites but absent on that of FBN and GTCO. Live chatbot feature is available on all banks' websites except FBN's.

Evidently, Access Bank demonstrated the highest level of stakeholder engagement and interactivity options, offering a broader range of communication and feedback features. UBA also exhibited a strong commitment to stakeholder engagement. while FBN

and GTCO provided essential interactive channels, the absence of certain interactive features such as chatbot, newsletter and comment/review reduced the overall engagement scores.

Table 3: Comparison of the effectiveness of FBN, UBA, GTB and ACCESS banks' websites.

MEASUREMENT CRITERIA	BANKS AND SCORES																					
	First Bank of Nigeria Plc						United Bank of Africa Plc						Guaranty Trust Bank Plc						Access Bank Plc				
	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5
Ease of navigation																							
Visual appeal (design layout)																							
Content clarity																							
Information update frequency																							
Loading speed																							
Accessibility (ease for use)																							
Credibility and trustworthiness																							
Overall user experience																							

Source: Researchers' content analysis, 2026

1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent

8-16 = low effectiveness

17-28 = moderate

29-40 = high

Rating

FBN = 39/40
UBA = 35/40
GTB = 36/40
ACCESS = 38/40

Data from Table 3 above reveals that websites of FBN, UBA, GTCO and ACCESS banks are highly effective in achieving their communication and service delivery objectives. All four banks scored above the minimum threshold for high effectiveness, indicating strong performance in terms of navigation, visual appeal, content clarity, information update frequency, loading speed, accessibility, credibility and overall user experience. FBN recorded the highest effectiveness score of 39/40, suggesting that its website provides the most satisfactory overall user experience among the banks studied. ACCESS closely followed with a score of 38/40; GTCO and UBA scored 36/40 and 35/40, respectively. Although differences exist among the banks, the scores indicate that all four banks maintain highly effective websites capable of meeting stakeholder information and communication needs.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first objective of this study examined the nature and scope of public relations content available on the websites of FBN, UBA, GTCO and ACCESS banks. The findings revealed that all four banks had a score of 10/10 on all PR content indicators examined, showing a high presence of public relations information on their websites. These websites contained comprehensive corporate information including organisational history, mission and vision statements, leadership profiles, investor relations information, corporate social responsibility reports, media resources, news updates, awards and career opportunities. The high score of PR-related content across all four banks suggests that Nigerian commercial banks are increasingly recognising websites as strategic communication tools for enhancing transparency, reputation management and stakeholder communication.

This observation is consistent with Waters et al. (2012), who assert that organisational websites serve as important channels for communicating corporate values, financial performance, service innovations and corporate social responsibility activities to stakeholders.

The finding also aligns with the view of Capriotti and Moreno (2017), who maintain that websites provide organisations with the opportunity to control information dissemination and present a consistent corporate identity to diverse publics. The presence of extensive corporate information on all four websites demonstrates that the banks have adopted websites as important communication vehicles for maintaining visibility and strengthening stakeholder confidence. Furthermore, the result supports Cornelissen's (2020) assertion that banks operate in highly regulated environments where transparency and accurate communication are essential. By providing comprehensive information on their websites, the banks enhance public trust and demonstrate accountability to customers, investors, regulators and other stakeholders.

The second objective of the study aimed to ascertain the extent of stakeholder participation and interactivity features on the websites of the banks studied. The study found that ACCESS recorded the highest stakeholder engagement and interactivity score (9/10), followed by UBA (8/10), while FBN and GTCO scored 7/10 each. The banks generally provided contact information, contact forms, feedback mechanisms, social media integration, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sections and mobile responsiveness. However, certain dialogic features such as newsletter subscriptions, user comment sections, multilingual options and live chatbots were not consistently available across all websites. The result is in line with Kent and Taylor's (1998) Dialogic Communication Theory, which emphasizes that organizational websites should include interactive communication capabilities to promote conversation and dialogue in addition to information delivery. The banks have adopted key elements of dialogic communication, as evidenced by the inclusion of social media integration, feedback channels, and contact methods on their websites.

The result also confirms the observation of Waters et al. (2012), who observed that although organisations increasingly use websites for communication, many fail to fully utilise interactive features that foster stakeholder engagement. While the banks in this study displayed moderate to high levels of interactivity, the absence of specific functionalities on some websites shows that chances for deeper stakeholder interaction remain underutilised. Similarly, the study corroborates Capriotti and Moreno's (2017) argument that many organisations emphasize information sharing over stakeholder interaction. Although all four banks give extensive information, discrepancies in interactivity scores show that not all of them have effectively adopted two-way communication ideas. However, the relatively high engagement scores recorded by ACCESS and UBA suggest a growing recognition of the importance of stakeholder participation in contemporary public relations practice. This development reflects the increasing shift from one-way communication models toward more dialogic and relationship-centred approaches advocated by modern public relations scholars.

Lastly, objective three of the study compared the effectiveness of these banks' websites in promoting the organisations' corporate image. The findings showed that all four banks achieved high effectiveness ratings. FBN recorded the highest score (39/40), followed by ACCESS (38/40), GTCO (36/40) and UBA (35/40). These results indicate that the websites are highly effective in terms of navigation, visual appeal, content clarity, information update frequency, loading speed, accessibility, credibility and overall

user experience. This finding agrees with Enrique et al. (2018), who argue that websites have become essential public relations tools because they combine informative, relational and transactional functions within a single platform. The high effectiveness scores obtained by all four banks suggest that their websites successfully perform these functions and serve as important channels for communication with stakeholders. The result also agrees with Fray (2016), who observed that corporate websites contribute significantly to information dissemination, relationship management and image building. The effectiveness of the websites demonstrates their ability to support key public relations objectives, including reputation management, stakeholder communication and organisational transparency.

Interestingly, FBN emerged as the most effective website despite recording only a moderate stakeholder engagement score. This finding suggests that website effectiveness extends beyond interactivity alone and includes factors such as information quality, usability, accessibility, credibility and user experience. This observation supports the criticism of Dialogic Communication Theory identified by Taylor and Kent (2014), who argued that the existence of interactive features alone does not guarantee effective public relations outcomes or stakeholder participation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the websites of FBN, UBA, GTCO and ACCESS are effective public relations tools. They provide comprehensive information, facilitate stakeholder communication and promote organisational transparency. However, the variations observed in interactivity features indicate that there is still room for improvement in achieving the full dialogic potential envisioned by Kent and Taylor (1998). Strengthening stakeholder participation mechanisms would further enhance the public relations value of these websites and promote stronger relationships between the banks and their publics.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Organisational websites have become an indispensable public relations tool in the Nigerian banking sector. While all four banks effectively utilise their websites for information dissemination and corporate communication, greater emphasis on interactive and dialogic features would further strengthen stakeholder engagement and relationship building.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the banks should continue to maintain comprehensive and up-to-date public relations content on their websites to sustain transparency, credibility and stakeholder confidence, while FBN and GTCO should strengthen stakeholder engagement by incorporating additional interactive features such as live chatbot features, newsletter subscriptions, opportunities for stakeholder comments and feedback where appropriate. Moreover, future researchers should expand the scope of this study by examining other sectors of the Nigerian economy and incorporating stakeholder perceptions through surveys and interviews to complement website content analysis.

Ethical clearance

The researchers observed strict research ethics while carrying out the study. This is because content analysis requires a scientific outcome that can be relied upon in decision-making. Thus both primary and secondary data presented above are verifiable facts.

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The study was not funded by any commercial interest.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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