

**STRATEGIC SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND VOTER ELECTORAL
ENGAGEMENT FROM PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This study examined how public relations practitioners in Nigeria's South East geopolitical zone use social media for voter and electoral engagement. It also investigated the electoral public relations strategies employed by these practitioners. A descriptive research design was adopted, and data were collected from a sample of 188 public relations practitioners in the South East of Nigeria. The findings revealed that WhatsApp and Facebook are the two most widely used social media platforms for electoral public relations. The electoral public relations strategies adopted by practitioners include civic education and audience-segmented messaging. The findings further indicated that voter awareness generation was perceived to be highly effective, while efforts to counter misinformation were perceived to be moderately effective. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) develop professional conduct guidelines for public relations practitioners during elections. It also recommends that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) partner with fact-checking organizations to combat misinformation during electoral processes. Finally, the study advocates that public relations practitioners in the South East prioritize ethical communication practices, particularly two-way symmetrical communication, rather than relying on influencer-payment models that may undermine public trust.

Keywords: *social media, strategic public relations, voter engagement, electoral integrity, South East Nigeria, NIPR, disinformation*

Introduction

For those who may not know, after his victory at the 2015 presidential election, in which the incumbent president (Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party, PDP) lost, the winner, Muhammadu Buhari (candidate of the main opposition All Progressive Congress, APC), credited his victory, in part, to the use of social media for political communication. The irony is that while social media helped the Buhari team win the election, there was no evidence of engagement by a man who garnered 683,000 followers but who, in return, only followed 22 back. Nigeria's electorate has moved online, and its political class has followed close behind. By the start of 2025, some 107 million Nigerians were using the internet, a penetration rate of 45.4 percent, with 38.7 million social media identities recorded in the same period (Kemp, 2025). Whether that shift has strengthened the democratic process or weakened it is not a settled question. Much depends on how the communication around elections is practised, and by whom. What follows draws on Nigeria's 2023 general election as a working case. It then sets out where strategic communication can do good, where it tends to do harm, and what NIPR practitioners or professionals specifically owe the profession and the public.

Traditional public and political communication once ran through gatekeepers. Newspaper editors, broadcast stations, party structures controlled the message before it ever reached a voter. That arrangement has broken down. Social media platforms now let politicians and ordinary citizens publish to each other and respond directly, without an editor standing between them, and the resulting environment is shaped less by institutions than by whoever can produce content that spreads (Altay, Berriche, & Acerbi, 2023).

The relationship between digital communication and democratic participation is one of the major issues of interest to political scientists, the public and communication scholars today. In many African countries including Nigeria, the social media has done away with gatekeeping of information that used to occur before as messages can now be sent to voters through various channels as and when desired (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020; Gilardi et al., 2021). At the start of 2025, Nigeria had 107 million internet users and an internet penetration rate of 45.4% with 38.7 million social media users across all active accounts (Kemp, 2025). The 2023 general elections in Nigeria were possibly the most digitally contested in the history of the country.

Statement of the Problem

The South East geo-political zone in Nigeria was a major zone to watch during the 2023 presidential election. As reported by Aniugbo and others (2025) and Aideloje and others (2024), the region generally went for the Labour Party's candidate in the presidential election as was seen in the OBIDIENT movement led by young Nigerians to campaign for Peter Obi on social media. For young Nigerians, information especially political information is consumed on WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter) and Instagram rather than from print or electronic media such as newspapers, television or radio. The South East therefore is a region that can be influenced by communication through digital platforms.

The strategic communication practices of public relations practitioners in South East Nigeria are a 'black hole' of limited research. With political communication and information society developments taking center stage in the world today, stakeholder engagement is a key practice of public relations but with a problem. Hence, this study empirically examines the practices of public relations practitioners in the South East. Critical examination of how they practice public relations are key themes for study. Strategic communication practices of public relations practitioners are spread across the country. However, the study of their practices in the South East is critical especially when the practices are being compared with paid disinformation ecosystem as stated by the BBC during the 2023 elections in which influential disseminators of information were paid as much as twenty million naira to spread falsehood about opposing candidates (Kemp, 2025). Thus, it is not clear on how public Relations Practitioners strategically deploy the use of Social Media in Public relations, voter and electoral engagement in South-East Nigeria

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by three objectives and they are as follows;

- I. To examine how South East PR practitioners use social media platforms for strategic public relations in voter and electoral engagement.
- II. To assess the perceived effectiveness of social media-driven PR strategies in enhancing voter engagement and electoral integrity among South East PR practitioners.
- III. To determine the outcome and implications of PR practitioners use social media platforms for strategic public relations in voter and electoral engagement in South-East Nigeria.

Literature Review

Social Media and the Transformation of Political Communication

Decentralization in the architecture of political communication has become the hallmark of the era of social media. Online environments have led to a drastic change in the ways messages are produced, distributed and received. As Zhuravskaya et al. (2020) demonstrated, the internet has a systematic effect on how people consume information online. However, this effect is determined by the institutional environment within which this information is consumed. Therefore, online and offline agendas of politicians are interdependent with that of the media, as Gilardi et al. (2021) found out. The work of the public relations agents who communicate on behalf of their clients in election campaigns is picked up by the media, and vice versa. However, as has already been mentioned, there are also a number of structural limitations to democracy on social media, given that these platforms are designed to maximize engagement rather than accuracy. In the course of time, such messages of emotionally resonant disinformation spread much faster than messages of accurate information. Recently, Chan and Yi (2024) found that the relationship between social media use and political engagement is mediated by the degree of affective polarization in a given context. The author of this text would like to refer to this finding in the context of Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious electoral environment.

Chibuwe (2020) examined how in Africa and Nigeria in particular social media actors used social media to further existing political cleavages during the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe. Similar trends of usage of social media by partisan actors can be observed for Nigeria's 2023 elections, as reported by Hassan (2023). Based on sixty in-depth interviews with citizens across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria, as well as on eighteen focus group discussions, Hassan (2023) presented evidence of how social media contained not only ethnic and religious polarization 'content' but also 'content' that furthered and incited such polarization. This is in line with Abboud et al. (2024) findings of grassroots civic engagement as well as inauthentic behavior by political actors on social media during the 2022 elections in Kenya. In contrast, in Southeast Asia, Tapsell (2020) identified and analyzed subversive underground campaign operations conducted through social media, which might serve as a comparator to Nigeria's social media sphere.

Strategic Public Relations in Electoral Contexts

This study is anchored on the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations as posited by Grunig and Hunt (1984) views ethical public relations practice as a two-way process

of mutual adjustment between an organization and its publics. Thus, voters are not objects that candidates at election can use to achieve their objectives through their communications. Rather, voters are active participants in a dialogue between themselves and candidates at election which would determine the nature of communication between them and the policy orientation of candidates at election.

In an attempt to explore the applicability of the Technology Acceptance Model, Igben and Ugboime (2023) investigated the applicability of the Technology Acceptance Model to social media adoption among Nigerian public relations practitioners. The findings of their study revealed strong willingness to use social media on the part of practitioners, and identified several ethical issues which practitioners were unsure how to handle in their actual use of the technology. However, Klyueva and Ngondo (2023) in their study of public relations practitioners' perceptions of ethically ambiguous practices on social media found mixed results between practitioners' perceptions of clients' need for reach and of practitioners' adherence to ethical public relations practices by being transparent and disclosing information.

Gayeta (2021) noted how information officers in the Philippines practice one-way information dissemination due to the nature of their public relations roles within their institutions. Such one-way information practices can even stifle two-way communication and negatively affect democratic communication. However, Makama et al. (2025) posited that social media literacy can be a professional competency and strategic tool for practitioners to engage on social media to build public trust and confidence.

Social Media for Voter Engagement and Mobilisation

This study examined how public relations practitioners in Nigeria's South East geopolitical zone use social media for voter and electoral engagement. It also investigated the electoral public relations strategies employed by these practitioners. A descriptive research design was adopted, and data were collected from a sample of 188 public relations practitioners in the South East of Nigeria. The findings revealed that WhatsApp and Facebook are the two most widely used social media platforms for electoral public relations. The electoral public relations strategies adopted by practitioners include civic education and audience-segmented messaging. The findings further indicated that voter awareness generation was perceived to be highly effective, while efforts to counter misinformation were perceived to be moderately effective. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) develop professional conduct guidelines for public relations practitioners during elections. It also recommends that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) partner with fact-checking organizations to combat misinformation during electoral processes. Finally, the study advocates that public relations practitioners in the South East prioritize ethical communication practices, particularly two-way symmetrical communication, rather than relying on influencer-payment models that may undermine public trust.

An exception is the study by Abid and Harrigan (2020) into the ways in which voters use social media for voter relations and the ways in which content is consumed by voters to satisfy their various needs for gratification. The researchers used the uses and gratifications theory to underpin their study into the ways in which social media is used by voters. They found that the ways in which voters use social media for voter relations are guided by a number of gratifications that voters expect to receive from the content that they consume on social media for, including information about candidates and elections, interaction with other voters and with candidates, as well as identity expression and affiliation. This suggests that messages posted by voters on social media for voter engagement will be more effective the more that they are designed to satisfy the various needs for gratification that voters have when they use the medium for voter relations. In a separate study, Lee (2020) found a positive relationship between voters' uses of social media for voter relations and their electoral participation. She found that voters who used social media more for their voter relations were more confident and more willing to take part in the electoral processes when they believed that the messages that they read online about the candidates were credible and interactive rather than promotional. In their study of the relationship between social media use and voter participation, especially among the youth in South Eastern, Nigeria, during the 2015 and the 2019's general elections, Abdulyakeen and Yusuf (2022) found a significant correlation between voters' exposure to social media and their interest in politics, but an uneven relationship between the two variables of interest and the actual act of voting by the interested voters.

Mwonzora (2020) looked into the ways in which social media was being harnessed as a powerful tool for mobilization particularly during the biometric voter registration exercise in Zimbabwe. The writer opined that social media played a powerful role especially in towns and areas where civic education could not reach as easily as it does through social media. The writer Widjaya and Wono (2025) examined the influence of social media on the participation of first time voters in the digital democracy of Indonesia. The writers were of the view that the participation of first time voters was influenced by the exposure of the voters to social media which they used as information sources and for validation from their peers. Jacob and Kabobe (2025) investigated the influence of social media on voter participation in the digital democracy in Tanzania. The writers were of the view that widely used social media positively influenced voter participation in Busega District. Aideloje et al. (2024) analyzed the

role of social media in civic campaigns for voter mobilization during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The writers were of the view that civic campaigns on social media platforms were able to reach the young urban voters who were hard to reach through traditional voter mobilization.

Disinformation, Electoral Integrity, and PR Ethics

The same infrastructure that enables civic engagement also enables electoral manipulation, and the literature is unambiguous that both tendencies were present in Nigeria's 2023 elections at significant scale. Igwebuike and Chimunya (2020) established a discursive framework for understanding how falsehood is legitimated through social media, identifying the linguistic and framing mechanisms by which fabricated content is made to appear credible to audiences already predisposed by prior beliefs. Hassan (2023) applied this framework empirically to Nigeria, documenting how old footage and doctored images from previous elections were recirculated as current events to inflame inter-ethnic tensions and suppress voter confidence in specific regions. Aniugbo et al. (2025) focused specifically on South East residents' perceptions of social media messages related to electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election, finding that exposure to such content increased anxiety and reduced willingness to participate in polling day activities, a direct effect on electoral integrity. Olaniran and Diepeveen (2023) offered a corrective to deterministic readings of disinformation's power, noting that Muhammadu Buhari won the 2015 election despite a sustained disinformation campaign against him, a finding that cautions against overstating the mechanical conversion of false content into electoral outcomes while not diminishing the ethical obligation to counter it.

Jakesch et al. (2021) documented how a cross-platform organisation manipulated Twitter trends during the Indian general election, providing a methodological model for understanding coordinated inauthentic behaviour that is directly applicable to the Nigerian influencer-payment ecosystem. Altay et al. (2023) distinguished conceptually between misinformation and disinformation, with the latter defined by deliberate fabrication and funded coordination, the form most prominently documented in Nigeria's 2023 elections. Coombs (2007) contributed the situational crisis communication framework, which holds that rapid, transparent responses to false claims protect institutional credibility more effectively than silence, a principle with direct implications for how PR practitioners should respond when their clients or their profession are implicated in disinformation episodes.

Social Media PR Practice in Nigerian and Comparative African Contexts

Bassey et al. (2024) assessed the digital campaign strategies adopted by presidential candidates in Nigeria's 2023 elections, finding significant variation in the sophistication of social media deployment across campaigns, with the Labour Party's online strategy notable for its organic, community-driven character relative to the more heavily funded but less trusted approaches of established parties. Yussif et al. (2024) documented social media and political communication patterns in Ghana's Tema Metropolis, finding that WhatsApp dominated as both an information channel and a disinformation vector, a pattern consistent with Nigerian data. Matsilele and Nkoala (2023) examined social media usage by South African female politicians, introducing the concept of metavoicing as a trust-building mechanism that distinguishes authentic relational communication from performative political messaging, a distinction directly relevant to the two-way symmetrical model applied here. Olaimat et al. (2022) provided empirical evidence from Jordan that social media reputation management for PR purposes produces significant public trust effects when conducted transparently, contributing a comparative external validity frame for the South East Nigerian findings reported below.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) provides the normative baseline against which South East practitioners' actual social media strategies are evaluated. The model's core proposition is that ethical PR communication is characterised by dialogue, mutual adjustment, and transparency rather than unilateral persuasion or concealed advocacy. Applied to electoral communication, it implies that practitioners committed to democratic integrity will design campaigns that inform voters, correct false claims openly, and disclose paid relationships, rather than engineering emotional responses through targeted manipulation.

Uses and gratifications theory (Abid & Harrigan, 2020; Lee, 2020) provides the audience-side complement to this framework. It holds that media users are active agents who engage with content in pursuit of specific gratifications, including information, entertainment, social interaction, and identity expression. For PR practitioners, this means that effective voter engagement strategies must be designed around what voters actually seek from political social media content, not merely around what candidates or parties wish to communicate. Together, these frameworks generate a dual evaluative lens: normative at the level of professional ethics, and empirical at the level of audience behaviour.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design, appropriate for generating representative accounts of current practices and perceptions within a defined professional population (Portabes&Apas, 2025; Kashaka, 2025). The target population comprised NIPR-registered public relations practitioners operating across the five states of Nigeria's South East geopolitical zone: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to reach practitioners who had professional involvement in electoral communication activities during the 2023 general elections, yielding a usable sample of 120 respondents.

A structured questionnaire was the primary data collection instrument. The instrument was organised in three sections: respondent demographic and professional profile (Section A); platforms and strategies used for electoral PR communication aligned to Objective 1 (Section B); and perceived effectiveness and integrity challenges aligned to Objective 2 (Section C). Section B and Section C items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Data were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores. Results are presented in tabular and graphical form consistent with APA 7th edition formatting standards. Ethical considerations included informed consent, participant anonymity, and institutional data protection protocols.

Results and Discussion

Respondent Profile

A total of 120 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 100% owing to direct administration and digital follow-up. Table 1 summarises the demographic and professional profile of respondents.

Table 1

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
State	Abia	24	20.0
	Anambra	31	25.8
	Ebonyi	18	15.0
	Enugu	27	22.5
	Imo	20	16.7
Gender	Male	72	60.0
	Female	48	40.0
Years in Practice	Less than 5 years	29	24.2
	5 to 10 years	46	38.3
	More than 10 years	45	37.5
Election Involvement	Directly involved in 2023 campaign	81	67.5
	Indirectly involved	39	32.5

Note. n = 120. Data collected from NIPR-registered practitioners across South East Nigeria states.

Anambra State returned the highest proportion of respondents (25.8%), consistent with that state's concentration of established PR and media institutions. The majority of respondents were male (60%), though the 40% female representation reflects a growing professional diversification in the South East chapter. A combined 75.8% of respondents reported five or more years of professional practice, indicating a sample with substantial field experience. Notably, 67.5% indicated direct involvement in electoral communication activities during the 2023 general elections, lending specific empirical relevance to the findings reported in subsequent sections.

Social Media Platforms Used for Strategic PR in Electoral Engagement (Objective 1)

Respondents were asked to indicate which social media platforms they used in the conduct of strategic PR activities during the 2023 electoral cycle. Multiple selections were permitted, and percentages reflect the proportion of the total sample that endorsed each platform.

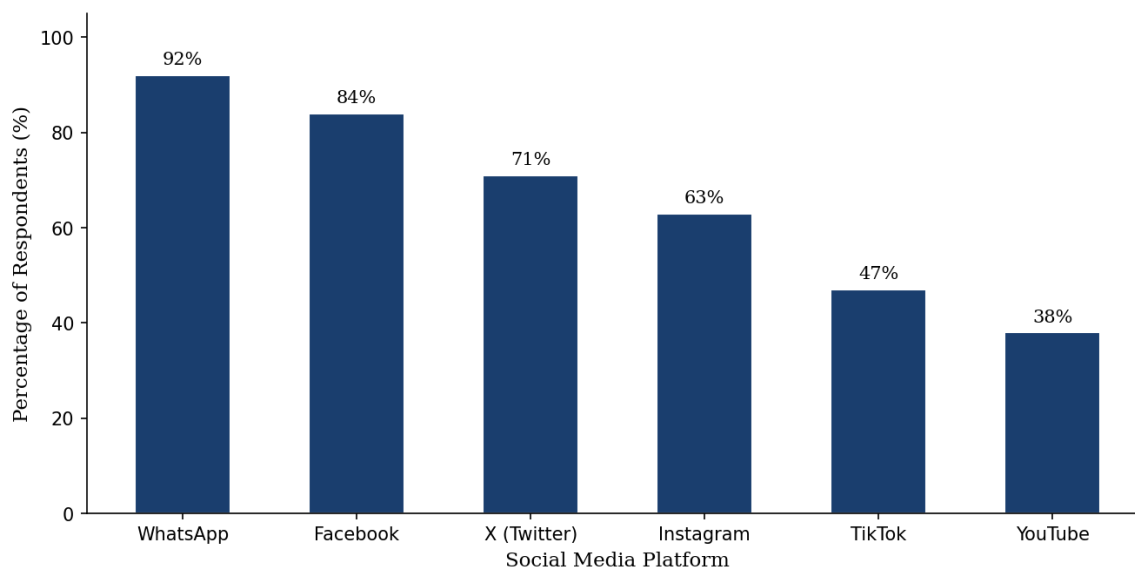
Table 2

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Primary PR Use
WhatsApp	110	91.7	Group messaging, voter education, rapid response
Facebook	101	84.2	Audience-segmented campaign content, civic posts
X (Twitter)	85	70.8	Real-time electoral commentary, agenda setting

Instagram	76	63.3	Visual content, demographic-targeted messaging
TikTok	56	46.7	Youth mobilisation, short-form civic content
YouTube	46	38.3	Long-form candidate communication, debate sharing

Note. Multiple responses allowed. n = 120.

Figure 1. Social Media Platforms Used by South East PR Practitioners for Electoral Communication



Note. Percentage of South East PR practitioners (n = 120) reporting use of each platform for electoral communication during the 2023 general elections.

For information dissemination at community level across Sub-Saharan Africa the most used platform are, WhatsApp followed by Facebook and then X (Twitter). This is reflected in the results above where WhatsApp secured the highest percentage of votes with 91.7% dominance in information dissemination to the community, see Figure 1 above. Yussif et al. (2024) conducted a study in Ghana recently and found similar trends of information dissemination to the community using WhatsApp. A study on South East OBIDENT mobilization using WhatsApp for position paper also found similar results. Additionally, Facebook scored 84.2% followed by X (Twitter) scoring 70.8%. As noted earlier by Gilardi et al. (2021) Twitter or X is primarily used for real time commentary on issues at hand and for setting agenda. On the other hand, TikTok and YouTube scored 46.7% and 38.3% respectively for information dissemination at community level. This can be attributed to lack of practitioners' familiarity with video production for these two platforms and resources required to produce video content for these two platforms unlike other platforms.

These platform choices are not politically neutral selections. Boulianne and Larsson (2021) demonstrated that different platforms generate qualitatively different forms of political engagement, with Facebook producing broader audience reach and Twitter producing more concentrated elite and journalistic uptake. Kruschinski et al. (2022) showed that the organic and paid media affordances of Facebook require distinct messaging strategies, a distinction most South East PR practitioners are beginning to navigate but have not yet institutionalised. Amalia et al. (2025) found that campaign strategy effectiveness is substantially conditioned by the social network dynamics of the platform being used, implying that practitioners who understand platform-specific audience behaviours will produce more effective electoral communication than those who replicate offline messaging styles across all channels.

PR Strategies Deployed on Social Media for Voter Engagement (Objective 1, continued)

Respondents identified the specific strategic approaches they employed across social media platforms for voter and electoral engagement. Table 3 presents the distribution of endorsed strategies.

Table 3

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Target Outcome
Civic education content	104	86.7	Voter awareness and participation
Audience-segmented messaging	91	75.8	Demographic-targeted engagement
Real-time fact correction	78	65.0	Electoral integrity, trust-building
Crisis communication response	67	55.8	Reputation management under disinformation
Influencer collaboration	59	49.2	Reach amplification
Multilingual content (local languages)	54	45.0	Linguistic inclusivity and reach
Paid content / sponsored posts	41	34.2	Audience expansion
Transparency / disclosure practice	38	31.7	Ethical credibility

Note. Multiple responses allowed. n = 120.

Civic education content emerged as the most widely deployed strategy (86.7%), consistent with the normative expectations of the two-way symmetrical model and with the documented success of FactCheck Elections' fifty-volunteer network in reaching the South East youth demographic through credible, educational social media content during the 2023 cycle (Kemp, 2025). Audience-segmented messaging, endorsed by 75.8% of respondents, reflects the growing awareness among South East practitioners that Nigeria's linguistic and cultural diversity demands tailored rather than uniform electoral communication, a principle the position paper articulated in its discussion of Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Pidgin content differentiation.

Real-time fact correction was endorsed by 65.0% of respondents, suggesting meaningful professional engagement with the disinformation challenge that Altay et al. (2023) and Igwebuike and Chimuanya (2020) have theorised and that Egwu (2023) documented empirically through the coordinated fact-checking partnerships among Dubawa, Africa Check, and FactsMatterNG during the 2023 elections. Crisis communication response was endorsed by 55.8%, indicating that a majority of practitioners have some familiarity with Coombs' (2007) prescription that rapid response to false claims protects institutional credibility more effectively than silence, even if formal SCCT training is not yet widespread in NIPR South East programming. Heavey et al. (2020) provided the strategic management rationale for this, demonstrating that leaders who engage substantively with social media during crises retain stakeholder trust at significantly higher rates than those who adopt reactive or defensive postures.

Influencer collaboration was endorsed by 49.2% of practitioners, a finding that requires careful contextualisation. Hudders et al. (2020) showed that the commercialisation of social media influencers creates systematic risks to communication transparency when paid relationships are not disclosed. The BBC documentation of influencer payments of up to twenty million naira to spread disinformation about rival candidates during Nigeria's 2023 elections (Kemp, 2025) represents the pathological endpoint of undisclosed influencer-for-hire arrangements. The relatively low endorsement of transparency and disclosure practice (31.7%) in Table 3 therefore represents the single most significant ethical gap identified in this study. Kumar and Sharma (2024) established that social media marketing activities for political purposes, when accompanied by transparent brand relationship signalling, produce stronger voter citizenship behaviour outcomes than opaque influence operations, providing empirical justification for what is already an ethical obligation under the NIPR Code of Professional Conduct.

Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media PR on Voter and Electoral Engagement (Objective 2)

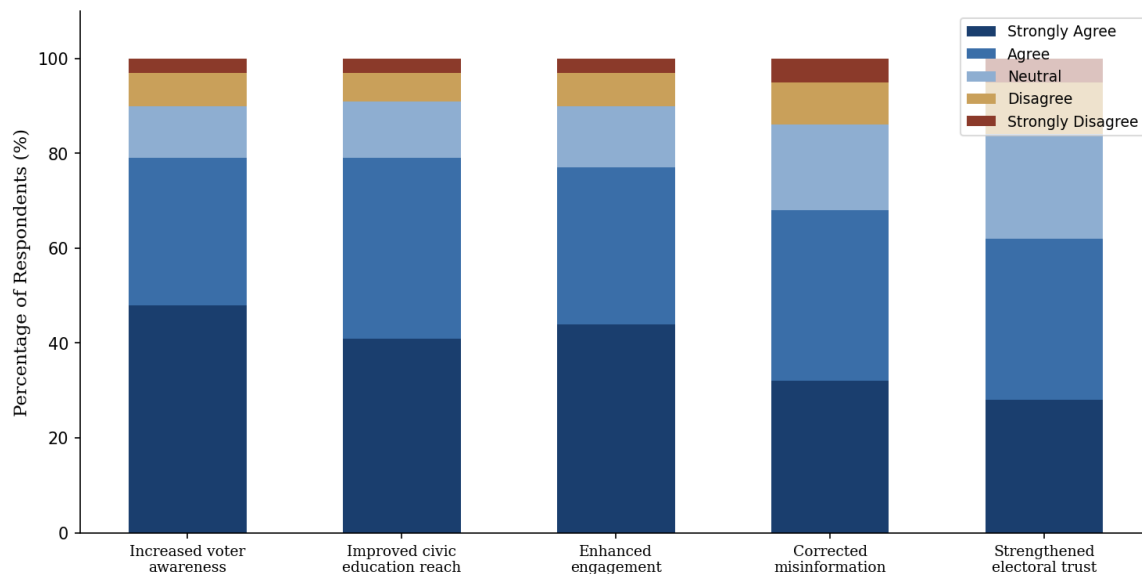
Respondents rated five items assessing the perceived effectiveness of social media PR strategies on voter and electoral engagement outcomes, using a five-point Likert scale. Table 4 presents mean scores and response distributions, with Figure 2 providing a visual representation of the stacked response proportions.

Table 4

Effectiveness Item	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean
Increased voter awareness	48	31	11	7	3	4.14
Improved civic education reach	41	38	12	6	3	4.08
Enhanced citizen engagement	44	33	13	7	3	4.08
Corrected electoral misinformation	32	36	18	9	5	3.81
Strengthened electoral trust	28	34	22	11	5	3.69

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree. Mean scores based on five-point scale. $n = 120$.

Figure 2. Respondent Ratings on Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media PR Strategies for Voter and Electoral Engagement



Note. Stacked bar chart showing the distribution of Likert responses across five perceived effectiveness items. $n = 120$.

The highest perceived effectiveness was recorded for increased voter awareness ($M = 4.14$), with 79% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that their social media PR activities contributed meaningfully to broadening voters' awareness of candidates, processes, and electoral dates. This finding is consistent with Kashaka (2025), who demonstrated significant positive effects of social media on political engagement, and with Chang and Lee (2025), who found that social media usage positively mediates the relationship between public service delivery and political participation in Asian democracies, a relationship that holds cross-contextually when credible civic content is the primary medium.

Perceived effectiveness scores decline progressively as the outcomes assessed move from awareness to institutional trust. Correcting electoral misinformation returned a mean of 3.81, with 18% of respondents neutral, reflecting genuine uncertainty about whether individual PR interventions can match the speed and scale of disinformation networks. Calvo et al. (2023) found that social media engagement is heavily shaped by election return dynamics,

with the losing side's supporters engaging more intensely with contentious content after unfavourable results, suggesting that fact-correction efforts face their greatest resistance precisely when they are most needed. Enns-Jedenastik et al. (2021) noted that platform algorithms respond to engagement signals that disinformation content tends to generate at higher rates than factual corrections, creating a structural headwind against which South East PR practitioners are working.

Strengthening electoral trust returned the lowest mean ($M = 3.69$), with 37% of respondents either neutral or disagreeing. This result is theoretically important. Matsilele and Nkoala (2023) argued that trust-building through social media requires sustained metavoicing over time, a form of relational communication that is difficult to compress into a campaign cycle, and that partisan messaging, however competently executed, tends to deepen existing alignments rather than building the cross-partisan credibility that genuine electoral trust requires. Olaimat et al. (2022) found that reputation management through social media platforms for PR purposes produces significant trust effects only when practised with consistent transparency, and the finding in Table 3 that only 31.7% of South East practitioners systematically practise disclosure suggests that the conditions for sustained trust-building are not yet in place for a majority of the sample.

Challenges: Disinformation, Ethics, Electoral Integrity, Outcomes and the implications (objective 3)

Respondents were also asked to rate the severity of specific challenges encountered in the deployment of social media PR strategies for electoral engagement. Table 5 presents the distribution of perceived threat levels.

Table 5

Challenge	High (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)	Not Encountered (%)
Spread of disinformation by rival actors	74	18	5	3
Client pressure to produce misleading content	48	31	14	7
Difficulty distinguishing organic from paid engagement	52	29	11	8
Platform algorithmic suppression of factual content	44	33	16	7
Inadequate NIPR guidance for election-period conduct	61	24	9	6
Ethnic/religious tensions amplified through social media	67	22	7	4

Note. Percentages reflect proportion of respondents rating each challenge at the indicated severity level. $n = 120$. The spread of disinformation by rival actors was rated as a high challenge by 74% of respondents, the strongest single finding in the study and one that directly corroborates the position paper's account of the 2023 electoral disinformation ecosystem. Aniugbo et al. (2025) documented the South East as a region particularly targeted by electoral violence messaging during the 2023 cycle, and the present finding confirms that PR practitioners operating in the zone experienced this as the dominant challenge to their professional work. Igwebuike and Chimunya (2020) traced the discursive mechanics of how disinformation legitimates itself through social media contexts, and Jakesch et al. (2021) showed how platform-level trend manipulation can amplify false content to the point where correction efforts are overwhelmed. The Institute for Security and Technology (2024) documented the specific role of AI-generated content in the 2023 Nigerian elections through journalist Hannah Ajakaiye's work with FactsMatterNG, adding a technological dimension to disinformation production that goes beyond simple fabrication.

Inadequate NIPR guidance for election-period conduct was rated as a high challenge by 61% of respondents, the second most severe finding and one with direct policy implications. While NIPR's existing Code of Professional Conduct establishes that members must conduct their professional activities with proper regard to the public interest (Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, n.d.), the code does not provide election-specific guidance on contested scenarios such as undisclosed paid political content, the ethics of linguistic micro-targeting, or the

appropriate response when a client requests disinformation-adjacent messaging. The position paper recommended a sector-specific guidance note built on the existing code rather than replacing it, and the present data provide empirical justification for the urgency of that recommendation. Klyueva and Ngondo (2023) found that PR practitioners across jurisdictions consistently report that explicit professional guidance helps them navigate client pressure for ethically ambiguous practices, particularly in high-stakes contexts like electoral campaigns.

Client pressure to produce misleading content was rated as high by 48% of respondents, a finding that sits in direct tension with the 31.7% transparency disclosure rate in Table 3 and with the ethical baseline established by the NIPR Code. Reisach (2020) argued that social media platforms' engagement-optimised architecture creates systematic incentives for content producers, including professional PR practitioners, to prioritise emotional resonance over accuracy, because emotionally resonant content performs better algorithmically regardless of its truthfulness. Ate et al. (2025) demonstrated that filter bubbles and echo chambers in social media environments exacerbate these pressures by creating audiences that reward content confirming their prior beliefs, making factual correction not merely difficult but sometimes counter-productive within enclosed information environments. The implication for South East PR practitioners is that ethical electoral communication requires deliberate resistance to platform incentive structures, a form of professional discipline that formal NIPR guidance could help to institutionalise.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how public relations practitioners in Nigeria's South East geopolitical zone use social media for strategic public relations in voter and electoral engagement and assessed the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in enhancing civic participation and electoral integrity. The findings present a nuanced picture of the role of social media in electoral public relations. WhatsApp and Facebook emerged as the dominant platforms for electoral public relations in the South East, while civic education and audience-segmented messaging were identified as the most widely employed strategic approaches. Practitioners perceived these strategies to be highly effective in increasing voter awareness and expanding the reach of civic education. However, they considered them less effective in combating disinformation and strengthening public trust in the electoral process—outcomes that are fundamental to the long-term health of democracy.

The most significant finding is the disparity between the prevalence of disinformation as a professional challenge and the adoption of transparency and disclosure practices as a corrective strategy. While 74% of respondents identified disinformation as a major challenge, only 31.7% reported adopting transparency and disclosure practices, which are widely regarded as essential for mitigating misinformation and promoting public trust. This disparity reflects not only deficiencies in individual professional ethics but also broader shortcomings in professional capacity development. It further underscores the inadequacy of the current election-period guidelines of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), as evidenced by the 61% of respondents who rated the absence or inadequacy of such guidance as a high-severity challenge.

The study offers three principal recommendations grounded in its findings.

- I. Individual South East PR practitioners should systematically adopt transparency and disclosure practices as a non-negotiable professional baseline, declining to draft content known to be false and consistently disclosing paid political relationships in compliance with the two-way symmetrical model's ethical prescriptions (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and the NIPR Code (Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, n.d.).
- II. NIPR should develop a formal election-period professional conduct guidance note, building on the existing Code rather than replacing it, that addresses the specific scenarios of paid influencer arrangements, undisclosed political sponsorship, multilingual micro-targeting ethics, and disinformation response protocols.
- III. INEC should formalise its partnership with fact-checking organisations such as Dubawa, Africa Check, and FactsMatterNG into a standing rapid-response arrangement, agreed before each campaign season begins, to institutionalise the coordination that proved effective but improvised in 2023 (Egwu, 2023).

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