

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MEDIA-BASED CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examines the role of public relations in media-based conflict management in Taraba State, Nigeria. The core thrust of this research centers on how strategic communication underpins conflict mitigation and crisis management in view of peacebuilding. Taraba State, with its recurrent communal, farmer-herder, and ethno-religious conflicts, presents a complex environment in which misinformation, rumor propagation, and biased media reporting can heighten tensions. A qualitative research approach based on documented evidence and secondary data was applied to analyze government reports, media publications, policy documents, and civil society records to explore the design and implementation of public relations strategies in conflict-prone contexts. Thematic content analysis reveals that effective public relations facilitate timely and accurate information dissemination, guides media narratives, encourages community engagement, and promotes peace-oriented messaging across both traditional and digital media platforms. Results demonstrate the critical role of PR in de-escalating conflicts, counteracting misinformation, and fostering trust among stakeholders. Based on these findings, the study advocates for government institutions, media practitioners, and civil society organizations in Taraba State to consider structured public relations frameworks, digital and traditional media engagement, transparent and inclusive communication, and community engagement in improving conflict management for sustainable peacebuilding.

Keywords: *Public relations, conflict, media-conflict management, sustainable peacebuilding, Taraba State.*

Introduction

Conflict continues to feature prominently in many multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, including Nigeria, where conflicts over political power, land, identity, and resources trigger conflicts all too often (Yusuf 2025a; Egharevba & Iruonagbe, 2015). Taraba State in Nigeria's North-East geopolitical zone is one of the areas saddled with this problem, being a State that is ethnically diverse and experiencing communal and ethno-religious conflicts quite frequently. In addition to the loss of lives, these hostilities have led to the displacement of communities, engendered social cohesion breakdown, and rolled back socio-economic development (Agbu, Akombo, & Agbu, 2021). Communication becomes one of the most potent tools in such volatile atmospheres, not only in terms of information management but also in perception tuning, dialogue facilitation, and peace promotion. An indispensable part of this communication process is the media and the related practice of public relations (Gjerazi, 2023; O'Hair & Woods, 2024; Hoffmann, 2014).

The media play a critical role in settings of conflict to inform the public, build narratives, and shape public opinion. However, media coverage of conflicts can either escalate violence

through sensationalism, misinformation, and biased reporting, or contribute to de-escalation by promoting responsible journalism, dialogue, and peace-oriented narratives (Abubakar, Ibrahim, & Ibrahim, 2025; Hussain, 2020). This duality in media capacity underlines the strategic need for communication management, which is where public relations become indispensable. Public relations provide the framework for managing relationships between institutions, communities, the media, and other stakeholders in cases of crises and conflicts (Grunig, 2011; Qiu & Cameron, 2007; van der Meer et al., 2017).

Public relations is concerned essentially with establishing mutual understanding, reputation management, fostering dialogue, and making sure that there is a free flow of accurate and timely information between organizations and their publics. Public relations would thus function as a strategic bridge between authorities, the media, and affected communities in conflict situations. Public relations offers ways of mitigating tensions, correcting misinformation, and fostering positive narratives that help in peaceful coexistence through crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, mediated dialogue, and conflict-sensitive messaging. This becomes even more essential in Taraba State, where conflicts usually involve multiple actors such as traditional institutions, religious groups, government agencies, and local communities.

However, while the influences of media in conflict situations have been observable in Taraba State, there has been little empirical attention to how public relations strategies shape media-based conflict management in the state. Most recent studies on media reportage of conflicts in the state tend to remain broad, not adequately interrogating structured communication efforts that guide such reportage and mediate stakeholder relationships (Gilboa, 2009; Gjerazi, 2023; Sacco & Bossio, 2015; Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2014). This is significant, given that poor communication management can amplify suspicion and rumors, perpetuate violence, while effective public relations interventions foster trust, transparency, and cooperation among parties in conflict.

The peace communication in Taraba State has been further complicated by the rise of digital and social media platforms: whereas the latter facilitates fast dissemination of information about peace advocacy, they also allow for an easy flow of hate speech, propaganda, and unverified information (Targema, 2020; Igbashangev & Ogunyemi, 2021). Thus, the challenge is growing for public relations practitioners to manage traditional and digital media narratives in highly sensitive conflict environments. There is a dire need to understand how public relations works within this complex media ecosystem, with a view towards strengthening conflict management frameworks in the state.

This study, therefore, examines the role of public relations in media-based conflict management in Taraba State, Nigeria. It seeks to explore how public relations strategies are deployed in managing media communication during conflicts, the extent to which such strategies contribute to peacebuilding, and the challenges faced by practitioners in the process. By situating public relations within the broader discourse of media and conflict management, the study contributes to both academic knowledge and practical policy formulation aimed at promoting sustainable peace in conflict-prone societies such as Taraba State. Therefore, the paper reviews related literature on public relations in media-based conflict management. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is adopted for this study as its analytical framework. This is followed by the study's context and methodology, and subsequently, the analytical sections consist of public relations strategies for crisis communication and media coordination during conflicts in

Taraba State and public relations, digital media, and peacebuilding communication in Taraba State. The last section shall be the conclusion.

Review of literature on public relations in media-based conflict management

Public relations is a strategic communication function framed in terms of deliberate relationship management between organizations and their publics, especially in the context of uncertainty, crisis, and acute public sensitivity (Grunig 2011; Fall 2004). Other than routine information dissemination, public relations involve facilitating dialogue, building trust, managing reputation, and fostering mutual understanding. Communications in conflict arenas are emotionally and politically charged; thus, the strategic relevance of public relations increases (Dhanesh & Rahman, 2021; Maiwada et al., 2025). In such scenarios, public relations depart from its traditional organizational role and becomes an essential social tool that stabilizes relationships, shapes perceptions, and promotes peace-oriented communication across divided communities.

Conflict management through the media, in broad strokes, refers to the use of mass communication to influence people's understanding of any conflict, enable dialogue between contending parties, and maintain peaceful coexistence (Gilboa, 2009). Media occupation of influential positions in societies prone to conflict is determined by how they interpret, frame, and emotionally process these conflicts. Media accounts shape public opinion, social attitudes, and behavioral responses during these conflicts. Where reporting is sensationalized, biased, or inaccurate, it often increases hostility, deepens mistrust, and accelerates violence (Shaver et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2024). On the other hand, responsible and peace-oriented media practices reduce tension, humanize conflicting parties, and create space for dialogue and reconciliation. The interface between public relations and conflict management through media thus constitutes a critical area of scholarship, since public relations provides that strategic communication framework within which media engagement is coordinated, controlled, and directed toward peaceful outcomes (Zerfass, Verčič & Wiesenberg, 2016).

The literature is replete with clear indications that public relations plays both preventive and responsive roles in conflict situations. In the preventive stage, public relations contribute to conflict avoidance through public engagement, community dialogue, stakeholder communication, and early warning messaging (Qiu & Cameron, 2007; Nwanmuoh et al., 2021; Gjerazi, 2023). In this regard, these mechanisms of communication provide ample avenues for the isolation and management of grouses well before they escalate into a fight. As such, communication platforms should be targeted to include town hall meetings, radio programmes, and media advocacy campaigns, aimed at propagating transparency, inclusion, and participation. These early interventions offer an ongoing procedure that keeps suspicion, misinformation, and rumour-low factors that frequently act as snags to violent conflicts (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 2010).

During active conflict situations, public relations assume a crisis communication role. In this regard, communication becomes urgent, highly sensitive, and potentially destabilizing in nature, as Qiu & Cameron (2007) have reflected on communications in conflicts. Scholars addressing crisis communication have underlined the thought that poorly managed information during conflicts encourages panic, rumor proliferation, ethnic stereotyping, and retaliatory violence. Public relations function as the coordinating mechanism through which information is verified, structured, and dispersed to both the media and the public (Coombs, 2006; Taylor,

2010). Through press briefings, official statements, interviews with the media, and the involvement of stakeholders, PR professionals strive to ensure message consistency, emotional reassurance, and factual accuracy (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Taylor, 2000). Such coordination reduces various conflicting narratives and allows the media to function within the bounds of ethics and conflict-sensitive communication.

Public relations also play a very important role in post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation. Communication after violent conflict is about rebuilding trust, restoring damaged relationships, and reintegrating fractured communities (Orimiyeye & Bala, 2024). Public relations campaigns emphasizing reconciliation, social cohesion, trauma-sensitive messaging, and collective identity reconstruction go to the heart of this process. Such campaigns often use both traditional media and strategies for interpersonal communication in the promotion of forgiveness, shared values, and peaceful coexistence. In this respect, public relations go beyond mere immediate crisis response to long-term social reconstruction and peace sustainability (Maiwada et al., 2025; Nwanmuoh et al., 2021).

A significant body of scholarship further puts into light the influence of media framing on conflict dynamics and the role of public relations in shaping such frames. Media framing refers to the selection, emphasis, and presentation of information in ways that influence audience interpretation of events (D'Angelo, 2017; De Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999). Public relations practitioners play a central role in frame construction through press releases, media briefings, interviews, and other media relations activities. In conflict contexts, framing strategies that highlight cooperation, dialogue, humanitarian concerns, and non-violent solutions tend to reduce public hostility, whereas frames that emphasize blame, threat, and confrontation often escalate tensions. Empirical studies from diverse conflict regions demonstrate that strategic framing guided by professional public relations practice significantly influences the tone and direction of media conflict narratives (Gilboa, 2009; Dhanesh & Rahman, 2021; Nijkraak, Gosselt, & Gutteling, 2015).

The expansion of digital and social media has even further complicated the interrelationship of public relations, media, and conflict management. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms allow for immediate, decentralized, user-generated communication. While this creates new opportunities for rapid peace advocacy and broad citizen engagement, it also raises the risks associated with misinformation, hate speech, propaganda, and rumor circulation. Conflicts in the digital age often play out simultaneously in physical and virtual spaces, making communication management increasingly more complex and less predictable. Public relations practitioners are thus increasingly involved in real-time monitoring, online rumor control, influencer engagement, and digital peace campaigns in order to counter negative narratives and stabilize public discourse. Still, the speed and emotional intensity of digital communication mean that a single unverified message may trigger widespread panic or violence within minutes, thus placing enormous strategic responsibility on public relations operations.

Empirical studies from various global contexts have shown how strategic communication enhances conflict management outcomes. In post-apartheid South Africa, public communication campaigns contributed significantly to national reconciliation and confidence-building between citizens and the state. Media-driven public relations interventions supported post-war reconciliation and transitional justice processes in Sierra Leone and Liberia. In Kenya, following the 2007-2008 post-election violence, studies show that coordinated media

messaging and structured public engagement campaigns helped lower ethnic tensions and prevent escalation.

In Nigeria, however, much of the scholarly attention has focused on media reporting of conflicts rather than the institutionalized role of public relations in media-based conflict management (Okoro, 2013; Egielewa, Ngonso, & Ukhurebor, 2024). Many studies have looked into media reporting of the Boko Haram insurgency, Niger Delta militancy, farmer-herder conflict, and ethno-religious violence throughout the Middle Belt (Ocholi & Okonkwo, 2021; Ojo, 2024; Yusuf, 2025b). The same sets of challenges have been identified across these many studies, which include sensationalism, political bias, ethnic framing, and weak conflict sensitivity in journalistic practice. Though many scholars agree that communication breakdowns are among those significantly contributing to the escalation of conflict, few studies explicitly interrogate the strategic place of public relations in organizing, coordinating, and stabilizing media communication in the face of conflicting situations.

Where public relations is referenced within the Nigerian conflict studies, it is often narrowly treated as a form of government information control rather than being considered as a professional strategic communication process. This narrow view constrains scholarly understanding of how structured public relations strategies-stakeholder mapping, crisis messaging, media coordination, rumor management, and reputation repair-contribute to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This is seen from works such as Maiwada et al. (2025), Nwanmuoh et al. (2021), and Gjerazi (2023). Furthermore, most of the Nigerian studies privilege large-scale national conflicts, leaving the communication dynamics of state-level conflict environments relatively under-explored.

Much of the scholarship on Taraba State has tended to focus on the causes, patterns, and socio-political consequences that are being propelled through indigene-settler tensions, land disputes, political rivalries, and identity-based violence (Maiwada et al. 2025; Nwanmuoh et al. 2021; Gjerazi, 2023). But while the media is frequently acknowledged as a key actor in these conflicts, detailed empirical studies have not really explored how public relations shapes media narratives, manages stakeholder communication, and influences conflict trajectories within the state.

The literature gap, therefore, lies in the limited empirical investigation of the structured role of public relations in the media-based management of conflicts at the sub-national levels in Nigeria, particularly in Taraba State. While existing studies emphasize journalistic practices and conflict reportage, they largely overlook the strategic public relations processes through which media engagements are guided, stakeholder relationships managed, and conflict communication outcomes determined. This gap underlines the need for focused research into how public relations operates within the media ecosystem in managing conflict in Taraba State.

Two-way symmetrical model of public relations: An analytical framework

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations-also referred to as the Excellence Theory-developed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984, is adopted in this study to explain the role of public relations in media-conflict management in Taraba State. This is most appropriate because the theory describes how strategic communication, dialogue, and mutual understanding, core elements of public relations, work within conflict-prone environments. It conceives public relations not as a tool for manipulation or propaganda but as a relationship-

building mechanism that promotes balance between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The symmetric two-way theory theorizes that public relations can be conceptualized as a balanced, symmetrical, interactive, and ethical process of dialogue, negotiation, feedback, and mutual adjustment between an organization and its publics (Theunissen & Rahman, 2011; Selim et al., 2024; Kent & Lane, 2021). In contrast to other one-way models of traditional persuasion, which put a strong emphasis on persuasive communication and the control of information, this model is built on symmetrical, reciprocal communication in which the organization and the stakeholder would listen, respond, and adjust. It assumes that good public relations is based on building trust, transparency, and mutual understanding rather than image management (Narula, 2014; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). It follows that this orientation makes the theory considerably relevant for conflict management where mistrust, misinformation, and social tension are often ahead in the communication spaces.

The theory provides an explanation, within media-based conflict management, of how public relations practitioners serve as a means of communication between governmental institutions, the media, security agencies, civil society organizations, and the communities affected by the conflict. According to Mukherjee et al. (2024), two-way communication, as opposed to unidirectional announcements, is enabled through structured communication activities of public relations in the form of press briefings, stakeholder consultations, crisis messaging, media engagements, and public dialogue forums. This interactive process allows the communities to express grievances and concerns while responsible institutions respond with clarification, negotiation, and peace-oriented actions. Communication, therefore, works as a mechanism in the de-escalation rather than the amplification of conflict.

The Two-Way Symmetrical Theory, therefore, holds great significance, especially in Taraba State, which is blessed with deep ethnic diversity, coupled with tensions between indigenes and settlers, farmers and herders, land and other political rivalries, including religiously divided people (Terrang, 2017; Pratt & Omenugha, 2014). In such fragile and sensitive environments, one-way government communication or media propaganda usually worsens conflicts because the communities feel excluded, misunderstood, or deliberately misrepresented. Explained herein, the theory holds that sustainable peace can only be achieved when public relations operate as an interactive system in which government institutions active in listening to community concerns through structured dialogue platforms, media narratives informed through ethical engagement rather than coercion, rumors and misinformation corrected through feedback mechanisms, and engaging conflicting groups through inclusivity and participation in communication processes for peaceful resolution (Nwanmuoh et al., 2024; Maiwada et al., 2025).

Through this theoretical lens, public relations is understood as a peacebuilding instrument rather than simply an information management unit. It has shown how public relations officers in the ministries, emergency agencies, and security institutions in Taraba State are able to involve both the media and the public in ways that can bring about cooperation, trust, understanding, and negotiated conflict resolution. This model of communication goes a long way in minimizing panic, countering violence instigated by rumors, soothing public emotions, and encouraging non-violent responses to conflict (Nwanmuoh et al., 2024; Maiwada et al., 2025).

It also offers a useful explanation of the expanding role of public relations in the digital media environment of Taraba State. Social media platforms have been used to spread unverified, emotionally laden conflict information that can quickly escalate violence within minutes (Nwanmuoh et al., 2024; Maiwada et al., 2025). Real-time online engagement, interactive feedback management, digital rumor control, and peace-oriented messaging via social media are justified in the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. This model involves direct engagement with citizens online, answering questions, correcting false narratives, and encouraging calm, dialogue-based communication through social media rather than relying solely on official press statements. This is particularly critical in Taraba State, where digital misinformation has been shown to heighten communal tensions.

The rationale behind the adoption of the Two-Way Symmetrical Theory is explained by the fact that it prioritizes dialogue over propaganda, mutual understanding over coercion, and peacebuilding communication over information control. It also offers a solid framework for the understanding of crisis communication dynamics across traditional and digital media environments and, as such, finds even more specific application to multi-ethnic and conflict-prone societies like Taraba State, Nigeria.

Study Context and Methodology

Study Context

This study is located in Taraba State, one of the states in the North-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state represents one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse states in Nigeria, with over 40 ethnic groups and a variety of religious affiliations within its boundaries. The state shares boundaries with Adamawa, Gombe, Plateau, and Benue States, as well as an international border with the Republic of Cameroon. Its capital, Jalingo, is the administrative and media hub of the state, hosting several broadcast stations, print media correspondents, and government communication offices.

In Taraba State, communal, political, and ethno-religious crises have been recurrent over the years. The causes of these conflicts are often linked to factors such as tensions between indigenes and settlers, land and boundary disputes, farmer–herder clashes, political competition, and identity struggles. These are major areas of conflict: Wukari, Takum, Lau, Karim Lamido, Ibi, Jalingo, and parts of Bali and Sardauna Local Government Areas. The devastating effects of these recurring conflicts include loss of lives, destruction of property, displacement of communities, and long-term socio-economic disruptions.

In this conflict setting, the media acts visibly to shape the narratives of conflict, public attitudes, and information for local and national audiences. The traditional media of radio, television, and newspaper coexist with digital and social media platforms through which information on the conflict rapidly flows. Apart from government information units, security agencies, traditional institutions, civil society organizations, and humanitarian agencies actively use strategic communication in the management of information throughout the conflict. Public relations practitioners in government and private institutions are important intermediaries between these actors and the media. This complex communication ecology enhances Taraba State's propriety and relevance as a context in which the role of public relations in media-based conflict management can be examined.

Methodology

Qualitative research approaches are utilized to study the role of public relations in media-based conflict management in Taraba State, Nigeria, using documented evidence and secondary data. The qualitative approach is thus considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand the processes, strategies, and practices of public relations in conflict communication, focusing on meanings, experiences, and contextual factors rather than quantifiable variables. A qualitative approach may therefore provide a rich, nuanced, and interpretive understanding of how the public relations strategies are represented and applied within the media and conflict management frameworks.

The design is descriptive and exploratory, intended to analyze the functions, strategies, and outcomes of public relations in conflict situations within Taraba State. Primary data from interviews or surveys are not utilized in this study; rather, it is based on secondary sources such as academic journal articles, government reports, official press releases, media reports, policy documents, NGO and civil society publications, and online news content. These sources document evidence of public relations practices, strategies of engaging with the media, and conflict communication interventions in the state.

Relevance, credibility, and temporal coverage guide data selection. Priority is given to sources that provide detailed accounts of public relations activities during communal, farmer–herder, and ethno-religious conflicts in Taraba State, including documented government communications, media reports, and reports from peacebuilding organizations. The study further considers secondary analyses of digital media interventions and public messaging strategies that address conflict dynamics in the state.

Documented evidence is examined in this study, using the thematic content analysis methodology. In essence, this involves a systematic review and coding of textual data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and strategies concerning crisis communication, media coordination, community engagement, and peacebuilding initiatives. The analysis will be conducted in stages: familiarization with the documents, initial coding, thematic clustering, and finally, interpretation of findings regarding the study objectives. These themes are analyzed in order to understand the strategic function of public relations, the effectiveness of media engagement, and the impact of communication interventions on conflict management outcomes.

Qualitative rigor techniques appropriate for a study based on secondary data are applied in ways that enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of this research. Triangulation is achieved through the use of multiple sources, namely government records, academic publications, and media content. Thick description in reporting findings situates the documented evidence within the socio-political and cultural context of Taraba State. Ethical consideration is therefore observed in the actual use of publicly available and verified documents with proper citation and acknowledgement of sources. By drawing on documented evidence, professional practices, institutional strategies, and media-based communication processes that occurred without direct interaction with participants are captured, while an in-depth understanding of the role of public relations in managing and mitigating conflicts in Taraba State is gained.

Public Relations for Crisis Communication and Media Coordination During Conflicts in Taraba State

Public relations has become an important tool for conflict communication management, which is increasingly used to manage communications during conflicts, especially in multi-ethnic and politically sensitive areas like Taraba State in Nigeria. The socio-political environment in Taraba state, where communal, farmer–herder, and ethno-religious conflicts occur intermittently, fuels a context in which misinformation, rumor diffusion, and emotional polarization can further lead to violence (Suleiman et al., 2024; Targema, 2020). Within such a context, public relations becomes much more than an organizational image management tool but an effective means of achieving crisis communication, media coordination, and conflict mitigation.

In the context of public relations, crisis communication involves an intentional dissemination of information meant to deter escalation, lessen public anxiety, and guide action by stakeholders into informed and constructive responses (Coombs, 2007; Ndlela, 2018). In Taraba State, PR officers within government ministries, security agencies, and CSOs use different strategies to handle information in the face of active conflict situations. Press briefings, official statements, media interviews, and press conferences are the main avenues for distributing verified and timely information. They not only enlighten the public on various issues but also help place government and community actions into context, reducing spaces for speculation, rumor, and misinterpretation (World Health Organization, 2007; Lowrey et al., 2007). The literature underscores that inasmuch as crisis communication is timely, transparent, and consistent, public confidence will be gained and institutional credibility increased, an important condition in a conflict-prone environment.

Media coordination represents another complementary dimension of public relations strategy in Taraba State. In view of the media's significant role in shaping perceptions, framing narratives, and influencing public sentiment about any conflict situation, critical PR engagement with media houses cannot be overstated (Olayinka & Odunayo, 2024; Dharta, 2024). PR practitioners contribute to media coordination through briefings, stakeholder meetings, and accurate background information supply. Such consultations will ensure that journalists report responsibly to avoid sensationalism or inflammatory framing of events that will lead to escalation (Meintjes & Grobler, 2014). Observations from empirical studies of conflict in Nigeria have shown that where media coordination is weak or lacking, reporting typically becomes fragmented, rumor-driven, or politically biased, thereby amplifying conflict. In this capacity, public relations acts as an intermediary that both informs and guides media practice in ways that shape the narrative environment to support conflict de-escalation (Rudd, 2025).

Another strategic dimension is community-centeredness: the embedding of community-oriented engagement in crisis communication frameworks. PR efforts also reach beyond conventional media platforms to include face-to-face dialogue with community leaders, traditional institutions, and localized civil society actors (Taylor, 2010; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Under the town hall meetings, community forums, and selective communication campaigns, PR practitioners facilitate engagements where localized actors are not just passive recipients of information but active players in deliberative discourses (Abdulkadir-Imam, 2020; Schoemaker & Stremlau, 2014). This helps to nurture mutual understanding, redress grievances before they escalate, and lends greater credence to institutional responses. In Taraba State, with

high sensitivity linked to ethnic and religious diversities, this culturally oriented approach to crisis communication lies at the core of trust-building and social cohesion.

Moreover, crisis public relations becomes even more powerful with the strategic framing of conflict information. In this regard, a two-way symmetrical approach informs the increasing efforts of PR practitioners in Taraba State to frame messages with a focus on cooperation, humanitarian concern, and dialogue while downplaying blame, threat, or confrontation. According to the principles of peace journalism, under such strategic guidance, the media can be a de-escalation tool, rather than a stimulant for violence. By creating narratives in both traditional and digital media, public relations strategies shape perception, contain rumor proliferation, and build constructive civic responses.

This is further compounded in practice by the parallel interaction of traditional and digital media in crisis communication in Taraba State. While traditional media like radio and television remain preponderant in several rural areas, social media platforms facilitate rapid flows of information, while managing conflicts complicates matters (Targema, 2020; Igbashangev & Ogunyemi, 2021). In the light of the above, public relations practitioners engage in a real-time monitoring of digital content, rapid responses to misinformation, and strategic messaging designed to correct false narratives and reinforce verified information through Eze & Zacky-Eze, 2025; Sjoraida, Guna, & Nungraha, 2025. This dual media ecology underlines the need for adaptive, multi-channel public relations strategies that would address diverse audiences while minimizing risks associated with rapid information flows.

Public Relations, Digital Media, and Peacebuilding Communication in Taraba State

With the proliferation of digital media, the face of conflict communication and public relations practice has totally been transformed in Taraba State. These digital platforms have made information dissemination rapid, decentralized, and user-generated through social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and other online forums, which present both opportunities and challenges in managing the conflict (Targema, 2020; Dyikuk & Obateru, 2021). The same digital platforms that use instant sharing of verified information and direct dialogue between stakeholders are also becoming avenues where misinformation, rumor circulation, hate speech, and amplification of existing tensions are increased. Within this scenario, public relations emerged as one of the crucial tools in leveraging the digital media for peacemaking, dialogue, and reconciliation (Maiwada et al., 2025; Toledano, 2016).

PR experts in Taraba State apply digital media strategically to support peacebuilding communication by monitoring online content, correcting false narratives, and distributing timely and verified information to the public. In this respect, Targema (2020) and Ja'afaru, Ekharefo, & Asemah (2025) detailed that real-time engagements on social media allow PR officers to address emerging conflict situations before misinformation spirals out of control. In cases of communal clashes or farmer–herder conflicts, government PR units, security agencies, and civil society organizations inform social media users about security measures, interventions at the community level, as well as humanitarian assistance. This approach is supported by crisis communication principles, although it extends the reach and immediacy of traditional media channels.

Digital media further provide spaces for inclusive dialogue, allowing communities and stakeholders to participate in conversations at levels that were previously available to them in

traditional media spaces. PR practitioners facilitate moderated discussions, live online briefings, and interactive campaigns that encourage citizens to report concerns, ask questions, and give feedback (Taylor & Gibson, 2017). This kind of interactive engagement supports the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, its underlying ethos emphasizing dialogue and mutual understanding through participatory communication. By creating rooms for online deliberation, PR strategies contribute to reducing mistrust between communities, government institutions, and security actors, imperative in a context marked by ethnic and religious diversity such as Taraba State (Ja'afaru, Ekhareafu & Asemah, 2025; Targema, 2020).

Peacebuilding communication using digital media is not limited to immediate crisis management but also to longer-term initiatives for social cohesion. Public relations campaigns focus on messages of tolerance, unity, and reconciliation, often with narratives of shared values and inter-community cooperation. Videos, infographics, and testimonials are used to humanize affected populations, to show non-violent conflict resolution endeavors, and to amplify the voices of local peacebuilders. In fact, these digital activities complement the offline community engagement strategies, reinforcing consistent messages across traditional and digital platforms. Low levels of media literacy, limited digital infrastructure in rural areas, and the rapid viral spread of unverified content continue to pose risks for conflict escalation in Taraba State, despite opportunities availed by digital media. Thus, public relations practitioners need to take proactive digital steps right from online monitoring to the verification of rumors, fact-checking through collaborations, to disseminating corrective information on time (Eze & Zacky-Eze, 2025; Dumbre, 2025). This requires coordination at the level of PR units, media organizations, and civil society to ensure coherence in digital narratives that promote peace rather than inflaming divisions.

The integration of digital media in peacebuilding should also be sensitive to the socio-cultural and political context of Taraba State. In general, PR strategies will work best when they consider local norms, languages, and ways of communicating, presenting messages to ensure that they are accessible, relevant, and inclusive. This is supported in the works of Latupeirissa et al. (2024) and Devereux & Peirson-Smith (2011). Such contextualization increases the credibility of information and incentives for broader public engagement, reinforcing trust in institutional channels of communication.

Public relations in Taraba State serves a dual purpose through strategic use of digital media: a mechanism of real-time crisis management and a tool for sustained peacebuilding communication. PR practitioners monitor content, shape narratives, facilitate dialogue, and promote reconciliation messages to manage perceptions and reduce tensions that support long-term social cohesion in a multiethnic, conflict-prone environment.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study are in close agreement with those found in the literature, which highlights public relations and strategic communication practices to take center stage in conflict environments. Scholars such as Targema (2020), Gjerazi (2023), and Schoemaker & Stremlau (2014) also identify timely, transparent, and coordinated crisis communication as dampening rumors and addressing or mitigating conflict escalation. In fact, the press briefings, official statements, and structured press engagement used in Taraba State mimic the literature on crisis communication as a whole, which emphasizes credible information as strengthening institution-wide legitimacies and weakening misinformation. Coombs (2015) and Fröhlich &

Jungblut (2018) have noted these ideas. The findings on the importance of media coordination also tally with evidence from Nigerian conflict zones that poor management of media relations has historically contributed to sensational reporting and heightened tensions. AbdulkadirImam (2020) and Dyikuk & Obateru (2021) have discussed such findings. Consequently, the results validate existing theoretical perspectives that place public relations as a stabilizing mechanism for shaping narratives, guiding journalistic practice, and encouraging de-escalatory communication in fragile contexts.

In addition, the adoption of digital media in PR practice in Taraba State finds strong support in scholarship on peacebuilding communication. Research by White (2011), Taylor & Gibson (2017), and Maiwada et al. (2025) confirms that digital platforms allow for fast information dissemination, participatory dialogue, and real-time monitoring-all capabilities critical for managing a society characterized by ethnic and political diversity. The findings on the potential risks of social media, including viralizing rumors and hate speech, reflect global concerns documented by scholars such as McKell (2020) and Bosley (2020), who note that unless regulated, digital spaces will further exacerbate social cleavages. Their stress on two-way symmetrical communication, with its message localized and culturally contextualized, shares a common concern with Sommerfeldt (2013) and Latupeirissa et al. (2024), who contend that PR strategies that are inclusive and sensitive to the community nurture trust and support long-term peacebuilding. Ultimately, findings reinforce and extend existing literature by illustrating how traditional and digital PR strategies combine to manage crises, strengthen social cohesion, and support peacebuilding efforts in Taraba State.

Conclusion

The centrality of strategic communication in mitigating tensions, shaping public perception, and fostering peace in the conflict-prone environment of Taraba State, Nigeria, is what the study of public relations within media-based conflict management attempts to highlight. Public relations serve not only as a tool for managing organizational images but also as proactive mechanisms for crisis communication, media coordination, and community engagement. PR practitioners reduce misinformation, manage rumors, and prevent the escalation of conflicts by making sure that timely, accurate, and context-sensitive dissemination of information occurs. This integration of digital media into the public relations strategies has expanded the scope and immediacy of conflict communication, providing dialogue platforms, stakeholder engagement, and campaigns on peacebuilding. Public relations officers in Taraba State can address traditional and emerging communication challenges through real-time monitoring, corrective messaging, and interactive online engagement. This reinforces public trust and culminates in promoting social cohesion. In summary, findings from this study proved that effective public relations in Taraba State function on multiple levels: it mediates between institutions and communities, it directs media narratives, and it uses digital platforms to achieve both immediate objectives of conflict management and longer-term goals of peacebuilding. The current study underlines the strategic value of PR as a tool not only in managing crises but in facilitating reconciliation, dialogue, and stability across multiethnic and politically sensitive contexts.

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