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PUBLIC RELATIONS, GLOBAL RANKINGS AND THE INTERNATIONAL PERCEPTION OF NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The reputation and image of Nigerian universities across the globe are still below expectations. Global rankings and the international perception of Nigerian universities are very poor. Nigerian universities can improve their global ranking through public relations. This paper, therefore, explored public relations, global rankings, and the international perception of Nigerian universities. It began with an introduction before examining the concepts of public relations and university global rankings. This paper attempts to identify some public relations tools that can promote global rankings and the international perception of Nigerian universities. This paper concluded that public relations is one of the means for promoting global rankings and a positive international perception of Nigerian universities. Based on the conclusion, it was recommended among others that Nigerian universities should organize annual training programmes for staff to enable them engage in public relations practices that create a positive image and enhance the visibility of the institutional activities to improve their global rankings.



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Keyword: Public Relations, Global Rankings, International Perception, Nigerian Universities, Tools

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global knowledge economy, universities are increasingly assessed, compared and patronised based on their visibility, reputation and performance in international

ranking systems such as the Times Higher Education (THE), QS World University Rankings and Webometrics. In the same vein, Amin (2025) asserted that the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), QS World Universities Rankings (QS-WUR), Times Higher Education World Universities Rankings (THE-WUR), Times Higher Education Impact Rankings (THE-IR), Times Higher Education Sub-Saharan African Universities Rankings (THE-SSAUR), Webometrics Rankings, US News Universities Rankings, and Nigerian Universities Rankings (NUR) engage in assessing and ranking of universities. Continuing, Amin pointed out that these ranking agencies are independent organizations that operate based on their criteria crafted based on some guiding principles. While teaching quality, research output and citations remain the core indicators, public relations and strategic communication have emerged as critical enablers in shaping how these achievements are projected and perceived globally.

For Nigerian universities, the quest for improved global standing is not merely about prestige; it is about attracting quality students, securing international collaborations, accessing research funding and positioning the nation as a credible contributor to global scholarship. In this context, public relations is no longer a peripheral support function but a strategic driver of institutional visibility and reputation management. Adeleke-Sola and Kuye-Aremu (2025) stated that public relations is all about managing reputation and building a favourable image for individuals, groups, organisations and entities.

Global ranking bodies rely heavily on publicly available data, institutional narratives, digital footprints and media presence. University websites, research repositories, staff profiles, news releases and social media platforms are key sources through which performance indicators are accessed and evaluated. A professionally managed public relations system ensures that these platforms are accurate, current, comprehensive and aligned with international best practices.

Research communication is particularly central. Nigerian scholars produce significant volumes of research, yet much of it remains underreported or poorly disseminated beyond academic journals. Strategic public relations bridge this gap by translating complex research outputs into accessible stories for global audiences, highlighting innovations, patents, community impact and policy relevance. This not only enhances citation potential but also strengthens institutional reputation as a centre of thought leadership.

Another dimension is international perception. Universities are judged not only by what they do, but by how consistently and credibly they communicate their achievements, values and governance standards. Proactive media engagement, participation in global academic conversations and effective digital storytelling help to counter stereotypes, correct misinformation and project Nigerian universities as stable, innovative and globally competitive institutions.

Crisis communication also has implications for rankings and international image. Issues such as industrial actions, student protests, security concerns or governance disputes, if poorly managed in the media space, can undermine investor confidence and international partnerships. A strong

public relations framework provides timely, factual and coordinated responses that protect institutional credibility and reassure stakeholders, including ranking agencies and foreign collaborators.

Furthermore, alumni relations and international partnerships are strengthened through strategic communication. Showcasing successful alumni, joint research projects, exchange programmes and global conferences enhances the university's profile and reinforces its international networks. These narratives contribute to reputation surveys, a key component of major ranking methodologies.

The role of digital visibility cannot be overstated. Web presence, online citations, open-access repositories and social media engagement directly influence metrics such as Webometrics ranking and indirectly affect perception-based indicators. Public relations professionals, working with ICT and academic units, ensure that institutional content is optimized, searchable, regularly updated and aligned with global standards of transparency and accessibility.

At the governance level, the Director of Information and Public Relations occupies a strategic position in aligning communication with institutional goals, ranking aspirations and internationalization policies. By providing management with reputation audits, media analytics and stakeholder perception reports, the office contributes to evidence-based decision-making and long-term branding strategies.

For Nigerian universities seeking to improve their global footprint, investment in public relations capacity is therefore an investment in competitiveness. It requires skilled personnel who understand higher education dynamics, international media ecosystems, research communication and digital reputation management. It also demands institutional commitment to openness, consistency and professionalism in all external engagements.

In the final analysis, global rankings are not merely numerical tables; they are reflections of performance, perception and presence. While academic excellence remains the foundation, public relations provides the voice through which that excellence is heard and recognized worldwide. By integrating strategic communication into the core of university management, Nigerian institutions can more effectively project their strengths, tell their stories and claim their rightful place in the global academic community.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

2.1.1 Public Relations

Public relations are concerned with creating a good image of an organization. Adeleke-Sola and Kuye-Aremu (2025) opined that the basic principle of public relations is to ensure a cordial relationship is maintained and sustained with stakeholders of an organisation, hence,

avoiding crises in whatever form. Public relations entail maintaining mutual understanding between an organization and members of the public. The members of the public are parents, the government, society and the international community, among others. Oluwagbemisola, Oduola and Babarinde (2018) asserted that public relations keep institutions of higher learning informed on public opinion and the best way to create a harmonious environment for academic work in this changing world. Igben (2022) described public relations as deliberate, planned and sustained efforts to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public.

Public relations entail disseminating information that fosters the acceptance of programmes, activities and goals of an organization. Shimawua and Ternenge (2022) noted that public relations have to do with effort by the organization that aims at establishing and maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with the public in order to achieve its set objectives. Musa (2023) described public relations as management functions, which evaluate public attitudes, formulate and execute policies and procedures of an organization based on public interests to earn mutual understanding and acceptance. Arum, Achi and Ewuzie (2024) noted that public relations are vital parts of maintaining the organization's image and of communicating its message to its customers, investors and other publics.

2.1.2 Global University Rankings

Global university rankings are the ordering and rating of universities across the globe, based on their performance in different aspects. Usher and Savino, cited in Akintola, Usamotu and Muhammed-Lawal (2025), referred to global university rankings as comparative evaluations of higher education institutions across different countries, based on indicators such as research output, citations, faculty-to-student ratios, and international reputation. Global university rankings indicate the relevance and performance of higher institutions of learning relative to others across the world.

Global university rankings are the placement and grading of higher institutions of learning based on predetermined criteria. Akintola, Usamotu and Muhammed-Lawal (2025) pointed out that global university rankings are becoming a key benchmark of institutional quality. The authors added that while rankings can promote research excellence, international collaboration, and global visibility, they also reinforce Western dominance, marginalize teaching quality, and neglect community engagement. Nigerian universities consistently underperform in global rankings due to underfunding, inadequate research infrastructure, and weak internationalization strategies (Osagie, 2020).

2.1.3 Tools of Public Relations

There are many tools of public relations that can be utilized by Nigerian universities. Igben (2022) noted that the tools of public relations are Media Relations, Advertorials, Social media, including school websites, Facebook page and WhatsApp Group, Newsletters on its activities, Community relations, Gift items (especially during the yuletide season), Brochures, handbook and catalogue, Sponsorship or partnership, speaking engagement and Business events among others.

Kankam (2022) listed tools of public relations as follows: television advertising, radio advertising, newspaper advertising, web page information, publications and events. Tools of public relations are TikTok, Twitter (x), institutional repositories, and Instagram.

2.1.4 Role of Public Relations in the Global Rankings and the International Perception of Nigerian Universities

Public Relations plays a pivotal role in fostering reputation and the dissemination of information regarding its activities that can be considered in global university rankings. Institutional narratives and media presence that Global ranking bodies rely heavily on in ranking universities can be promoted through public relations. Ezekwelu, Ralph-Nwachukwu and Okowa-Nwaebi (2023) asserted that public relations has a great impact on the building of corporate image and reputation. The image and reputation of universities have an impact on their rankings across the globe.

3. Conclusion

This paper concluded that public relations is one of the means for promoting global rankings and a positive international perception of Nigerian universities. The image, reputation and visibility of intellectual outputs of Universities, which are considered during global rankings, are enhanced through public relations.

4. Recommendations

Considering the conclusions, the following recommendations were made:

1. Nigerian universities should organize annual training programmes for staff to enable them to engage in public relations practices that create a positive image and enhance the visibility of the institutional activities to improve their global rankings.
2. Nigerian Universities should use social media such as institutional websites, Facebook page, TikTok, WhatsApp Group, Twitter (x), Newsletters and Instagram, among others, to create awareness of their activities and programmes that can improve their global rankings and international perception of the institutions.

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