



## Communicating Sustainable Development in the Era of AI: An Evaluation of PR Strategies of Select PR Firms in Akwa Ibom State

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### ABSTRACT

This study evaluated Public Relations (PR) strategies employed by firms in Akwa Ibom State to communicate sustainable development in the era of artificial intelligence (AI). The objectives were to examine the PR strategies used, assess the integration of AI tools, and evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in influencing public awareness and behaviour. The study was grounded in the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, emphasising two-way symmetrical communication, and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, explaining the adoption of new technologies within social systems. A survey design was adopted, with data collected from 140 registered PR practitioners and key stakeholders using structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Analysis employed frequency counts, percentages, and thematic interpretation. Findings revealed that traditional media campaigns, social media engagement, and community forums were the primary strategies, while AI tools were moderately integrated, mainly in social media analytics and automated content creation. Although PR efforts increased awareness, their impact on behavioural change and policy influence was limited. The study concludes that PR practices in Akwa Ibom remain predominantly dissemination-oriented, with underutilisation of AI and limited participatory engagement, constraining their contribution to Sustainable Development Goals. Recommendations include adopting participatory, AI-enabled communication frameworks; building practitioner capacity through continuous training by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations; and strengthening collaboration between PR firms, government agencies, and civil society to ensure campaigns achieve measurable behavioural and policy outcomes

## **INTRODUCTION**

Public Relations (PR) as a profession in Nigeria has moved from mere publicity and image polishing towards being a strategic actor in national development agendas. Scholars have documented how PR practitioners shape public awareness, mobilise stakeholders and influence policy through communication of environmental, social and governance (ESG) concerns (Nejo, Odiboh, Omokiti & Adeluwa, 2020). Lagos State Ministry of Environment, together with its agency Lagos State Parks and Gardens, staged consistent campaigns aimed at combating climate change through clean-up drives, tree planting, and publicity on life-on-land issues; PR here served not only to inform but to engender civic behaviour changes. Nejo et al. (2020) found that awareness and impact of PR activities in that State had direct effects on public knowledge of environmental law and adoption of sustainable waste disposal habits. Nigeria also has non-governmental actors leveraging PR efforts: Integrated Indigo Limited won in 2021 the SERAS Award for Best PR/Communications Agency Promoting Sustainability, on account of its wide deployment of sustainability-stories, client campaigns and stakeholder collaboration (SERAS, 2021; Brand Impact Nigeria, 2021). Such instances show urgency in PR practice's capacity to contribute towards sustainable development, particularly as Nigeria strives to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Communication of development policies, environmental protection, climate activism and participatory governance depends heavily on PR firms' competence, credibility, and strategic choices of channels and messages.

Communicating sustainable development in the era of artificial intelligence (AI) introduces new potentials and challenges for those PR firms which operate at sub-national levels such as in Akwa Ibom State. AI tools offer greater capacity for sentiment analysis, predictive modelling of environmental risk, automated content generation, and more precise audience targeting (Tella, Rahmon, Oyerinde & Salau, 2025). Experts assert that leveraging AI can accelerate Nigeria's 2030 development goals by improving efficiency in policy communication and public sector service delivery (Osho, 2024). Use of early warning systems, for instance, in climate and flood risk communication, through collaborations with NEMA, NIMET and NIHSA, has been highlighted in Akwa Ibom State government's disaster preparedness strategy (Akwa Ibom State Government, 2023). PR firms in this environment thus have an expanded role: deploying digital tools, interpreting big data to inform message framing, leveraging platforms for interactive public engagement, and ensuring messages transcend mere information to provoke sustainable actions. There remains, however, limited documentation on how PR firms in Akwa Ibom State are utilising AI in these ways, especially with respect to environmental sustainability and SDG-oriented communication. That gap raises important questions concerning effectiveness, ethics, access and the ability of local firms to adapt to technological shifts while still maintaining local relevance and trust.

Akwa Ibom State has already demonstrated commitment to sustainable development through several initiatives which depend heavily on strategic communication. The State's Environmental Protection and Waste Management

Agency (AKSEPWMA), under its waste-to-wealth initiative, has embedded “Education, Enlightenment and Enforcement” in public engagement campaigns, law enforcement and regulatory communication to reduce indiscriminate dumping and improve vegetation control, earning recognition as Nigeria’s cleanest state for several consecutive years (AKSEPWMA, 2022). Savannah Energy PLC, in collaboration with the Inoyo Toro Foundation, launched Environmental Awareness Clubs in 20 public secondary schools in Akwa Ibom. That programme uses tree planting exercises, radio talks, awareness walks, quiz competitions and messages tied to the ARISE agenda of the State government to reach youths (Savannah Energy, 2024).

Community groups also call for investments in climate adaptation infrastructure, and request that PR strategies should heighten local voices and stories, especially where flooding, pollution, and health hazards intersect at the grassroots level (Ibeno Green Youth Hub, ActionAid Nigeria reports, 2025). Such cases indicate that PR strategies in Akwa Ibom are essential for sustainable development, but there is a need for systematic evaluation: whether PR firms are integrating AI tools, which kinds of message frames work best, how stakeholders perceive those messages, how resource constraints affect strategy, and how PR efforts translate to behavioural change. This study intends to fill that gap by evaluating the PR strategies of selected PR firms in Akwa Ibom State in the context of sustainable development and AI influence.

#### ***Statement of the Problem***

Despite the growing importance of sustainable development communication in Nigeria, there is scant scholarly attention on how Public Relations firms in Akwa Ibom State are adapting their strategies in the era of artificial intelligence to drive awareness, behavioural change and stakeholder participation. While studies in Lagos, Abuja and other metropolitan centres highlight the role of PR in shaping public knowledge on climate change, environmental protection and sustainable policies (Nejo et al., 2020; Osho, 2024), little is known about the unique strategies employed within Akwa Ibom, where socio-cultural realities, infrastructural gaps and grassroots communication needs differ. Existing State efforts, such as the AKSEPWMA waste-to-wealth programme and partnerships like Savannah Energy’s school environmental clubs, point to the reliance on communication to mobilise citizens, yet the actual contribution of PR firms, their adoption of AI-driven tools, and their effectiveness in creating sustainable development awareness remain under-researched. This lack of empirical evidence raises a critical problem: without clear evaluation, stakeholders cannot determine whether PR firms in Akwa Ibom are effectively leveraging AI technologies, appropriately framing sustainability narratives, and successfully influencing behavioural patterns needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### ***Research Objectives***

The objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the Public Relations strategies employed by selected PR firms in Akwa Ibom State in communicating sustainable development.

2. To assess the extent to which artificial intelligence tools are integrated into sustainable development communication by PR firms in Akwa Ibom State.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of PR strategies of selected PR firms in influencing public awareness and action towards sustainable development in Akwa Ibom State.

### ***Research Questions***

The following research questions were raised in this study:

1. What Public Relations strategies are employed by selected PR firms in Akwa Ibom State in communicating sustainable development?
2. To what extent are artificial intelligence tools integrated into sustainable development communication by PR firms in Akwa Ibom State?
3. How effective are the PR strategies of selected PR firms in influencing public awareness and action towards sustainable development in Akwa Ibom State?

## **LITERATURE RIVIEW**

### ***Public Relations and the Communication of Sustainable Development in Nigeria***

Public Relations in Nigeria has been evolving into a tool for promoting sustainable development. Campaigns run by organisations and the government have increased awareness of environmental issues such as waste management, deforestation, pollution, and climate change. Mass media campaigns assessed by Arikenbi, Ainakhuagbor, Ikharo, and Inu (2023) revealed that Nigerian citizens encounter PR messages on environmental sustainability through radio, television, newspapers, and social media, though message recall and behavioural change have often been limited by inadequate penetration into rural areas. PR practitioners in Nigeria have sometimes challenged perceptions of environmental crisis by framing messages in ways that resonate with local values. WAPCO Plc's CSR efforts in its host communities illustrate that firms can engage with all three pillars of sustainable development: environmental care, social welfare, and economic contributions, while relying heavily on communication to maintain legitimacy and community trust (Adewuyi & Olowookere, 2010). WAPCO publishes annual reports including environmental performance, oversees community projects, and holds meetings where community voices are heard; public relations functions there include stakeholder communication, transparency, and expectation management.

Conflict between PR promise and practical impact becomes evident when communication does not translate into lasting behaviour change or policy enforcement. A study of green awareness campaigns in Ogun State showed that social media advocacy raised awareness, but follow-through in behaviour, such as waste disposal or recycling, lagged because infrastructure (bins, recycling centres) remained inadequate and enforcement was weak (Odunlami & Aro, 2024). Official pronouncements or environmental policies have often lacked consistent communication support at the local level. Nigeria's national plastic waste management policy, adopted in 2020, aims to eliminate certain plastics by 2025, but analysis suggests that campaigns to inform citizens about the policy remain uneven, especially outside urban centres, and enforcement bodies struggle with capacity and funding (Reuters, 2024). Public Relations practitioners

sometimes engage in what may be called symbolic actions: tree planting, clean-up days, but these gestures risk being dissociated from deeper policy change or from the systemic habits that sustain environmental degradation. Citizens sometimes perceive such campaigns as marketing or corporate self-promotion rather than as genuine sustainable development communication.

The role of local culture, trust and context in PR communication cannot be ignored. Message framing that appeals to communal responsibility, traditional leadership, and spiritual values often proves more effective in many Nigerian settings than appeals grounded purely in technical or scientific detail. Caritas Communications in Lagos and Abuja works often in the energy, oil and gas sectors where environmental risk is significant; their PR work includes public education, stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication, drawing on local narratives around land, pollution and health risks (Caritas Communications, n.d.). Bekeme Masade-Olowola's work with CSR-in-Action combines training, policy advocacy, and storytelling to give voice to affected communities, emphasising lived experiences of environmental harm and local solutions (Bekeme Masade-Olowola, n.d.). Where citizens trust messengers such as local NGOs, religious leaders, community elders, journalists, PR messages are more likely to be believed, accepted, and acted upon. Distrust of governmental messaging, sometimes owing to perceptions of corruption or lack of follow-through, undermines PR efforts.

Critical gaps remain in scholarly and practical work on Public Relations and sustainable development communication in Nigeria. Several studies have assessed mass media campaigns or CSR reports, yet few have focused on how PR firms systematically design, evaluate, or innovate their strategies to ensure that sustainable development is embedded rather than superficial. Many reports note a lack of measurable outcomes, poor feedback channels from the public, and inconsistent use of audience segmentation; rural and marginalised communities are frequently left out (Arikenbi et al., 2023; Odunlami & Aro, 2024). Ethical issues arise when companies overstate environmental achievements in CSR reporting without independent verification. Institutional constraints, such as weak regulation, limited resources, and low technical capacity, hinder many PR firms. Learning from past successes and failures, such as green advertising efforts in South-South states, plastic waste bans in Lagos, and CSR reporting in industrial firms, can guide improved practice. Need emerges for empirical evaluation of PR firms' strategies in sub-national states like Akwa Ibom, especially how they adopt tools, measure impact, and connect with local publics.

***Artificial Intelligence and its Application in Public Relations Practice***

Public Relations practice in Nigeria is confronting a shift in tools and techniques owing to the emergence of Artificial Intelligence. Practitioners are increasingly exploring AI for functions such as media monitoring, sentiment analysis, audience segmentation, content generation and crisis response (Udoh, 2025; IMPR reports cited in PRNigeria, 2025). Nigeria Customs Service recently unveiled an analytics-driven dashboard that visualises media performance in real time under new leadership, reflecting how government agencies are adopting AI-enabled tools for public sector communication (Leadership News,

2025). Use of generative AI for drafting press releases or potential social media messages has been mooted, though such use often raises concerns about tone, voice, and cultural relevance (George-Taylor of Skot Communications, 2024). Research indicates that many PR firms are aware of AI's potential but lack capacity, i.e, skills, infrastructure and budget for full integration (An assessment of artificial intelligence integration in PR, Owerri study, 2024). Interviews with PR practitioners in Owerri showed benefit in efficiency from AI tools but challenges in trust, ethical implications, and adaptation to local contexts (Oduenyi & Williams, 2024). Similar themes appear in commentary during masterclasses organised by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations in Rivers State and other locations: practitioners report that AI could aid predictive scenario planning and media trend tracking, but lag in adoption remains due to low technical expertise and cost constraints (BusinessDay NG, 2025).

Ethical issues, credibility concerns and human oversight emerge as central themes in the application of AI in PR in Nigeria. Experts such as Celestine Achi have called for formal guidelines from professional bodies like NIPR (Nigerian Institute of Public Relations) to establish norms for generative AI use among PR firms (PRNigeria, 2024; NPRW, 2024). Practitioners warn that AI-generated message content without careful human editing may appear tone-deaf or culturally inappropriate (Udoh, 2025). Skot Communications' leader pointed out that Nigerians expect emotionally rich, culturally anchored narratives; reliance on AI that lacks deep local contextual knowledge may undermine authenticity (George-Taylor, 2024). Survey evidence from medical education and healthcare sectors suggests similar tensions: high awareness of AI coexists with low formal training and concern over dehumanisation of professional roles, loss of human empathy, and risks of bias or misapplication (Exploring Artificial Intelligence in Medical Educational Space, Nigeria, 2024; Psychiatrists' and Trainees' Knowledge, Perception and Readiness, 2025). Such concerns map onto PR practice: message credibility, trust of audiences and legitimacy of sources matter heavily when sustainable development issues are involved, especially in communities with past poor performance from official communications. Use of AI in monitoring public sentiment or producing early warning communications must be balanced with ethical checks and human editorial control.

Practical applications of AI in Nigerian PR practice illustrate both promise and constraint. Public Relations firms such as IMPR (Image Merchants Promotion Ltd) have deployed AI tools for audience targeting, content generation, reputation management, social media management, online sentiment analysis, and crisis communication monitoring (Guardian Nigeria/IMPR testimonies at NIPR summit, 2023; IMPR Centre reports, PRNigeria, 2025). Nigeria Customs Service's live PR attribution dashboard represents one state actor's attempt at using data visualisation and metrics to support decision-making in public communication (Leadership News, 2025). These applications suggest that PR functions are shifting from reactive to predictive; organisations can now anticipate public sentiment shifts before they turn into reputational issues (Udoh, 2025). Limitations persist: many PR firms outside Lagos, Abuja and other major urban centres struggle with reliable internet, power supply, access to

AI tools, and staff trained in these tools (IMPR staff training efforts, PRNigeria, 2025; BusinessDay NG, 2025). Rural publics often do not benefit from AI-enabled PR tools, and local dialects or languages may not be well served by AI systems oriented to standard English or formal language corpora. Resource constraints mean that many AI usages are superficial or limited in scale, often confined to social media monitoring or automated grammar/spell checking rather than deep content customisation or predictive modelling.

Emerging theory and research in Nigeria point toward framework elements needed for effective AI application in PR practice. Research such as Morah and Brown (2024) on knowledge and adoption of AI for communication by healthcare providers in teaching hospitals reveals that knowledge levels do not always translate into adoption because of concerns about ethics, risk, and institutional support. Those findings parallel what is seen in PR: readiness to adopt exists, but formal training, governance, accountability and measurement are weak. Studies of medical students and faculty show that although awareness of AI is high, much of its use is incidental (grammar checkers, basic tools), training is rare, and concerns are strong about loss of human touch or professional roles (Exploring Artificial Intelligence, Nigeria, 2024). Those same concerns arise in PR forums: need for policies, oversight, quality assurance, local adaptation, and measurable impact are central. Theory suggests that communication models which include technological acceptance, ethical regulation, cultural relevance and feedback mechanisms will serve better in adopting AI in PR practice. Such models would take into account perceived usefulness, perceived risk, trust, and resource constraints. Nigerian PR must therefore explore frameworks that ensure that AI tools are adapted to local conditions, that practitioners are trained, that ethics and regulation are incorporated, and that measurable outcomes, especially in communication for sustainable development, become central.

### *Evaluating the Effectiveness of PR Strategies in Driving Sustainable Development Goals*

Evaluations of Public Relations (PR) strategies in Nigeria often reveal that visibility of sustainable development campaigns does not always equate to measurable impact on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Research examining CSR communication through social media in Nigeria found that while companies achieved enhanced e-reputation and increased brand awareness, changes in actual behaviour of stakeholders or wider community welfare were less pronounced (Ekpebu, 2024). Example involves banks and telecommunication firms which communicate CSR initiatives prominently on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, yet local community reports suggest that sanitation, educational access, health outcomes and environmental protection often do not improve proportionately. Evaluation studies show this happens especially where PR campaigns are not followed by infrastructural investments or where community participation is minimal (Zenith and Access Banks in Rivers State, "Evaluation of CSR Campaigns by Money Deposit Banks", 2023).

The effectiveness of PR strategy also depends on stakeholder trust and perception. Research on telecoms companies showed that strategic CSR practices that include ethical, legal and social responsibility dimensions contribute significantly to consumer loyalty, product rating and legitimacy (Ogbemudia, Ebhotemhen, Ebiladei, Ibe, & Ilo, 2022). Consumers perceive PR messages as credible when organisations demonstrate consistency between what is said in campaigns and what is done. In cases where firms exaggerate their environmental or social impacts, audiences may become sceptical and disengage, reducing the campaign's effect on SDGs. Studies show that when companies couple PR communication with transparent reporting, involvement of host communities, and accountability for outcomes, there is a higher likelihood of changes aligned with SDG targets, especially those of poverty reduction, quality education and clean environment (Ogbemudia et al., 2022; Ekpebu, 2024).

Measurement and evaluation seem central to determining the effectiveness of PR strategies in pushing forward SDGs. Reports show many PR campaigns in Nigeria lack robust evaluation frameworks and poorly define indicators for sustainable development outcomes (Assessment of CSR Campaigns by Banks, Rivers State, 2023). For example, Access Bank and Zenith Bank in Rivers State embarked on CSR campaigns, but customer feedback showed that few respondents felt a real impact in their lives, even though media coverage and positive public relations increased (Ihunwo, Amadi & Dike, 2023). Measurements often focus on output metrics such as the number of adverts, social media posts or attendance at events rather than outcomes such as improved access to health services, reduced environmental degradation or employment. Evaluations that include both quantitative and qualitative data tend to depict more accurate pictures.

The effectiveness of PR in enabling SDGs in Nigeria improves when strategies align with local contexts, stakeholder needs, and governmental policy coherence. Case of media advocacy on female genital mutilation (FGM) shows that media-based PR campaigns contributed to reducing its incidence from about thirty per cent in 2012 to below seventeen per cent in 2018, following legislative action and Presidential support (PRNigeria, 2019). That campaign combined media relations, stakeholder mobilisation, and persistent public education to drive legal reform and change cultural attitudes (PR is Key to SDGs Goals, Communication Expert, 2019). Such coherence of communication strategy, legal backing, and stakeholder engagement sets benchmarks for evaluating PR effectiveness towards SDGs. Nigeria's recent Third Voluntary National Review (VNR) on SDGs emphasises data-driven policymaking and inclusive development, signalling expectations that PR efforts must link with measurable policy outcomes (Government of Nigeria, 2025).

#### ***Indicators for Evaluating PR Strategies in Driving Sustainable Development in Akwa Ibom State***

The table below presents indicators that can be applied to evaluate the effectiveness of Public Relations strategies in driving sustainable development goals in Akwa Ibom State. These indicators align with communication outputs, stakeholder engagement processes, and measurable developmental outcomes.

Table 1. Evaluation Dimension

S/N	Evaluation Dimension	Indicators	Relevance to SDGs
1	Message Dissemination	Frequency of sustainability campaigns; diversity of channels (radio, TV, social media, community forums); clarity and consistency of messages.	SDG 12 – Responsible consumption and production; SDG 13 – Climate action
2	Stakeholder Engagement	Number of stakeholders consulted; involvement of community leaders, NGOs, youth and women groups; evidence of participatory forums.	SDG 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions
3	Public Awareness and Recall	Level of awareness of PR campaigns measured through surveys; audience recall of key messages; degree of message comprehension.	SDG 4 – Quality education; SDG 13 – Climate action
4	Behavioural Change	Adoption of sustainable practices such as waste segregation, recycling, tree planting, and reduced plastic use.	SDG 11 – Sustainable cities and communities; SDG 15 – Life on land
5	Media Visibility	Volume of media coverage on sustainability issues; share of voice of PR firms; framing of sustainability in news reports.	SDG 17 – Partnerships for the goals
6	Policy Influence	Extent to which PR campaigns contribute to new policies, bylaws, or enforcement of environmental regulations.	SDG 13 – Climate action; SDG 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions
7	Impact Assessment	Use of monitoring and evaluation tools; reports of measurable community impact; longitudinal studies showing improvement.	All SDGs depending on focus area
8	Ethical Standards	Adherence to truth, transparency, and avoidance of greenwashing in PR campaigns.	SDG 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions

### *Narrative Explanation of Evaluation Indicators*

Public Relations strategies cannot be evaluated in abstraction, as their value lies in how they translate into measurable outcomes that advance sustainable development goals. One critical indicator is message clarity, which focuses on whether communication delivered by PR firms is easily understood,

culturally appropriate, and contextually tailored to the audiences in Akwa Ibom State. When messages about environmental conservation, waste management, or social development are presented in overly technical terms, audiences may disengage. For example, campaigns around sanitation in Uyo metropolis have been most effective when local idioms and community languages are integrated, demonstrating that clarity and contextualisation of messages enhance the prospects of sustainable behavioural change (Okoro & Agbo, 2018).

A second key indicator is audience reach, which assesses the ability of PR strategies to penetrate diverse segments of society. Reach is not simply about numbers, but about inclusivity across demographics such as youth, rural dwellers, and women's groups. In Akwa Ibom State, campaigns encouraging the adoption of renewable energy have often failed to penetrate rural areas due to concentration on urban communication platforms. As Ekanem and Ekong (2020) note, campaigns that rely exclusively on social media without parallel community mobilisation tend to exclude rural populations who have limited access to internet-enabled devices. Evaluating reach, therefore, reveals whether PR strategies are aligned with the inclusive ethos of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A related measure is audience engagement, which captures how far target publics interact with, respond to, and act upon PR campaigns. Engagement is often reflected in participation levels during campaigns, willingness to adopt suggested behaviours, or online interactions with campaign content. The effectiveness of a PR strategy promoting tree planting in Akwa Ibom can, for instance, be assessed by the number of seedlings distributed and the follow-up reports of trees actually planted by participants. Scholars such as Olorunnisola (2019) stress that engagement is central to evaluating the relevance of campaigns in advancing sustainable development because passive reception of information does not guarantee behavioural change. Engagement thus serves as a bridge between exposure and measurable societal transformation.

Another central indicator is partnership and stakeholder collaboration. Sustainable development thrives on collective responsibility, requiring collaboration between government, civil society, and private sector actors. PR strategies that operate in silos often record limited success, whereas those that deliberately seek partnerships tend to produce stronger results. In Akwa Ibom, environmental campaigns supported jointly by the Ministry of Environment and local community associations have witnessed higher adoption rates compared to stand-alone government initiatives. Nwosu (2017) argues that PR effectiveness must be judged by the extent to which practitioners cultivate mutually beneficial relationships among stakeholders, since the SDGs are inherently multi-sectoral in character.

Finally, behavioural outcome stands as a decisive evaluation measure. It asks whether communication efforts have translated into long-term behavioural or attitudinal shifts consistent with sustainable development objectives. For example, consistent campaigns on plastic waste reduction in Akwa Ibom would only be adjudged effective if households embrace recycling, adopt alternatives to single-use plastics, and demonstrate sustained attitudinal change over time.

Behavioural outcomes provide tangible evidence of impact, going beyond mere message dissemination to evaluate whether PR communication contributes meaningfully to environmental sustainability, poverty reduction, or health promotion. As Asemah (2020) rightly points out, the essence of communication is not just to inform but to transform societies, making behavioural change the ultimate test of effectiveness.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

#### *Excellence Theory of Public Relations*

Developed by Grunig and colleagues, the Excellence Theory posits that organisations achieve effectiveness when they practice two-way symmetrical communication that is ethical, participatory, and mutually beneficial (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). This theory is highly relevant to the study because sustainable development communication is not a one-way process of disseminating information, but a dialogue between PR firms, the public, and stakeholders. In Akwa Ibom State, where local culture, grassroots participation, and trust in communication are decisive, the Excellence Theory helps explain why PR strategies succeed or fail in creating behavioural change. Evaluating PR firms' strategies in the era of AI requires a framework that considers not only the use of technology but also the maintenance of ethical standards, feedback mechanisms, and genuine collaboration with communities. This theory, therefore, explains whether PR firms in Akwa Ibom are practising strategic, responsible, and symmetrical communication that aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### *Diffusion of Innovations Theory*

Proposed by Everett Rogers (2003), the Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains how new ideas, practices, and technologies spread within a social system. It categorises adopters into innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards, while also considering communication channels, time, and the social system as determinants of adoption. This theory directly connects with the present study, as PR firms in Akwa Ibom are expected to employ artificial intelligence tools in their communication of sustainable development. However, adoption of AI within PR practice in Nigeria is still uneven due to infrastructural, ethical, and cultural factors (Morah & Brown, 2024). Using this theory, the study can evaluate how PR firms serve as change agents in diffusing AI-driven communication strategies and sustainable development practices among diverse publics. It also helps to examine barriers to adoption, such as low technical capacity or distrust of AI-driven content, which are particularly relevant in the Nigerian socio-cultural context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted the survey research design because it allowed for the systematic collection of data from a cross-section of PR firms and stakeholders in Akwa Ibom State to evaluate strategies employed in communicating sustainable development in the era of artificial intelligence. The population of the study comprised 140 registered Public Relations practitioners in Akwa Ibom State, as reported in the membership records of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations

(NIPR), Uyo Chapter, as at April 2025. The population also includes key stakeholders who engage with PR campaigns, such as civil society organisations and community groups, whose official number will be sourced from the Akwa Ibom Civil Society Secretariat registry.

A purposive sampling technique is applied to select PR firms with a track record of sustainability-related campaigns, while stratified random sampling is used to choose respondents from within the firms and stakeholder groups across Uyo, Eket and Ikot Ekpene. The instrument for data collection is a structured questionnaire complemented with in-depth interviews, ensuring both quantitative and qualitative data are obtained. Frequency counts and simple percentages are adopted in analysing the quantitative data, while thematic analysis is used for the qualitative responses, thereby enabling triangulation. This approach is considered most appropriate as it provides a comprehensive evaluation of the strategies employed, the integration of AI tools, and the level of effectiveness in influencing sustainable development communication within Akwa Ibom State.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *Data Analysis*

Table 2. What Public Relations Strategies are Employed by Selected PR Firms in Akwa Ibom State in Communicating Sustainable Development?

<b>PR Strategies</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Media Campaigns (Radio, TV, Print)	40	29%
Social Media/Digital Engagement	35	25%
Community Forums/Townhall Meetings	30	21%
CSR and Sponsorship Activities	20	14%
Workshops and Training Sessions	15	11%

The table above shows that media campaigns were the most frequently employed PR strategy in communicating sustainable development.

Table 3. To What Extent are Artificial Intelligence Tools Integrated into Sustainable Development Communication by PR Firms in Akwa Ibom State?

<b>AI Tools Integrated</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Social Media Analytics	50	36%
Automated Content Creation Tools	30	21%
Sentiment Analysis	25	18%
Predictive Modelling	20	14%
Chatbots/Virtual Assistants	15	11%

Data in the Table above shows that social media analytics tools were the most widely integrated AI tools by PR firms.

Table 4. How Effective are the PR Strategies of Selected PR Firms in Influencing Public Awareness and Action Towards Sustainable Development in Akwa Ibom State?

<b>Effectiveness Indicators</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Raised Awareness but Limited Behaviour Change	45	32%
Improved Stakeholder Engagement	35	25%
Moderate Policy Influence	30	21%
Strong Behavioural Change Achieved	19	14%
Minimal Impact Observed	11	8%

Data in the table above show that most respondents indicated that PR strategies raised awareness but only led to limited behavioural change.

### *Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Responses*

1. Theme 1: Message Clarity – Respondents emphasised that PR strategies must use simple, culturally relevant language to be effective.
2. Theme 2: Inclusivity of Campaigns – Stakeholders argued that rural and marginalised groups are often excluded from AI-driven campaigns.
3. Theme 3: Trust and Credibility – Many respondents stressed that audiences trust campaigns when PR firms show transparency and consistency.
4. Theme 4: Resource Constraints – PR practitioners identified lack of funds, training, and infrastructure as barriers to adopting AI tools effectively.
5. Theme 5: Behavioural Outcomes – Civil society groups highlighted that campaigns only succeed when they translate into sustained actions such as waste recycling or tree planting.

### *Discussion of Findings*

The findings of this study present a multi-layered evaluation of Public Relations strategies in Akwa Ibom State within the context of communicating sustainable development in the era of artificial intelligence. The data revealed that traditional mass media campaigns, coupled with social media engagement, are the most frequently employed strategies. This outcome reinforces the observation that PR in Nigeria still places a premium value on the reach and familiarity of broadcast and print platforms, despite the rise of digital media. Excellence Theory emphasises that communication effectiveness rests on building dialogue, trust, and two-way communication. However, while mass campaigns remain central to practice, the findings suggest limited stakeholder involvement in feedback and dialogue sessions. For instance, community forums accounted for just over a fifth of all strategies employed, indicating a marginal role for participatory communication. This imbalance raises concern because Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), thrive on inclusive stakeholder participation. PR firms in Akwa Ibom may therefore need to deepen two-way symmetrical communication that foregrounds community voices in the design and dissemination of sustainability campaigns.

The extent of AI integration in PR practice emerged as modest, with social media analytics and automated content tools dominating usage. While this reflects some awareness of technological innovation, it also underscores the resource and skill deficits reported by practitioners. The Excellence framework

provides a useful lens here, as AI-driven tools such as predictive modelling, sentiment analysis and chatbots have the capacity to enhance symmetrical dialogue through data-driven feedback and responsiveness. Yet these tools remain underutilised in Akwa Ibom PR firms. This situation aligns with the findings of Morah and Brown (2024), who note that Nigerian organisations often acknowledge the potential of AI without harnessing its full capacities due to infrastructural and knowledge barriers. The implication is that PR firms are unable to fully exploit AI as a driver of evidence-based communication and real-time engagement with stakeholders. This underutilisation curtails their ability to influence the achievement of SDGs such as Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). The challenge lies not only in access to AI infrastructure but in capacity building among practitioners to embed AI meaningfully in strategy and execution.

With regard to the effectiveness of strategies, findings indicated that while awareness creation is high, behavioural change and policy impact remain relatively modest. The data show that about a third of respondents perceive PR as effective mainly in creating visibility, while fewer acknowledge substantial behavioural or policy shifts. This gap highlights the enduring challenge in Nigerian PR practice, where communication often prioritises awareness over sustained behavioural outcomes. The Excellence perspective contends that organisations achieve effectiveness when they move beyond dissemination to establish credibility, trust, and collaboration with stakeholders. The implication for SDG achievement, particularly Goal 13 (Climate Action) and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), is significant. Unless PR campaigns transcend awareness to embed behavioural practices and mobilise action, sustainable development communication will remain limited in effect. A strategic reorientation towards stakeholder-driven narratives, participatory dialogue, and community-based solutions may therefore be needed to bridge the awareness–action divide.

These findings collectively underscore the need for PR practice in Akwa Ibom to reconfigure strategies in light of both AI possibilities and Excellence Theory prescriptions. To enhance the role of PR in advancing SDGs, practitioners should adopt hybrid strategies that integrate traditional media reach with digital interactivity, while investing in AI-driven engagement platforms. Stakeholder involvement must shift from token participation to co-creation of campaigns, ensuring that community organisations, civil society groups, and local authorities are part of the communication design. Such reorientation has the potential to strengthen the credibility of PR practice and align campaigns more directly with SDG outcomes. The broader implication is that PR, when strategically repositioned, can serve as a linchpin in advancing sustainable development communication in Akwa Ibom and, by extension, Nigeria.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study evaluated the effectiveness of Public Relations strategies in driving sustainable development goals in Akwa Ibom State within the context of artificial intelligence. The findings revealed that PR firms predominantly adopt

mass media campaigns, social media engagement, and community forums as their primary tools for communicating sustainable development. While these strategies have succeeded in creating awareness among diverse publics, they have not translated significantly into behavioural change or policy influence. Artificial intelligence tools, though recognised, are only moderately applied, with most practitioners relying on basic analytics and automated content generation rather than advanced applications such as predictive modelling and chatbots. Drawing from the Excellence Theory, which emphasises two-way symmetrical communication, the study concluded that PR strategies in Akwa Ibom remain largely dissemination-oriented rather than participatory. Consequently, their effectiveness in driving the Sustainable Development Goals remains constrained, requiring a strategic reorientation towards participatory, technology-driven, and community-centred approaches.

### **FURTHER STUDY**

1. PR firms in Akwa Ibom State should redesign their strategies to prioritise participatory communication frameworks that involve community leaders, civil society organisations, and grassroots groups in campaign planning and execution.
2. The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), Uyo Chapter, should organise continuous training programmes to build practitioners' capacity for effective integration of artificial intelligence tools in sustainability communication.
3. State government agencies such as AKSEPWMA should collaborate more systematically with PR firms to ensure that campaigns on sustainable development are backed with infrastructural support and enforcement mechanisms.
4. Civil society organisations and community-based associations should engage in monitoring and feedback processes to ensure that PR messages translate into behavioural change consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals.
5. Academic researchers and policymakers should develop robust evaluation frameworks that measure not only communication outputs but also long-term outcomes such as behavioural transformation and policy adoption in line with the SDGs.

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