UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA

**DIGITAL MEDIA IN PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION:
THE CASE OF SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA**

ROSEMARY LEBENE SABAKPO

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ROSEMARY LEBENE SABAKPO

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DECLARATION

Student's Declaration

I, **Rosemary Lebene Sabakpo**, declare that this thesis, except for quotations and references contained in published works which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.

Signature…………………………

Date……………………………

SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this work was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for supervision of thesis as laid down by the University of Education, Winneba.

SUPERVISOR'S NAME: **DR. MAVIS AMO-MENSAH**

SIGNATURE:……………………

DATE:…………………………….

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Simon Mawuli Sabakpo. Thank you for your sacrifices and your love.
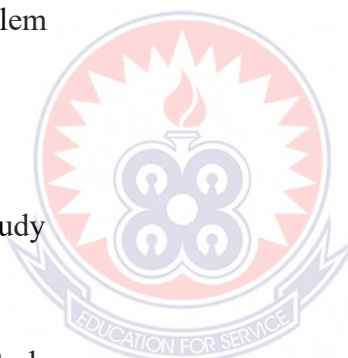
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the incorporation of digital media into undergraduate PR education in Ghana, using UniMAC-GIJ and UPSA as case studies. The study explored the methods through which PR educators have incorporated digital media into the curriculum; assessed public relations students' perspectives on this incorporation; and identified emerging issues in integrating digital media within public relations education. The study employed Kolb's experiential learning theory and collected data through in-depth interviews with PR educators and focus group discussions with selected PR students. Findings indicate that both universities actively incorporate digital media courses and topics within their public relations curricula, employing diverse teaching strategies such as case studies and critiques, practical applications, and assignments to enhance digital literacy. The educators also utilize digital tools and platforms including YouTube, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom, and WhatsApp to teach which enhances students' engagement, while equipping them with digital skills. However, while the students believed that digital media skills were pertinent to public relations education and industry, they expressed a preference for a more hands-on approach to learning digital media, suggesting that current methods may not fully meet their needs for practical experience. The study highlights the multifaceted issues of integrating digital media into public relations education, encompassing technological, infrastructural, and pedagogical aspects that need attention and resolution. The study also suggests strategies to better prepare students for the digital dimensions of the public relations industry.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) observe that until a few decades ago, the traditional media: Newspapers, Magazines, Radio, and Television were the principal means of disseminating information and mass-media messages, with trained journalists serving exclusively as disseminators of news and information. The ability to control messages is no longer the sole domain of a media organization. Now, digital media has made it possible for individuals to have the same opportunity (Orji-Egwu et al., 2019).

Digital media refers to the array of technological advancements that have transformed communication through the digitalization of media content, the introduction and widespread of novel applications and platforms, and the emergence of virtual communities (Fang et al. 2019). Digital media platforms have transformed communication by providing new channels for reaching, educating, interacting with, selling to, getting to know, and serving audiences (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). The top-down, hegemonic structure of traditional media appears to be contested by digital media's bottom-up, participatory character (Kramp, 2015).

Li and Wang (2021) note that social media is the major new media channel to result from technological innovation. These methods are generally claimed to have better technical capabilities and produce better results than the traditional media (also known as 'old media') (Li & Wang, 2021). With the replacement of traditional forms of communication by contemporary digital means, the process of contemporary communication, expressed through online forms of communication, has become more efficient, faster, and simpler (Simonson, 2013).

Nielson et al. (2016) reported that due to technological advancements, mostly attributed to the emergence of the internet, the slow shift towards digital media has recently accelerated and altered the media landscape in potentially fundamental ways. Another consequence of digital media has been the decline in print readership and television viewing (Al-Quran, 2022). Again, due to widespread internet access and high levels of internet use, more than half of all time is now spent with digital media, including internet use on smartphones, tablets, and personal computers (Al-Quran, 2022).

Bharadwaj et al. (2013) observed that the corporate infrastructure has also changed during the past ten years, becoming more connected to digital processes as a result of digital media technologies. They point out that not only does the new infrastructure make things easier and faster for people; but they also make it possible to control, coordinate, and collaborate on tasks in new ways more quickly and affordably at lower costs than in previous ears. Necmiye and Fahri (2017) also note that the way customers behave, how firms conduct business, how organizations service their customers, and a host of other things have altered as a result of digitalization.

Arief and Saputra (2019) affirm that public relations has also evolved from the traditional era (described as Web 1.0) to the digital era (described as Web 4.0). According to them, in the traditional era, print media became the centerpiece in the distribution of information, hence, the form of communication was one-way communication where public relations activities were broadcaster-like. Public relations 2.0 is described as the era of the emergence of online media where the form of communication is horizontal or many to many. This era was characterized by the beginning of the transition from print media to digital platforms. Public Relations 3.0 is the era in which social media was born; while Public Relations 4.0 is the era of AI and big data (Arief and Saputra, 2019). In this era, public relations competes with robots

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that can write releases, plan uploads of materials, and predict strategic steps an organization needs to take regarding a phenomenon. (Arief and Saputra, 2019).

Similarly, Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) also described the evolution of public relations practice from the traditional to the digital era and noted that the early 20th-century public relations campaigns mostly used traditional media to promote clients, where radio and television became indispensable tools for public relations. Again, these technologies were mostly one-way communication channels used by public relations practitioners to disseminate information to the general public, and content was frequently only made available after passing the examination of media gatekeepers. However, with the advent and widespread use of the Internet, public relations professionals can engage with the publics directly on a scale never before possible without obtaining the consent of media gatekeepers or adhering to their regulations (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018).

Wright and Hinson (2017) postulate that many parts of the public relations profession have undergone progressively drastic alterations as a result of new, developing, and social communication channels. The advent of digital media has given media professionals, particularly public relations professionals, a variety of outlets to engage their publics directly and successfully without relying on traditional media (Orji-Egwu et al., 2019). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), gaining respectable coverage in newspapers, radio and television was the main goal of public relations campaigns before now. They argue that digital media gives professionals a unique opportunity to track public opinion, gather information on issues, and have dialogue with publics concerning issues affecting the organization or society. Public relations practitioners are therefore increasingly embracing digital media (Permatasari et al., 2021).

Orji-Egwu et al. (2019) contend that the rise of digital media has resulted in improved methods for conveying stories, and a variety of tools, including digital images and films. Large and small institutions have chosen digital public relations, which mostly uses digital channels. (Permatasari et al., 2021).

Research on public relations education examines the teaching and learning of public relations in academic institutions, as well as the professional development of students. As a result of these changes in the practice of public relations, there have been calls from educators, practitioners, and scholars to incorporate digital media into public relations education. For instance, the Commission for Public Relations Education (2018) report stresses that educators should integrate activities relating to technology trends in all courses to keep up with current media trends. The report notes that there are still gaps in the workforce's capacity relative to the demands of the profession. (Commission for Public Relations Education, 2018). Again, McCollough et al. (2021) affirm that the way contemporary issues are perceived and communicated is changing as a result of digital tools, so public relations education should place priority on teaching students how to use these tools.

According to Fang et al. (2019), educators should provide students with a wide range of digital abilities in the teaching and learning of public relations and advertising to fulfill the demands of the industry. Luttrell et al. (2021) argue that because of the emerging issues that digital media presents to communication practitioners, there is a crucial need to assess the gap of integrating digital media into public relations education. Specifically, in the case of Ghana, Thompson (2018) in examining how lecturers in public relations in Ghana are preparing students to be effective practitioners, contends that the incorporation of new media and technological skills in public relations courses has come up as a concern, especially given that the industry demands and values

these talents in graduates. This background underscores the need to examine how digital media has been incorporated into Ghana's public relations education.

1.1 An Overview of Public Relations Education

According to Wright (2011), the first public relations course was introduced in 1920 by the University of Illinois. The United States of America (USA) implemented systematic techniques to encourage public relations career progression. The Public Relations Society of America was founded in the USA to improve the skill level of practitioners. Similarly, the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) was established by the United Kingdom (UK) in 1948 (Bernays, 2013). According to Wright (2011), the first part of the 20th century saw considerable public relations education developments in the USA. Several other nations were inspired to create similar programs at their educational institutions (Wright, 2011).

There are similarities in curriculum across different public relations schools since the evolution of public relations education has followed a pattern that is consistent throughout the world (Abdullah & Ahmad, 2022). Sriramesh and Hornaman (2006) and DiStaso et al. (2009) postulated that public relations curricula lack global consensus, although it is locally discussed. Cultural public relations discrepancies result from various states' unique cultural, political, economic, and social traits, having a considerable impact on local public relations curricula (Fitch & L'Etang, 2017).

Public relations practice in Ghana has been in existence since the colonial era (Hansen, 1968). Before independence, public relations was carried out in large corporations by expatriates who were mostly known as information officers, according to Gyan (1991). Post-independence, the local people replaced expatriates in ministries and large multinational corporations. This prompted businesses to ask that the locals

communicate with the ministries on their behalf. As a result, the indigenous people served as a conduit or link between the ministries and these global corporations (Gyan, 1991).

Again, Gyan (1991) points out that public relations was employed to bridge the communication gap between the local ministries and the international corporations. Later, these corporations hired Ghanaian journalists to work as public relations officers. According to Gyan (1991), even though these journalists handled public relations duties, they lacked any formal training. Amoakohene (2015) adds that public relations practitioners came from many backgrounds and that the field was not valued as a career at that time. To provide information, publicity, and public relations services, the Information Service Department previously known as Ghana Information Service was established. This resulted in more officers receiving training in public relations duties (Gyan, 1991). As a result, during the Second Republic, the Information Service Department was re-organized as the government's public relations department and it started hiring public relations officers for the various ministries and agencies (Gyan, 1991).

According to Amoakohene (2015), the growth of public relations was inhibited between 1966 and the return to democratic rule in 1992 (a period marked by civilian and military transitions in government). The restoration of democracy and media liberalization brought public relations back into the spotlight as a profession. (Amoakohene, 2015, Thompson, 2015). According to Thompson (2018), there are already more than one thousand, five hundred (1,500) registered practitioners working across the entire nation. The Institute of Public Relations (IPR Ghana), a reputable umbrella organization, offers practitioners a venue for networking and refresher training (www.iprghana.com).

According to Blankson (2004), formal public relations education in Ghana began in the 1960s when Mr. Harold Macmillan (former British Prime Minister) and Mr. Jimmy Moxon (Director of Information Services of Ghana and public relations adviser to President Nkrumah started the Ghana Institute of Journalism) to train officers who had been employed in the public service after independence. The first training program for journalists in sub-Saharan Africa was founded by the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) now part of the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC). Later, it added public relations and advertising courses and started awarding bachelor's degrees as well as diplomas in these fields (Blankson, 2004). UniMAC-GIJ also offers an MA/MPhil in Strategic Public Relations Management (www.gij.edu.gh). Thompson (2015) notes that the University of Ghana's Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication (currently the Department of Communication Studies) established post-graduate training in communication in 1972. The Institute awarded graduate diploma, Master of Arts (MA), and Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Communication Studies. A 12-month M.A. degree replaced the graduate diploma starting in 2001, and a doctoral degree began in 2013. The Department of Communication Studies taught public relations and advertising together for more than 15 years after it was founded, possibly as a result of the time's lack of respect for the academic disciplines of public relations and advertising (Thompson, 2015). These two institutions were the only ones providing communication training in Ghana up until 2006 (Amoakohene, 2015). Anani-Bossman (2018) notes that many institutions are presently offering undergraduate and graduate-level PR programs.

Table 1 Tertiary institutions in Ghana that teach communication and public relations. Source: Ghana Tertiary Education Commission.

Tertiary institutions in Ghana that teach Communication and Public Relations

Public Institutions		
Institution	**Programme**	**Date of Commencement**
University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC-GIJ)	Diploma in Communication	2006
	B.A Communication Studies – Public Relations option	2006
	M.A/MPhil Strategic Public Relations Management	2022
	M.A Public Relations with Marketing	2022
	M.A Public Relations	2013
University of Ghana, Legon	MA Communication Studies,	1998
	MPhil Communication Studies	1998
	PhD Communication Studies	2013
University of Education, Winneba (UEW)	MA/MPhil in Strategic Communication	2007
	B. A Communication Studies	2019
University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA)	Diploma in Public Relations Management	2008
	B.A Public Relations Management	2008
	MBA Corporate Communications Management	2019
University of Cape Coast (UCC)	BA Communication Studies	2011
	M A Communication Studies	2016
	Mphil Communication Studies	2021
Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA)	B.A Communication Studies (Public Relations Option)	2015
	M.A Public Relations	2015
Private Institutions		
Institution	**Programme**	**Date of Commencement**
Christian Service University College	B.A Communication Studies	2011

African University College of Communications	Diploma in Communication Studies B.A Communication Studies	2002 2007
Central University College	B. A Communication Studies	2014
Islamic University College	B.A Communication Studies	2011
Pentecost University College	B. A Communication Studies	2011
Wisconsin International University College	B.A Communication Studies	2014
Academic City College	B.A Communication Studies	2018
BlueCrest College	B.A Mass Communications and Journalism	2016
Knutsford College	BSc. Communication and Media Studies	2018
Methodist University College	B.A Communication Studies	2018
Perez University College	B.A Communication Studies	2018

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Neill and Schauster's (2015) study shows that public relations professionals desire digital skills in their hires. As highlighted by Permatasari et al. (2021), the adoption of digital public relations, primarily leveraging digital media, has gained popularity among organizations of various sizes. Wolf and Archer's (2018) research also indicates that the dialogic features of digital technologies not only enhance traditional public relations capabilities but have also become a crucial component of it. McCollough et al. (2021) assert that digital platforms have transcended being exclusive to younger demographics, as even the older generation is increasingly embracing their use.

In light of this shifting dynamic, a pressing real-world challenge emerges: the imperative that public relations students' educational experiences take into account

developments in the industry as they prepare for life in the professional world (McCollough et al., 2021). The growing influence of digital media, coupled with its widespread use by publics and public relations professionals, as well as the industry's preference for digitally-savvy recruits require educators and institutions to critically assess and adapt public relations education and training.

Scholars have researched the incorporation of digital media into public relations education. (Ewing et a1., 2018 Fang et al., 2019 ; Luttrell et al., 2021 ; McCollough et al., 2021). For instance, McCollough et al. (2021) conducted content analyses of course descriptions to determine how educators in accredited public relations programs are responding to the need for industry-specific competency with courses in social media, analytics, and digital media. Similarly, Luttrell et al. (2021) performed content analyses of all graduate and undergraduate public relations programs that are accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) and the Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) to investigate how and where social media, digital media, and analytics courses have been incorporated into the public relations curricula. Fang et al. (2019) investigated how public relations and advertising education incorporate digital media into their courses. Ewing et al. (2018) also examined how faculty teach social media analytics in public relations programs. These studies were conducted in the West.

Within the African context, few studies have been done on public relations education. For instance, Benecke and Bezuidenhout (2011) looked into experiential learning approaches that are used in South Africa to educate and train aspiring public relations professionals. Sende and Vladimir (2021) reported on the extent to which the public relations curriculum in South Africa incorporated cultural diversity knowledge. Again, in South Africa, Azionya et al. (2019) illustrated the benefits of implementing a Value

Based Education (VBE) strategy to give aspiring public relations professionals the moral principles they will need to uphold ethical practice and promote these principles in the organizations they would oversee. In Zimbabwe, Chibike and Nkomo (2022) investigated public relations training and cultural sensitivity using the conceptual framework of cultural sensitivity and situational theory of publics.

In Ghana, Thompson (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with public relations educators to investigate how public relations educators in Ghana are educating students to be effective practitioners. Affum (2021) also looked into post-graduate students' perspectives on Ghana's public relations education. The literature review indicates a notable scarcity of research on public relations education in Africa, especially concerning digital media integration. Furthermore, it appears that no study has yet explored the incorporation of digital media into Ghana's public relations curriculum. The goal of this study is to examine how digital media has been incorporated into public relations education in Ghana.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study operationalizes the 'incorporation of digital media' to mean the inclusion and teaching of digital tools and platforms in the public relations program. The study seeks to address the following objectives:

1. To explore how public relations educators have incorporated digital media into public relations education of the selected universities.

2. To investigate students' perspectives on the incorporation of digital media into the public relations education of the selected universities.

3. To examine the emerging issues associated with digital media incorporation in public relations education of the selected universities.

1.4 Research Questions

This study, in its attempt to meet the above-stated research objectives, seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How have public relations educators incorporated digital media into public relations education in the selected universities?

2. What are students' perspectives on the incorporation of digital media into public relations education of the selected universities?

3. What are the emerging issues associated with digital media incorporation into public relations education of the selected universities?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The necessity to research public relations in Africa, particularly Ghana, is suggested by literature. According to Anani-Bossman (2021), Ghana in particular, and all of Africa is unexplored for public relations discussions. He contends that contributions from African nations like Ghana are necessary to adequately resolve the discourse on global public relations. There is a definite need for much more empirical research that could serve as the basis for an African perspective (Anani-Bossman, 2021).

This study answers this call by investigating how digital media has been incorporated into public relations education in Ghana. This study aims to delve into three key aspects: first, it scrutinizes the incorporation of digital media into public relations education by educators. Second, it delves into the viewpoints of public relations students on the incorporation of digital media in their education. Finally, it explores the emerging issues associated with incorporating digital media into public relations education. The significance of this research resonates across multiple stakeholder groups,

encompassing academia, government bodies, civil society organizations, and practitioners in the field of public relations in Ghana.

For academia, this research contributes to the field of public relations education. Thompson (2018) also notes that the literature on public relations education in Africa is few. The study contributes to the academic community by adding to the body of knowledge in the field of public relations education. It sheds light on a relatively unexplored area, which is how public relations education in Ghana infuses digital media. This can lead to new research on the integration of digital media into public relations pedagogy as well as the development of new theories and pedagogical approaches.

Furthermore, the findings generated by this research can serve as a valuable resource for curriculum development within public relations programs. Educators specializing in public relations can draw upon these insights to fine-tune their courses; ensuring that they remain in sync with the ever-evolving industry landscape. Ultimately, this realignment equips graduates with enhanced readiness for the demands of public relations practice of the digital era. Auxier (2020) is of the view that, for potential professionals and recent graduates entering the communication industries, knowledge of emerging digital media technologies and intelligence platforms is highly desired.

Moreover, academic institutions stand to benefit by applying the insights from the study to augment the quality of education they offer. This may encompass the modernization of teaching methodologies and the optimization of resources to effectively cater to the contemporary communication requirements of both students and the professional world.

Government agencies that are responsible for education and labour can benefit from this study by gaining insights into the skills and knowledge required by the modern public relations workforce. The study's findings can play a pivotal role in shaping policies aimed at enhancing the employability of graduates. Governments can leverage these findings to advance digital literacy within educational curricula, aligning them more closely with industry needs and fostering a workforce that excels in digital competence.

Within the scope and operations of civil society organizations, the importance of effective public relations cannot be overstated. These entities heavily rely on strategic communication to convey their messages to the public. Understanding the integration of digital media within public relations education is of paramount significance for such organizations. It equips them with the knowledge needed to engage more proficiently with their target audiences in an era dominated by digital platforms. Civil society organizations can harness the findings of this study to advocate for enhancements in public relations education programs. By doing so, they can contribute to the cultivation of improved communication practices within the field, potentially yielding substantial benefits for various social causes and initiatives.

This study equally holds significant implications for both professional development and students studying public relations in general. Practitioners in the field of public relations stand to gain substantial advantages from the findings and conclusions of this study. Specifically, it provides them with a deeper understanding of how digital media is being integrated into the education of future professionals. The said knowledge is invaluable as it can serve as a compass for their professional development, ensuring they remain competitive and relevant in an ever-evolving industry.

Moreover, the study can contribute to enhancing employability in the public relations sector. By shedding light on the perspectives and strategies related to digital media incorporation, practitioners can better anticipate potential hiring considerations and prepare themselves for emerging challenges in this domain. In essence, the study equips them with the knowledge needed to stay at the forefront of the industry.

For students pursuing courses in public relations, this study assumes paramount importance. It serves as a bridge between their academic pursuits and real-world relevance. By elucidating the role of digital media in their future careers, the study effectively prepares them to navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of the industry. Furthermore, the study provides students with insights into what they should expect from their education. It encourages them to actively engage in the learning process, recognizing that digital media literacy is an indispensable component of their skill set. Armed with this understanding, students can approach their studies with a heightened sense of purpose and direction, fully aware of the critical role that digital media plays in shaping the contemporary practice of public relations.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The current study is mainly focused on exploring digital media in public relations education in Ghana specifically looking at how public relations educators incorporate digital media into their courses, how students perceive the incorporation, and the emerging issues associated with the incorporation of digital media in public relations education in Ghana. This study primarily looks at public relations education and excludes the broader field of mass communication and its subfields. The post-graduate level is not included in this study, which solely looks at undergraduate public relations education. The study will be specifically targeting two public relations training

institutions, namely the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC) and the University of Professional Studies, Accra.

1.7 Organization of the Study

The research is organized into five distinct chapters, each dedicated to exploring a particular facet of the research. The first chapter introduces the study, setting the stage with background information, highlighting the problem under investigation, laying out the study's objectives and research questions, and detailing its significance and scope. The second chapter delves into the literature review and the theoretical underpinning relevant to the study. In the third chapter, the research methodology is detailed, including sample selection techniques, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures selected to meet the study's goals. The fourth chapter is dedicated to analyzing the data according to the methodologies described earlier. The final chapter concludes the study, offering recommendations for future research. This chapter encapsulates the key findings of the research and proposes directions for future inquiries and actions.

1.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter is the introductory chapter of the study and it details the background of the study as well as the problem for which this study was conducted. In addition, the research objectives and questions are highlighted among other aspects. The next chapter will detail the literature review and the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

A literature review is a crucial research tool to conduct successful research and create a strong foundation for knowledge growth (Webster & Watson, 2002). It helps the researcher find the right resources for a problem. The relevant theories that best describe the situation under examination are covered in this chapter along with reviews of related literature from various contexts.

2.1 An Overview of Public Relations

Gregory (2004, p.1) describes the nature of public relations as "dynamic, fast-moving, always developing at the heart of the action". Finding a single definition for the profession of public relations is challenging due to the field's global nature because both academics and practitioners have not agreed on a single definition of public relations (Butterick, 2011). Anani-Bossman (2018) offers an understanding of public relations as communication management aimed at establishing and maintaining positive relationships and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics, which is similar to the claim made by Gruning and Hunt (1984, p.6), who defined public relations as "the management of communication between an organization and its publics," regardless of the disagreement over a clear definition of the profession. Here, public relations is understood or defined as an organization's ability to effectively communicate with its publics to maintain a relationship and foster understanding.

According to Grunig (2001), public relations is evolving from a purely technical communication function to a management function. This supports the definition

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provided by Cutlip et al. (2002, p. 6), three influential researchers in the field, who described public relations as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics on whom its success or failure depends." According to Freitag and Stokes (2009), definitions like these may not be applicable in developing nations and countries undergoing transitions, such as those in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. By incorporating a cultural component into the profession, Sriramesh & Verčič, (2009) link the definition of public relations to globalization to underline this point. The authors aver that a country's cultural variety should be reflected in its public relations practice. Therefore, according to Gruning (2001), the profession of public relations will be most valuable to organizations and society if it is founded on the principles and worldviews of other cultures. Fill and Jamieson (2011) asserts that public relations can penetrate through messages and is more cost-effective and sometimes more trustworthy. In public relations, it is therefore essential to match theoretical learning with practice, to ensure that the function operates effectively in the broader organizational context (Swart, 2012).

According to Arief and Saputra (2019), the definition provided by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations which states that "public relations is about reputation - the results of what you do, what you say, and what other people say about you," is the one that best describes public relations in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Permatasari et al. (2021) are of the view that this definition is the most pertinent because nearly all information that is spread today is stored in huge digital data that can be accessed by anybody who needs it.

2.2 Digital Media

Research suggests that as the 'analog age' came to an end, a tsunami of new technologies, electronics, and digital applications sent us plummeting into the 'digital age.' (Heinderyckx, 2014). Sheikh and Serhan (2022) define digital media as media that uses a computer to create, transmit, and store information. For Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012) 'digital media' are information and communication technologies that include a variety of functions, applications, and content creations that allow users to connect at the same time. Furthermore, Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012) postulate that in the current media environment, digital media can be thought of as channels of communication that include Web 2.0, 3.0, mobile communications, computer-enabled user devices, and social media. According to Rayburn (2012), digital media consists of text, audio, video, and graphics that are distributed via the Internet for online consumption.

The plethora of definitions of digital media was categorized by Guinibert (2022) into digitization, content, communication, and technology. The 'digitization of content', though it is referred to in many different ways, is the first aspect of digital media definitions that is consistently used. Terms like 'digitized,' 'encoded in a machine-readable format,' 'digitally compressed,' and 'data' are frequently used. Some definitions also consider the media as devices that store digitized content. Second, the use of the term 'media' necessitates the inclusion of 'content,' which can refer to specific media types (e.g., audio, graphics, video), multimodal elements, or information. Third, the facet which is 'communication' recognizes that digital media involves some form of communication, and it challenges the traditional one-way communication of traditional media. Fourth, 'technology' and its infrastructure are

included since digital media has deep roots in information and communication technology (ICT) (Guinibert, 2022).

Scholars have also identified the characteristics of digital media. For instance, Sheikh and Serhan (2022) mentioned interactivity, diversity, integration, and surpassing cultural borders as characteristics of digital media. Herbst (2014) also contends that digital technologies enable storytelling with four distinct features: integration, accessibility, connectivity, and interactivity. Pečiulis (2016) also defined the characteristics of digital media to include cost effectiveness, momentariness, accessibility, and interaction. Again, Komodromos and Nicoli (2016) outlined some basic characteristics of digital media or digital media contents as immediacy, internationality availability, interactivity, anonymity, and unreliability.

Other phrases that describe the characteristics of digital media include 'interactive media', which is a media feature that allows the recipient to participate in the content rather than just receiving it. Internet users are also referred to as interactors in interactive media and also known as 'online/cybermedia' or network media. The *Operational Media* refer to 'hypermedia' and 'hyperlink' as 'info media' or 'information media''. Last but not the least, 'multimedia' concerns the computer-controlled blending of text, graphics, still and moving images (Video), animation, audio, and any other media where any type of information may be represented, saved, transmitted, and managed digitally (Pavithra, 2018). Demuyakor (2020) contends that digital media is also called new media. According to Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012), the term 'new' refers to both novel applications and technologies that enable novel, creative approaches to undertaking new tasks. The idea of 'new media' as a technological construct, according to Peters (2009), is simply an approximation of a medium's contemporary significance since technologies advance so quickly that what

is 'new' currently will soon become common and then 'old'. Review of the literature indicates that social media is the primary focus of studies on digital media. The presence of interactions and dialogues between individuals is what distinguishes social media from other digital media. (Kaplan &Haenlein, 2010).

Research has also identified the special potential of digital media. According to Shirky (2011), transaction costs are lowered to a point where people can interact, cooperate, and take collective action without the need for formal organizations to regulate operations and actions. Another aspect of digital media is that it allows for the transfer of power from those who own the means of production—that is, organizations that create and manage messages, like publishing houses and newspaper publishers, as well as departments and agencies responsible for advertising and public relations—to the general public (Shirky, 2011). The ability to create content much more actively has also been made possible by digital media. (Shirky, 2011). Anyone with access to computers and the Internet can engage in social media activities, publish original writing, works of art, movies, photographs, and commentary, as well as do business online (Abraham, 2016). Al-Quran (2022) notes that running numerous campaigns simultaneously is possible with digital media, which enables users to execute campaigns using a variety of different creatives. This enables a company to more effectively target every demographic group. The use of digital media increases the output of thoughtful, well-educated graduates who can comprehend the many social, cultural, political, and technological complexities of the medium. In the long run, these graduates will be able to solve challenging problems and support the making of critical rational decisions (Abraham, 2016). The fact that latent groups are given a voice and the capacity to act is another distinctive feature (Shirky, 2011).

Despite these benefits, news stories warn us about the potential effect that digital media could have on youngsters (Kahne et al.,2009; Twenge, 2017). Young people are perceived as technology addicts who have lost the capacity to interact with others face-to-face (Twenge, 2017). Girls in particular are portrayed as being particularly vulnerable online, despite the larger risks of offline sexual exploitation in families and schools (Jenkins et al., 2016). In addition, Twenge (2017) asserts that smartphone use is linked to depression and suicide. Public concerns regarding emerging digital media are expressed (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). More so, with the use of digital technology, consumers have many options for obscuring their identity. The prevalence of the internet has significantly heightened all forms of bullying, trolling, stalking, threatening, and insulting conduct (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). However, for Buckingham (2007), the pedagogical and social contexts in which digital media is employed play a critical role in determining its benefits.

2.3 The Deployment of Digital Media in Public Relations Practice

Public relations, which strives to manage organization-stakeholder communication (Grunig and Hunt 1984), can now be carried out using digital media to create and sustain stakeholder relationships (Jo & Kim 2003). Verčič et al. (2015) opine that digital technologies have profoundly altered public relations, especially in the last ten years. The top three practical concerns in public relations, according to Zerfass and Schramm (2014), include how to manage digital media. Verčič, et al. (2015) note that the body of knowledge on the connection between public relations and information and communication technologies, digital, social, and mobile (DSM) media, or public relations studies, which covers digital practices or the use of digital media in public relations, does not have a single terminology.

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Verčič, et al. (2015) and Huang et al. (2017) argue that various terms have been used to describe public relations research that looks at digital practices or the relationship between digital media and public relations research. Such terms are not limited to but include: a) *digital public relations* (Huang et al., 2017), b) *interactive online communication* (Kelleher, 2009), c) *social media as public relations tactics* (Taylor & Kent, 2010), d) *website public relations* (Sommerfeldt et al., 2012)*, e) *website/web-based PR* (Kim et al., 2010); f) *online public relations* (Ye & Ki, 2012); and g) *Internet-related/focused PR* (Khang et al., 2012) h) *social media* (Freberg, 2013).

Kelleher (2009) used the term, 'interactive online communication' when looking into whether and in what ways communication patterns found in blogs could assist organizations and its publics in achieving the Internet's promise of creating significant relational outcomes of mutuality of control, satisfaction, commitment, and trust—the perceptions of people on their experiences of interactive communication with a tech company via blogs.

Ye and Ki (2012) used the term, 'online public relations'*,* in examining articles published between 1992 and 2009 to examine the topics and patterns of online public relations research. The authors examined the selected peer-reviewed publications' topics, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, analyses, and recommendations for further study. The results of the study showed that there was an upsurge in online public relations research at the time. The Excellence theory and the Dialogic theory are the two theories that were most frequently utilized in online public relations research. The quantitative research approach was dominant, and content analysis was the predominant research design of the studies.

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Khang et al. (2012) employed the term, 'Internet-related/focused public relations', exploring the patterns of social media research in public relations, advertising, communication, and marketing disciplines from 1997 to 2010. The study analyzed each peer-reviewed paper on social media published in seventeen journals across all four disciplines between 1997 and 2010 over fourteen years. The focus of social media research in the disciplines was found to be on social media usage, perceptions and attitudes about social media, and social media-related concerns.

Kim et al. (2010) employed the terminology, 'website/web-based public relations', conducting a content analysis of Fortune 500 company websites to evaluate how businesses use their websites to connect with and meet the demands of their various stakeholders. The study's findings revealed that Fortune 500 served the needs of their stakeholders in order of importance. Consumers' needs came first, followed by community members, next are government agencies or policymakers, and then lastly activists.

Sommerfeldt et al. (2012) explored the concept of 'website public relations' by examining why activist organizations often neglect to include dialogic elements. This investigation involved interviews with thirteen public relations practitioners working in activist organizations.

The study revealed that activists perceived websites as passive communication tools that should be complemented with the conventional media; the activists believed that the issue they were advocating for, rather than the technology itself, was what made websites effective in drawing visitors, stimulating interest, and fostering relationships. Again, websites appeal to already-existing, highly engaged audiences according to the study.

Taylor and Kent (2010) used the term, 'social media as public relations tactics', examining how professional periodicals socialize students towards professions. *Public Relations Tactics*, a public relations periodical read by students, was reviewed by the authors.   Their research revealed that readers were presented with an overwhelmingly favorable impression of social media's role in public relations. However, there was limited evidence in the publications that social media was a useful instrument for communication.

Freberg et al. (2013) used the 2009 H1N1 crisis as a case study in assessing how social media is used for information sharing in public relations during crises. The authors set up an account on *Delicious* to watch and track the social bookmarks that were being employed as references to the H1N1 outbreak to collect data for the study. Findings showed that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was the most frequently referred to source of information, people were very active, blogs were the most common type of publications, and Twitter was the most frequently cited source, according to the authors' analysis of social bookmarks on the H1N1 virus.

For Huang et al. (2017), these terms (*interactive online communication*, *website public relations*, *website/web-based PR*, *online PR,* and *internet-related/focused PR*) describing public relations research on digital media are problematic because most of them do not extend beyond websites, and do not take into account any future development that might make the internet obsolete. The authors note that they prefer 'digital public relations. Huang et al. (2017) argue that in public relations research, digital public relations is now regarded as a research paradigm. Digital public relations research, according to Huang et al. (2017), has three phases of development: budding, diversification, and advancement. Scholars mostly focused on studying the Internet in general during the budding phase (1998–2003) (Huang et al., 2017). In the

diversification stage (2004–2007), researchers looked at the Internet as a communication tool and started looking into social media (Huang et al., 2017). The advancement stage (2008–2017) concentrated on the growth of social media in public relations studies (Huang et al., 2017).

Digital media, including web-based content, mobile communications, computer-enabled devices, and social media, have been increasingly employed by organizations to manage interactions with their stakeholders in recent years (Park & Reber 2008). Social media has become particularly relevant among the various digital technologies in the field of public relations as the "new" channel, not only for connecting with and with the publics and stakeholders but also for fostering relationships with them. (Verhoeven et al., 2012).

In addition to the above-reviewed studies, other scholars have offered their perspectives regarding the impact of digital media on public relations. For instance, Wright and Hinson (2009) conducted an in-depth investigation into how social media are being used in public relations practice. The study examined how public relations practitioners use social media in the field. The majority of respondents (73%) agreed that social media had changed the way they communicated by making communication more instantaneous, enhanced, and cost-effective than traditional mainstream media. Yet, social media raises issues of credibility, accuracy, and trust and only a small number of organizations actively do social media measurement, according to the study. Findings also indicated that the answer to the issue of whether social media complements traditional mainstream media (newspapers, periodicals, radio, and television) received even higher agreement (85%). This finding of Wright and Hinson (2009) conforms with assertions by Permatassari et al. (2021) and Wolf and Archer (2018) that digital media and traditional media could complement each other in public relations.

A three-year longitudinal study (2009, 2010, and 2011) was carried out by Wright and Hinson (2011) to determine how public relations professionals are utilizing new communications media. The results indicated that the use of digital media for public relations practices increased yearly. According to the findings, professionals saw search engine marketing as the most significant form of communication medium for public relations messaging in 2009. However, in 2010 and 2011, practitioners regarded Facebook as being the most significant and frequently used. In 2010, Twitter was second in terms of usage, but LinkedIn took its spot in 2011.

Wright and Hinson (2013) again, in examining the actual implementation of social and emerging media in public relations practice, found that the use of these emerging media continued to increase each year and enhanced public relations practice. Practitioners agreed that emerging media are altering and impacting the practice of public relations, the impact was on external audiences than internal audiences. The emergence of these media empowered the external audiences (publics). Also, only 43 percent of practitioners conducted social media measurement according to their findings.

In their 2015 study, Wright and Hinson provided an analysis that looked at how public relations practice has undergone significant changes as a result of the development of social and other digital media. Results indicated that Facebook and Twitter were the most used for public relations practice and that digital media continued to give power to external audiences. In 2015, more than half of practitioners (52%) said they measure social media use. Results also show that practitioners think social media and other new media's accuracy, trustworthiness, reliability, confidence, and truthfulness continue to improve unlike in Wright and Hinson (2009) where practitioners believed social media use raises concerns of truth and accuracy.

Similarly, Ngondo (2019) assessed how Zimbabwean public relations practitioners are using social media and other digital technologies. The findings indicate that digital media have improved and changed how Zimbabwean public relations practitioners communicate with their publics. This finding is consistent with that of Wright and Hinson (2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017). Zimbabwean practitioners spend their working hours on digital media. 52% of practitioners said they spent more than half of their time on work-related digital media. This is similar to the 99% of practitioners in the Wright and Hinson (2017) survey, where 94% of practitioners spent some time on work-related digital media activities. This extensive use emphasizes the critical role that digital media play in public relations.

Ngongo's (2019) and Wright and Hinson's (2009, 2011, 2013, and 2017) studies demonstrate that public relations practitioners' use of digital media continually increases only that the new media most used changes yearly. Their studies also show that previously practitioners feared the use of social media would raise issues of credibility and trust but this belief has changed in recent years. Again, it shows that the profession has not adopted measurement as much as it should have. Research and measurement was 43% in 2013, 52% in 2015, and less than 50% in 2017 (Wright & Hinson 2013, 2015, 2017).

Grunig's (2009) groundbreaking study presented a model of a strategic public relations process and provided suggestions for the use of digital media in each phase of this model. According to him, public relations professionals should be involved in the decision-making processes of the organizations they work in. As a result, they require digital media tools to assist them in the process. He concluded that digital media can be used in environmental scanning and media monitoring, stakeholders and publics segmentation, and issues and crisis communication programmes.

Public relations professionals now consider digital technologies as the norm, as supported by Wolf and Archer's (2018) exploratory study, which investigated the views and attitudes of public relations practitioners toward digital technologies. The results showed that traditional public relations skills or the fundamental tenets of public relations had not changed. However, the dialogic capabilities of digital media tools supplement it and are now a crucial part of conventional public relations skills. They argue that the core traditional skills of public relations such as writing are still relevant. This assertion is in line with Permatasari et al's (2021) assertion that traditional or conventional public relations are still relevant. Permatasari et al. (2021) argue that digital and traditional public relations should work synergistically and that organizations may not necessarily need to migrate entirely to digital public relations since the core principles of public relations such as communication and relationship building remain the same.

Permatassari et al. (2021) interviewed ten public relations professionals from various institutions on their views on the trends and skills needed for digital public relations. According to the study, although its core functions remain the same, public relations practice is now more dynamic with the impact of technology. The research revealed that skills needed by practitioners include: oral and written communication skills, analytical skills, and digital skills. The authors concluded that in the implementation of digital public relations, the practitioner ought to be familiar with the use of websites and social media; and must have the ability to create digital content.

Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) summed up the twenty-year body of study on digital communication in public relations and called for the discipline to go beyond looking at whether digital media are used in public relations to an exploration of how they are used or applied strategically. Again, they identified the next research areas in big

data, where analytics have created new opportunities for the field and to better understand the effects of this strategy on digital media in public relations.

In addition, Tong (2022) examined how practitioners perceive organization-stakeholder relationships via digital media using an online survey of 241 marketing and public relations practitioners in Hong Kong. They reported that adopting digital media enables stakeholders to participate more actively with digital content in terms of affective appeal and cognitive engagement. The study established that commitment and trust are relational outcomes of digital organization-stakeholder relationships.

Macharia (2017) assessed the role of new media in public relations practice in organizations in Kenya using questionnaires, observations, and content analysis. The study was underpinned by Marshall McLuhan's Technological Determinism Theory. The results of the study indicated that organizations believed they could communicate their unique image and identity using new media communication platforms. This means that digital communication channels are critical in terms of disseminating information about an organization which will go a long way to help in projecting their identity. In a similar vein, Lee et al. (2013) observe that social media can shape an organization's identity. They provide three characteristics of social media that help reshape organizations' identities: 1. social media enables an organization to maintain relationships with its stakeholders. 2. social media are uncontrollable because users may readily generate, distribute, and even edit information, making the information flow unpredictable and multidirectional. 3. social media facilitate easy searchability and accessibility of all good and harmful content.

Orji-Egwu et al. (2019) examined the extent to which digital media has impacted public relations practices in Nigeria. Through interviews, it was observed that social media

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was the most used digital media platform. It was also revealed that the most affected areas of public relations as a result of emerging technologies are: media relations, media release writing, and event sponsorship.

Scholars have also questioned the value of digital media in public relations. For instance, Valentini (2015) is of the view that conversations about digital technologies in public relations, particularly social media, seem to be unduly optimistic. According to Valentini (2015), the prevalent conversation in public relations is that using social media is 'good' since it may assist organizations in forging relationships and dialogues with their publics. However, for her, social media in particular, as well as other digital technologies, do not always bring opportunities for organizations, but rather might occasionally pose risks and worsen social interactions. She argues that to project a favorable corporate image, some organizations use ghostwriting techniques. Again, public cynicism has increased as a result of monitoring and data collection, making it challenging to interact with and establish relationships with them (Valentini, 2015).

In like manner, Hagelstein et al. (2021) are of the view that digital communication tools and strategies present ethical problems though they improve the dissemination and influence of organizational messages. Their study explored how frequently ethical dilemmas arise in the course of public relations practitioners' daily work; how they evaluate the ethical implications of digital communication technologies and practices; and the methods they use to address ethical dilemmas. In a quantitative survey of 2,324 practitioners working in European public relations departments, the study found that the employment of social bots and big data was deemed the most problematic from an ethical aspect in digital communication.

Bernhard and Russmann (2022) opine that the degree to which digitization is altering the skills and competencies required in public relations, and consequently the profession, remains sparse. In an attempt to fill this gap, Bernhard and Russmann (2022), explored the impact of digitalization on the skill sets needed by practitioners through a longitudinal automated semantic analysis of 62,391 job postings for public relations professionals in Austria and Germany. They found that digital media skills come in second place out of the 25 hard skills that were examined. This indicates the rise in demand for these skills.

Ikpe and Olise (2010) argue that in the 21st century, effective media relations practice in public relations in Nigeria has been made possible by the widespread use of digital media tools by practitioners due to the many advantages they offer. Yet, Ndinojuo et al's (2016) study of the challenges of contemporary digital tools in media relations in Nigeria showed that practitioners are struggling to keep up with contemporary tools in media relations. Factors that account for this include practitioners' poor knowledge of and application of digital tools (Ndinojuo et al, 2016). This demonstrates the need to incorporate digital media into public relations education to equip future professionals with digital skills.

Verčič et al (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of 155 articles on public relations and ICTs, and digital, social, and mobile (DSM) media. It emerged that social media was the area that was discussed the most, although mobile media had been slightly underappreciated. The meta-analysis revealed that prior studies had almost solely concentrated on using digital media tools for media relations while ignoring the impact of issues like mobile technology, privacy, target groups, and the digital divide on public relations activities.

Though review of literature suggests that the impact of digital media on public relations has primarily been investigated from an organization-centric perspective that looks at how practitioners use these tools, Hon (2015) is among the few studies that looked at it from a public-centric perspective. The study examined how the digital media ecosystem has given rise to a form of public relations, that is, digital social advocacy, which enables publics to mobilize in unique ways. A theoretical model of public relations and digital social activism is offered, using the Justice for Trayvon campaign as its backdrop. The campaign illustrates how digital media transfer power from the owners of the means of production to the people; how digital technologies remove gatekeepers and enable citizens to disseminate messages in unfriendly environments.

In Ghana, social media is the main emphasis of digital media technology, with financial and educational institutions as the key stakeholders (Andoh-Quainoo & Annor-Antwi, 2015). Ayiku and Tandoh (2020) undertook a comparative study to explore how private and public institutions in Ghana used their corporate websites as dialogic communication channels and looked at the implications for moral behavior. Through interviews and focus group discussions, it was revealed that while profit-oriented institutions do extend website usage to profit, public institutions do use their websites to inform, educate, train, protect reputations, and create cordial relationships with their publics. This review of literature suggests that digital media has brought about a significant shift towards public relations practice but it has also presented challenges.

2.4 Incorporation of Digital Media into Public Relations Education

The slogan 'connecting theory to practice' has been used constantly for public relations classrooms, courses, and even certain programs to express the need for students to be able to transition easily from the classroom to the boardroom, bringing competency and

profession nearer through public relations training. (Grunig, 2003; Janssen, 1985; Welch, 2016). According to Luttrell et al. (2021), while public relations students prepare for life in the profession, their educational experiences in college classrooms ought to consider new advances in the sector. Data, analytics, and digital media have been important components in the public relations industry's evolution. (Luttrell et al, 2021). Both the field of public relations practice and education in general are experiencing significant development in the digital age (Koçyiğit & Küçükcivil, 2021).

Graphic design and social media are currently required courses that are connected to technology, preceding courses that involve video production, digital media, and visual communication, according to educator reports from the Commission on Public Relations Omnibus Survey results (Commission on Public Relations Education [CPRE], 2018). Both academics and industry professionals identified technology-based courses including social networking, analytics, web development, and graphic design as essential career competencies. Additionally, the importance of data literacy to graduates' contemporary practice was brought up in the report. For graduates to be able to make more informed judgments, they must be able to not just access available data but also extract relevant information from it (CPRE, 2018). Brunner et al (2018) investigated the competencies employers look for when hiring for public relations. According to the study, employers still place a high value on writing, but there was a lot of emphasis on social media writing (47%) and blogging (27%). Employers gave social media a high priority. Their findings highlight the need to incorporate digital media into public relations programs. Researchers and practitioners must take social media proficiency with digital citizenship into account when developing educational programs, building curricula, and devising pedagogies to improve digital citizenship in university students (Xie et al., 2018).

In line with the above, some empirical studies have investigated the incorporation of digital media in the teaching and learning of public relations. Luttrell et al. (2021) carried out content analyses of all graduate and undergraduate public relations programs that are accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) and the Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) to ascertain the extent to how social media, digital media, and analytics courses had been introduced into the public relations curricula. The analysis of course descriptions revealed a significant inclusion of social and digital media platforms, with mentions in 26 distinct courses either by name or in a general sense. However, it was found that only 30 programs (31.9%) required a specific course in social media, digital media, or analytics to complete their undergraduate or graduate degrees. On the flip side, 64 programs (68.1%) across these institutions did not mandate the inclusion of a course in social media, digital media, or analytics in their PR curricula.

Comparably, through a content analysis of 154 public relations course descriptions, McCollough et al. (2021) explored how emerging forms of digital media were being taught in accredited undergraduate public relations programs to further evaluate the degree to which public relations education continues to meet up with the expectations of the industry. The results highlighted an increased focus on the importance of using social media in public relations, particularly its professional use, and stressed the significance of professional growth through practical learning methods.

The studies by Luttrell et al. (2021) and McCollough et al. (2021) focus on course descriptions, which may not always adequately reflect the comprehensiveness of concepts taught in a course. The studies could have included an interview or survey of educators and students. In addition, exploring institutional challenges and other barriers

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educators and students face in incorporating digital media into the curriculum could be useful.

According to Fang et al. (2019), there is an enormous demand for advertising and public relations education to prepare future practitioners for the effective application of technologies. Their study discovered that almost a quarter of advertising and public relations courses taught digital media, laying a greater value on skills courses through a content analysis of 99 institutions providing advertising and public relations programs' course descriptions. A major drawback of this study is the inability of the content analysis of the online course descriptions to express what was taught in class or to explain the deeper reasons for what was found.

Alexander (2016) investigated the digital skills that are becoming more crucial for practitioners of public relations. He highlighted some activities for which future public relations practitioners will need to be proficient in digital technology. These include analytics, crisis management, content creation, social media management, and search engine optimization (SEO).

In the most recent Commission on Public Relations Education report (2018), research and analytics were named as one of the top four skills necessary for entry-level hiring by both practitioners and educators. Research and analytics, data analytics, and measurement and evaluation were the three knowledge areas that were most in demand (CPRE, 2018). Employers seek new workers with social media analytics abilities, as indicated by other studies.

For instance, Adams and Lee (2021) conducted a study to identify the specific analytics skills and expertise that managers of public relations firms value and demand most from new hires. The findings demonstrate that an analytical measurement and data analysis

basic instruction is essential for preparing for the digital job market and that communication managers look for fresh hires with solid analytical skills and the capacity to draw insights from a variety of data sources.

Ewing et al. (2018) examined the social media analytics curricula being taught by academics. Two content analyses were carried out to look into the developments in social media and digital analytics training. The authors looked at comparable course curricula as well as a Twitter discussion involving public relations practitioners and academics. They discovered that in actual practice, emphasis was placed on the development of concepts and abilities, assessment of results, contextualized thinking of data, and training in the use of social listening tools. The study suggested learning objectives that educators should think about including in their digital analytics course curricula. However, the study's applicability was constrained because just a small number of comments were used to support the themes that developed from the Twitter chat. It would have been more illustrative to integrate focus groups and interviews with educators and professionals.

Meng et al. (2019) examined whether social media analytics courses would be engaging to students and help them build a thorough understanding of the important role of social analytics in public relations research and practice using Google Analytics courses and certification exams. They discovered that students want to engage in activities that use their knowledge of online and social analytics to conduct public relations research and practice, even though they lack both a general and technical understanding of social media analytics. Employing qualitative techniques such as focus groups and interviews allows educators to identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, incorporating employers' perspectives would offer valuable insights.

Neill and Schauster (2015) identified the basic competencies required for success in the new media sector through in-depth interviews with executives at American advertising and public relations agencies. The findings demonstrated that, while writing and presentation skills remain important, employers also thought that new workers needed to be proficient in mathematics and data analysis, which are usually tied to social media listening and analytics.

These studies (Adams & Lee, 2021; Ewing et al., 2018; Meng et al. 2019, and Neill & Schauster, 2015) demonstrate that one of the key areas of digital media instruction in public relations education is analytics. The importance of analytics education at various levels was emphasized by Kent et al. (2011). They recommended introducing analytics-related concepts and tools to beginning students while periodically assigning actual data collection to advanced students. As many instructors use scenarios and case studies to teach ethics, having access to real data and helping students understand how to interpret data is beneficial. (Kent et al., 2011).

To discover the basic abilities required of faculty instructing social media courses in public relations programs, Freberg and Kim (2018) interviewed 20 industry professionals. A social media curriculum should focus on developing content, writing, consumer habits, market research, analytics, and connection building, according to the findings. Once more, the survey made it clear that the social media educator should function as a bridge between academia and industry and be actively involved in the social media landscape.

Social media use by practitioners is increasing (Wright & Hinson, 2017). According to Kinsky et al. (2016), the constantly shifting digital environment has sparked a wealth of academic and well-known articles on the topic of effectively utilizing social media;

however, one important but understudied topic is how university curricula can prepare students to enter the workforce with strong social media expertise. Kinsky et al.'s (2016) research examined the Hootsuite certification program, a social media certification program, as a means of enhancing professional social media education in the public relations classroom in an effort to fill this knowledge gap. The study made use of interviews with experts, educators who had used the Hootsuite certification program in their classes, and students who had finished the Hootsuite certification program successfully. The research revealed that students thought they were knowledgeable about social media technologies, knew how to use them tactically, and saw social media expertise as an essential part of their resumes. Students had the opportunity to get a Hootsuite Certification and build their professional reputation, according to instructors who had used Hootsuite in their classes.

Moody and Bates (2013) examined perceptions of junior and advanced public relations students' perceptions on Search Engine Optimization (SEO). The results showed that although students believed SEO to be just as significant as other new media abilities, they felt their SEO knowledge was lacking in comparison to other new media skills. Also, it was discovered that students do not understand how important SEO is to public relations. This illustrates the need for educators to incorporate SEO in their course syllabi and instruct students on SEO. Examining public relations course objectives and teachers' use of SEO strategies in the syllabi and course descriptions would have been more beneficial to the study. Another limitation of this study is that the authors reported the findings together though the participants were two groups of students: junior and senior public relations students. Comparing the responses of the students would have been more helpful.

Anderson and Swenson (2013) studied the essential digital skills endorsed by 25 recognized social media experts and how the public relations curriculum may incorporate these skills. Participants in the study were Twitter chat experts and industry bloggers. The findings showed that experts advised developing decision-making abilities, and practical experience, monitoring online results, using social media strategically, and understanding how to strike a balance between community value and organizational goals. The study offers beneficial ideas for academics and students studying digital public relations. However, since digital public relations cover a larger spectrum of topics than just blogging and social media, the study's exclusive concentration on public relations Twitter chat professionals, and industry bloggers limits the extent and depth of the discussion.

Using the experiential learning theory, Fraustino et al. (2015) investigated creative strategies for imparting social media knowledge in public relations courses. In the study, social media strategy instructors at three university campuses engaged students in cross-institutional Twitter conversations. Using qualitative textual analysis of tweets along with on-site observation, researchers were able to understand how students might use social media to enhance classroom experiences and the impact of experiential learning opportunities. It was determined that professionalism, media influence and perceptions, ideas on crisis communication, social media actions, and the latest trends in public relations were the issues that surfaced most frequently from the interactions. The study's limitation was its focus on using Twitter in the classroom and does not investigate other social media platforms or tools that may also be useful in promoting experiential learning, despite being based on the framework of experiential learning theory, which offers a solid theoretical basis for the use of social media as a pedagogical tool. In addition, the study also does not offer a thorough analysis of the difficulties

involved in this use, focusing solely mostly on the advantages of using social media in the classroom.

The above-reviewed studies indicate that most public relations training institutions have integrated digital media into public relations education. However, these studies were conducted in the West. Another gap in the literature is that there is a lack of evidence on the emerging issues associated with the incorporation of digital media in public relations education. Again, in line with the empirical review on how digital media are being taught in public relations to create a more comprehensive body of knowledge on digital media in public relations education, it is important to capture the voices of educators and students which seem to be insufficient in literature. How educators strategically teach digital media should be examined. Moreso, students' perspectives will help educators design, provide, and evaluate graduates' proficiency in digital media skills that best match the needs of the discipline and allow for improved industry integration in the classroom.

In addition to examining the acquisition of professional skills, other studies looked at the effectiveness of integrating digital media in public relations classroom exercises that reinforce theory and practice-based ideas. These studies mainly focused on how digital media technologies are applied as instructional tools in public relations classes. Sutherland and Ward (2018), for instance, investigated the use of immersive simulation as a teaching aid in public relations. Students were required to complete a paper questionnaire both before and after the immersive simulation experiment. The research revealed that public relations students regarded immersive simulation as a good learning tool. The study's commitment to employing immersive simulation as an educational tool for public relations exemplifies a creative method of instruction along

with providing students with a chance to experience real-world public relations settings. Nonetheless, in educational institutions, particularly for those with limited resources, access to immersive simulation platforms, tools, and software may be hampered. The cost and accessibility of these materials may hinder use and restrict students' access.

Nerren and Vierra (2020) used the arousal theory as a guide to integrating modern pedagogical technology into the public relations classroom. To pique students' interest and participation in public relations courses, the authors offered case studies and examples of how to use the arousal theory. These examples include the usage of multimedia and interactive content. According to the authors, arousal theory's recommendations for fostering engagement among students, enthusiasm, and knowledge acquisition can serve as a guide for student performance in the classroom.

The review of literature suggests public relations education that examines the use of digital media as pedagogical tools is considerably less than those that focus on teaching public relations using digital media. Teaching digital media skills and utilizing digital media as instructional tools are essential for public relations education (Luttrell et al., 2021). However, this study solely focuses on investigating the teaching and learning of digital media in public relations education as well as the emerging issues associated with the teaching and learning of digital media in public relations education as this is essential for preparing students for the demands of the field.

2.5 Digital Media and Public Relations Education in Africa

Scholars such as Anani-Bossman (2021), Ngondo (2019), and Thompson (2018) lament the paucity of literature on public relations in Africa. Though there is little scholarly research on public relations in Africa, there have been a few efforts to address this disparity.

For instance, drawing on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, Benecke and Bezhuidenhout (2011) explored experiential learning and the various experiential learning approaches used in South African public relations education. They conducted in-depth interviews with public relations educators and Focus Group Discussions with public relations industry players. The study's conclusions showed that although there was agreement on the value of experiential learning, it was not implemented as a teaching strategy and educators did not make the best use of the numerous experiential learning activities. The curricula for public relations education incorporate experiential learning activities, but frequently as a 'supplement' rather than as a core method of instruction (Benecke & Bezhuidenhout; 2011). Students' views on or experiences with experiential learning in public relations education could have been explored through interviews or surveys. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning is learner-centered and aims to give students practical demonstrations of what they are learning. As a result, incorporating student opinions on experiential learning would result in an all-encompassing body of knowledge.

Sende and Vladimir (2021) explored the extent to which the public relations curriculum in South Africa prepares students with knowledge of cultural diversity as understanding cultural diversity has become essential in the public relations industry (Sende & Vladimir, 2021). Interviews and focus groups with students and lecturers, as well as a review of the curriculum, were used to gather data. According to the research, public relations students have a solid theoretical understanding of public relations and cultural diversity. However, they lack the practical experience needed to use this in a professional setting. This finding is consistent with that of Affum (2021) who in investigating public relations students' perspectives on public relations education in

Ghana, found that the students perceived public relations education as theoretical though it is interactive and friendly.

Azionya et al. (2019) argued for a Value-Based Education (VBE) model for public relations education in South Africa. According to Azionya et al. (2019), a VBE approach uses a communication curriculum as a 'moral education' model and reflective session for professionalism based on the three pillars of awareness of oneself, the awareness of other people, and professional principles. The authors concluded that using a VBE strategy will give students the skills they need to serve as a beacon of ethics for their organizations and set an example for others by acting in an ethically responsible manner.

Using the lenses of cultural sensitivity as a conceptual framework and the Situational theory of publics, Chibike and Nkomo (2022) explored public relations education and cultural sensitivity in the digital era in Zimbabwe. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with public relations lecturers, students, and past students of the journalism and media studies department at the National University of Science and Technology. The study found that public relations in the department teaches digital skills but cultural sensitivity is a subject that students were not taught a lot about. This study presents a perspective on digital skills in public relations education and is pertinent given the paucity of literature on digital media in public relations education in Africa. The issues associated with providing students with digital media skills in public relations education in Zimbabwe were not, however, examined in this study.

Thompson (2018) interviewed public relations educators in Ghana to investigate how they were preparing students to be effective practitioners. The study discovered that Ghana's public relations curriculum was largely influenced by Western public relations

approaches, theories, and concepts. This poses a challenge for lecturers and instructors who have to explain their content and make it applicable to the Ghanaian public relations industry (Thompson, 2018). This finding is consistent with Oksiutycz and Enombo (2011) and Ukonu et al. (2018).

Oksiutycz and Enombo (2011) examined public relations practice in the private sector in Gabon. The study found that public relations practice in Gabon is influenced by Western models. Also, Ukonu et al. (2018) in investigating which public relations style is practiced in Nigeria found that Nigeria's public relations history has been more closely associated with the British style of public relations. This demonstrates that both public relations education and practice in Africa are influenced by Western theories. Anani-Bossman and Tandoh (2023) came up with a framework for public relations in Africa that could be used by educators, practitioners, and researchers. The paradigm suggests four levels for the foundation of public relations in Africa: humanist, relational, communalist, and strategic. According to Anani-Bossman and Tandoh (2023), the framework is based on African societal ideals.

The above-reviewed studies suggest that scholars in Africa, particularly Ghana, have not been particularly interested studying in public relations education which supports Thompson's (2018) assertion that very little is known about public relations education in Africa. Recent studies indicate that the impact of digital media on public relations practice in Africa is catching the attention of scholars.

For instance, Anani-Bossman (2023) explored how social and other emerging digital media are impacting public relations practice in Ghana. The survey of 137 public relations practitioners indicates that Ghana's public relations industry has been significantly impacted by social and other digital media. According to the study, the

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most widely utilized platform is Facebook and the majority of practitioners also acknowledged using social media for more than half of their time. This suggests that it is essential to examine how undergraduate public relations education in Ghana is preparing students for a field that is significantly being influenced by digital and social media.

In addition, Amodu et al. (2019) explored the potential of the Internet of Things for effective public relations practice in Nigeria. He argued that the emergence of internet communication has raised the level of complexity of publics, necessitating an upgrade in the practitioners' technological agility. According to the survey, practitioners are likely to use the Internet of Things to tailor messages to customers, increase means for reaching them, look for actual time information about customers, and foresee their needs.

Comparably, Aja et al. (2019) discussed the emergence of new media technologies and how they are employed in media relations in public relations practice in Nigeria. The study concluded that the new media technologies present novel challenges for Nigerian media relations practice, but it also makes the case that they present new opportunities. Challenges identified in the study included cyber crisis and lack of expertise. The authors recommended that practitioners must be adequately trained and technically prepared for them to fully utilize the potential of new media technologies.

Again, a study by Okocha and Monday (2023), looked at how digital technologies have affected the field of public relations in Nigeria based on the Technological Determinism theory. Focus group discussions with 20 public relations professionals were used to obtain primary data for the study. The research revealed that social media and the internet are public relation's two biggest opportunities in the digital age. The study also

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found that the majority of public relations professionals prefer new media to traditional mass media.

Focusing on publics other than organizations, Oksiutycz and Kunene (2017) examined the methods by which Millennials in the Vaal Region of South Africa interact with brands online using various business communication tools, as well as the distinct kinds of interactions they have with brands online and the elements of online communication that impact brand reputation. A cross-sectional descriptive research methodology was utilized in the quantitative study. Two hundred participants between the ages of 18 and 35 in the Vaal Region completed the survey. As reported by Oksiutycz and Kunene (2018), millennials use digital media to engage with and acquire knowledge about brands. Interestingly, 69% of participants indicated they utilized the company's website for information on product prices and evaluations from consumers (Oksiutycz & Kunene; 2018).

Furthermore, Cooley and Jones (2013) observe that while numerous studies have established the value of social media platforms in promoting disaster relief initiatives, raising cash, and advancing public awareness, few of them have examined the occasions when social media has failed to produce the desired results. Using Coomb's (2004) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Cooley and Jones (2013) assessed the crisis response messaging tactics used on social media by Somali-based government agency sources. A content analysis of all corporate crisis messages sent to the public via Twitter done by the United Nations and African Union during Somalia's famine crisis was conducted. The findings of the study show that the strategies that the relief agencies employed in creating awareness and raising funds for the famine were inadequate. Hence, the inability to raise sufficient relief funds for such a massive crisis despite the ease of message delivery in a digitally linked society. This demonstrates a

recognition of digital media's benefits and shortcomings but it also makes clearer how much these benefits and shortcomings depend on its usage.

Also, Nyabera and Lando (2022) made an effort to investigate how social media has affected public relations at private universities in Kenya. A survey with 270 students, semi-structured interviews, and two in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners were employed. The study's findings showed that social media had a positive impact on how public relations departments delivered their services. Further evidence showed that social media promoted their activities and accomplishments; improved the quality of the information; provided a convenient forum for the public to interact with the organization; widened information accessibility; and strengthened the organization's ability to influence public opinion.

Moving away from digital media but motivated by the general lack of representation of Africa in the global public relations discourse, Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023) conducted a systematic review of public relations research in Ghana published between 2012 and 2021. (Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023) avow that to inspire the right future scholarly response, it is necessary to draw attention to important trends, gaps, and research possibilities in the existing literature. Only 26 peer-reviewed articles were discovered to have been published throughout the ten years according to their findings. The study also revealed that, in Ghana, public relations research has overly prioritized topics like corporate social responsibility (CSR) and CSR communication, public relations in higher education institutions, dialogic public relations, digital public relations, corporate reputation, and public relations and globalization, neglecting crucial areas like public relations education. On the topic of public relations education, there was just one article published ((Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman, 2023). This

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illustrates the critical necessity for public relations education studies, particularly in this era of digitalization.

The literature review in this section indicates that, while not nonexistent, public relations education research is scarce in Africa, especially Ghana. This shows that more empirical study on public relations education in Africa is needed, especially in the age of digitalization. Once more, in that the continent's public relations industry is adopting digital media more and more often for its strategies, it is crucial to examine how public relations education in Africa, and particularly Ghana incorporates digital literacy.

2.6 Emerging Issues in Digital Media and Public Relations Education

Luttrell et al. (2021) observe that even if it is seen as a crucial adaption in the public relations teaching and learning process, integrating digital media presents some difficulties.

Lack of expertise, computer phobia, resistance to change, and a lack of openness to innovation among lecturers have all been identified as obstacles to the successful integration of digital technology at all levels, according to Becker (2000).

The addition of professional social media skills to the curriculum, according to Novakovich et al. (2017), showed a considerable amount of resistance when professional social media abilities were included in the curriculum. The sense of agency that is required on social networks is missing from students' descriptions of online authenticity tactics (Novakovich et al., 2017). The researchers also found a gap between students' frequent usage of social media and professional activity.

Bormann et al. (2021) argue that the lack of digital device-equipped educational facilities is one of the major barriers to digital education. The authors note that due to

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geographical restrictions and their socio-economic status, some teachers and students have trouble accessing the internet. In addition, Christensen et al. (2017) opine that a lack of pedagogical knowledge and low teacher self-efficacy may make it challenging to effectively integrate technology in the classroom. Teachers must be prepared for mobile learning systems, particularly in terms of their professional capacities that support their passion and technical proficiency in doing so (Christensen et al. 2017).

When investigating educators' perceptions of the various obstacles they face when integrating media literacy education into their curricula, Harvey et al. (2022) discovered that the biggest obstacles that prevent teachers from teaching media literacy include a lack of training, time constraints, the absence of resources, a lack of administrative support, and educational standards.

Manca and Ranieri (2016a) researched lecturers' digital habits, concentrating on how they utilize social media and how they view the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing it for teaching. The findings demonstrate that usage of social media is still relatively constrained and restricted and that academics are not particularly eager to employ these tools in their activities for several reasons. According to the study, social media adoption in contemporary teaching methods appears to be being slowed down by some causes, including sociodemographic factors, pedagogical viewpoints, cultural resistance, privacy issues, worries about how to assess, the time required to understand the tool, and a lack of institutional support.

Similarly, Manca and Ranieri (2016b) offered empirical evidence on the use of social media for personal, academic, and professional purposes by higher education educators. The study found evidence that, though educators may find social media important in general, they might not recognize its benefit in the classroom or are unfamiliar with

these platforms. Findings indicated that 90% of respondents used at least one social media tool for personal reasons, and just 64% of respondents reported having taught at least one social media tool. Only 38.6% of respondents, according to the study, perceived social media to be valuable for teaching. This discrepancy may indicate that while educators acknowledge and are interested in social media, they lack the knowledge, drive, and teaching methods necessary to effectively impart these skills.

Enwerem and Chuks-Enwerem (2018) maintain that communication educators have to instruct students in the basic skills of mass communication, particularly in print, public relations and advertising, film, broadcast, and new media, among other areas. However, the proliferation of new media has created glaring skill problems that may hinder educators' capacity to effectively and efficiently conduct instruction in the most important pertinent areas. Enwerem and Chuks-Enwerem (2018) examined Nigerian communication educators' current use of technology, the degree to which they complied with it, and how well they understood the basic technological prerequisites for modern communication instruction. Findings from the study show that mass communication instructors have poor levels of technological knowledge and proficiency concerning the latest trends in the field of mass communication, including advertising and public relations.

Udoakah and Nda (2020) found a lack of utilization of digital media in the teaching and learning of mass communication in Nigeria. Only 24% of respondents reported using digital media for teaching and learning about mass communication. The majority of respondents (76%) lamented the lack of an environment that allowed for the best use of digital media in the teaching and learning of mass communication; this indicates that using digital media for teaching and learning is not embraced, or advocated for.

Onye et al. (2016) are of the view that African nations' inability to effectively incorporate digital media into the curriculum raises concerns about the 'digital divide,' which has led to a gap between standards of learning in Africa and those of advanced nations. Aduloju (2019) examined media literacy instruction in nine Nigerian universities' communication curricula. Findings indicated that: (a) there were no media literacy courses specifically on the curricula; (b) media literacy-related courses, which served as substitutes, made up roughly 2% of the curricula; and (c) media literacy-related courses were only offered as electives to students. This suggests that the lack of required digital media courses in curricula could hamper students' acquisition of digital skills.

Eskandari and Taghizadeh (2016) analyzed media literacy among university students in Bojnord, Iran. The authors concluded that the higher education system should probably eliminate media literacy from the list of optional courses and include it in the official or compulsory curriculum due to the growing rate of new media penetration among students, their influence on the development of cultural, religious, and political processes, and the low scores of students' media literacy.

Boateng and Tindi (2022) explored how educators utilized new media technologies for the delivery of curriculum, their reasons for using them, their techniques in using them, and any difficulties encountered in using them. Data was collected from university instructors who are members of the Communication Educators Association, Ghana (CEAG), using in-depth interviews and questionnaires. According to the study, Facebook, YouTube, and Google Scholar are the most popular sites among communication educators. Personal preference and the perceived value of digital technologies for teaching and research both had an impact on their decisions regarding and use of these new media. The use of digital technology by communication educators

is hampered by many issues, such as inconsistent internet connections, a lack of digital literacy, and financial limitations.

Review of literature suggests that issues associated with incorporating digital media into the curriculum are largely institutional constraints, financial constraints, and lack of technological knowledge on the part of educators.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

A theory, as defined by Littlejohn and Foss (2009), is a collection of ideas that make sense together and paint a coherent philosophical picture of a certain subject. They contend that theories simplify complex experiences into an understandable collection of concepts and propositions. According to Deo-Silas (2013), the relationship between theory and research is a transaction in which the theory, on the one hand, dictates the facts to be collected, and the research findings or data, on the other hand, show how the theory is supported or refuted. Thus, theories offer a framework or model to explain and interpret the data that has been gathered. In the context of this study, the experiential learning theory is used to understand the incorporation of digital media into public relations education more explicitly and provide detailed discussions.

2.7.1 Experiential Learning Theory

According to Obi and Christopher (2021), Kolb (1984) proposed the experiential learning paradigm. Kolb's (1984) experiential model was the outcome of in-depth research into the learning theories by Piaget, Lewin, and Dewey (Obi & Christopher, 2021). Knowledge results from the combination of "grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p.41). Activities that fall under the experiential learning paradigm, according to Cantor (1997), include but are not limited to, real-world

encounters, hands-on laboratory activities that take place in the classroom, such as role-playing exercises, campus projects, and community involvement. Munge et al (2018) are of the view that in experiential learning, the concept of 'learning by doing' is important, and learner participation is key Munge et al., 2018). Kolb saw learning as a process in which a student must actively participate in a variety of cycles known as learning cycles (Benecke and Bezuidenhout, 2011). Concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation constitute these cycles (Kolb, 1984). For effective learning, it is essential that learners actively engage in all four stages of the process (Kolb, 1984). Furthermore, Kolb emphasizes that learning is inherently cyclical, introducing the concept of the 'Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle', which consists of four interconnected components.:

Concrete Experience (CE): According to Kolb (1984) concrete experience means learners should be capable of immersing themselves completely, genuinely, and impartially in new experiences. Fűz et al. (2018) note that physical interaction is crucial to the concrete experience phase. At this stage, students are involved in social, cognitive, and physical activities, according to Jordan et al. (2018), which validates the embodied character of experiential learning. Additionally, the facilitator is unavoidably the teacher, who does things like help students stay open to trying out new approaches to challenges, support persistent attitudes, and enhance the efficacy of communication abilities (Isaak et al., 2017).

Reflective Observation (RO): Kolb (1984) avows that students must be able to consider and view these events from a variety of angles. Higher-order thinking is required at this stage because experiential learning involves complicated problem-solving (Collins et al., 2016). Two essential components of the process of experiential

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learning are reflection and analysis, which are frequently conducted individually as well as in groups (Isaak et al., 2017).

Abstract Conceptualization (AC): Students should be competent at developing ideas that combine their observations into logical theories (Kolb, 1984). For Munge et al. (2018), understanding that the context's conditions can change over time and space and that all knowledge is tentative and requires context-based evaluation is a crucial component of abstract conceptualization.

Active Experimentation (AE): Students should be able to use these theories to solve problems and make decisions (Kolb, 1984). Munge et al. (2018) postulate that Active Experimentation involves assessing newly developed real experiences to abstract conceptualizations to see how well they fit.

Kolb's (1984) model has drawn a great deal of criticism, specifically for being overly simple (Greenaway, 2008; Ord & Leather, 2011) and having problematic epistemology (Garner, 2000; Miettenin, 2000). Kolb's model, according to Greenaway (2008), may help clarify and reduce complicated and variable processes into a regular and standard pattern, however, models should be used with caution because they can distort reality. Kolb's (1984) study, according to Garner (2000), doesn't seem to be able to accurately identify a person's learning style, and his psychological justifications are still significantly defective. Garner (2000) went on to say that Kolb's (1984) idea is not inherently incorrect but rather should be used with caution because it lacks a cogent basis and obvious connections to psychology. In addition, some researchers (such as Seaman et al., 2017) suggested that Kolb's (1984) model, as it is at present, actually creates a barrier to a deeper understanding and effective facilitation of experiential learning. However, the most well-known and frequently referenced model, or most

concise articulation, of experiential learning theory is still Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (Seaman et al., 2017).

Nooghabi et al. (2011) investigated the challenges of experiential learning at the University of Tehran using a mixed-method approach. The study found that the primary barriers to experiential learning in the courses offered were a lack of adequate learning environments and tools, as well as less qualified instructors and technicians.

Again, a study by Obi and Christopher (2021) focused on the challenges of experiential learning for improving skill development in business education using a descriptive survey. The study was carried out at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Nigeria's Anambra State. 102 full-time business education students from Nnamdi Azikiwe University made up the study's population. The study identified several obstacles to experiential learning, including an uneven distribution of students and resources, a lack of learning skills material, a lack of participation from higher-ranking academics, and limited access to computers and the Internet in laboratories and workshops. This demonstrates that inadequate infrastructural resources and less competent human resources can be barriers to experiential learning.

A study conducted by Leal-Rodriguez and Albort-Morant (2019) aimed at promoting innovative experiential learning methods to boost academic performance. The study examined how students' levels of academic performance were affected by an experiential learning-based educational methodology. Using a sample of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Business Administration program at a Spanish business school, this study was conducted in the particular context of a private business school in Spain. The relationship hypothesis was tested using Pearson's correlation and structural equation modeling. Results from the analysis of a sample of undergraduate

business students indicate that participating in experience-based activities and managerial simulations is an efficient way for students to advance their competencies. It can be concluded that the experiential learning approach enhances learning.

Morris (2020) conducted a systematic review of literature to investigate what qualifies as a concrete experience and how it is handled in experiential learning. Five themes emerged from the analysis: learners are engaged, active participants; knowledge is situated in time and space; learners are exposed to novel experiences, that involve risk; learning requires inquiry into particular real-world problems; and critical reflection serves as a mediator of meaningful learning. As a result, a modification to Kolb's model has suggested: that experiential learning entails concrete experience that is rich in context, critical reflecting observation, abstract conceptualization that is specific to context, and practical active experimentation (Morris, 2020).

Sashi (2015) investigated how incorporating a social media experiential learning project into retailing courses can engage students, improve learning, and provide students with the social media and digital marketing abilities that merchants want. Students formed teams and collaborated on an experiential learning project during the semester in which each team chose a retail company and developed a social media plan to increase customer engagement for the company. According to the study, the project allowed students to learn through participation, interaction, reflection, knowledge, and application of retailing principles to the development of social media tactics.

Based on a mixed-method approach, Kolotouchkina et al. (2021) explored the impact of experiential learning projects in communication education on the development of critical professional skills and social activism of students. Two projects were developed by CEU San Pablo University students of Advertising and Communication in the

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framework of the Peer-to-Peer Facebook Global Digital Challenge initiative in 2017 and 2018. Findings indicated that the innovative project contributed to improving students' ability to manage a wide range of digital communication technologies, as well as their analytical skills, multicultural communication, and multidisciplinary workgroup dynamics which were necessary skills for their successful professional development. It was concluded that students who took part in the initiative were keen to individually contribute to the open public dialogues on the significant issues addressed by the project, making them very visible through creative content produced and shared on social networking sites. This illustrates that despite its challenges, experiential learning projects are essential for preparing students for the demands of the field.

2.7.2 Relevance of the Theory to the Study

I employed this theory for two major reasons. The first reason is that similar studies (Fraustino et. al, 2015; Madden et al., 2016; Thompson, 2018; Affum, 2021) have relied on the experiential learning theory which suggests its relevance to this study as well. For instance, Fraustino et al. (2015) conducted a study to explore innovative ways to teach social media skills in public relations education. The study involved cross-institutional Twitter chats between social media strategy instructors at three university campuses and their students, where the instructors created assignments based on the experiential learning theory framework. Similarly, Madden et al. (2016) relied on the experiential learning theory to examine how to enhance communication students' digital media expertise while also putting them in a better position to succeed in teleworking environments.

Also, Thompson (2018) drawing on the experiential learning theory, examined how lecturers in public relations in Ghana are preparing students to be effective practitioners. Thompson (2018) suggested that the experiential learning theory is a significant lens through which many educators and scholars have studied public relations education. In addition, Affum (2021) relied on the experiential learning theory to examine the perceptions of students on public relations education in Ghana.

The second reason is that it helped me to analyze and answer research questions one, two, and three through the tenets of the experiential learning theory. Thus, it helped me to ascertain whether or not public relations educators use experiential learning techniques to infuse and teach digital media in their courses to equip students with the digital skills that the industry desires. Again, it helped me to analyze the emerging issues that arise from efforts by public relations educators to teach digital media and students' learning of digital media in public relations education.
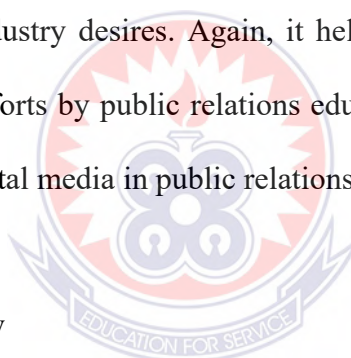
2.7.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter delved deeply into the fundamental concepts that make up the basis of the study to achieve a thorough understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Additionally, the section contextualized the study within the existing academic literature by reviewing pertinent empirical studies and establishing the study's alignment with prior research. Moreover, theories were utilized to elucidate the phenomenon and to acquire a deeper comprehension of the events. As a result, this chapter explored a relevant theory that forms the basis of the study, to establish a sound foundation of reasoning and logic for the research.

In the upcoming chapter, the research methodology used in this study will be explored in depth. This will entail a discussion of the research approach taken, the data collection methods used, and the data analysis techniques employed. Further, the chapter will consider any ethical concerns that arose during the research process.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This is the third chapter of the present study. This chapter discusses the research methodological procedures that were employed in the present study. Specifically, the chapter details the research approach, research design, sampling technique, data collection methods, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods as well as ethical concerns.

3.1 Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach. This is because the qualitative research approach enables researchers to explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social or human problems (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The current study sought to understand how digital media is incorporated into public relations education in Ghana by analyzing public relations instruction documents and interviewing public relations educators and students to understand the meanings educators and students ascribe to the phenomenon. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2017), qualitative research aims to identify, explore, and explain people's attitudes, actions, and perspectives in a social context as well as the meanings they ascribe to their actions without submitting them to rigorous mathematical computations. Additionally, Hancock (2007) contends that qualitative research outcomes are inherently subjective because they are based on people's experiences, views, and feelings. Denzin (2010) asserts that a qualitative research methodology offers intricate textual representations of how people experience an event. In line with this assertion, this study, as part of its

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objectives, examined the perspectives of students on the incorporation of digital media into public relations education. Furthermore, using a qualitative research approach allows researchers to collect data from participants' settings, analyze data inductively by connecting small details to larger themes, and make interpretations of the meanings of the data. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Consequently, the qualitative approach assisted me in exploring such meanings from data gathered from educators and students. Qualitative research is a process of inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social events within their natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Again, the goal of qualitative research is to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people give to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 3). Drawing on the above arguments, the qualitative research approach was adopted to obtain an in-depth understanding of the incorporation of digital media into the public relations education of the selected universities with a focus on how educators have incorporated digital media, perspectives of students on the incorporation of digital media and the emerging issues associated with the incorporation of digital media.

3.2 Research Design

A research design is a comprehensive strategy or approach for gathering scientific data (Schaefer, 2012). It serves as the research's master plan because it outlines the methodology. It illustrates how the key components of the study: the samples and the data collection techniques work together to answer the research questions (Thomas, 2010). Importantly, the type of research, the research problem and questions, the researcher's personal experiences, and the study's target audience all play a role in choosing an appropriate design (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Research designs,

particularly those used in qualitative studies, include case studies, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

3.2.1 Case Study Design

A case study is a form of research design where the researcher examines a case in-depth, typically including a program, event, activity, process, or individuals (Yin, 2018). Together with reporting a case description and case themes, a case study can also investigate a real-world, contemporary bounded system (a case) or several bounded systems (cases) over time through extensive, in-depth data collection involving a variety of information sources (observations, interviews, audio-visual materials, documents, and reports) (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). A case study is also an empirical investigation that looks at a phenomenon in its actual setting (Yin, 2018). The case study is particularly helpful, according to Yin (2018), when the context of the events being investigated is critical and when the researcher has no control over how the events unfold. Similarly, the current study explores how digital media is incorporated into public relations education in Ghana, an activity that takes place in the real-life context of public relations educators and students in the selected universities. Furthermore, because the study was carried out within an organization, I had little control over the study site.

Moreover, a case study is one of many methods for conducting qualitative research since it seeks to comprehend people in a social context by viewing their activities as a single group, community, or singular event (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This was applied in the current study because it sought to understand in detail how public relations educators have incorporated digital media into public relations education in Ghana, as well as the perspectives of students on it and the emerging issues associated with it at selected universities. As with case studies, the current study included a variety

of data collection techniques: document analysis, in-depth interviews with educators, and a focus group discussion with students. Additionally, Yin (2018) indicates that there are types of case studies: single cases and multi-case studies. Multiple case studies, according to Yin (2018), involve analyzing cases from various settings. This entails selecting some incidents or circumstances to demonstrate different perspectives on the problem.

A multiple case study gives the researcher the chance to investigate variations both within and between cases. The goal is to establish findings across cases so that comparisons can be made (Yin, 2018). The choice of a multiple case study is justified by the fact that I aim to explore how the two universities have incorporated digital media into their undergraduate public relations education. This is because the selected universities were the first two public universities to start undergraduate public relations programs in Ghana.

3.3 Sampling Technique

According to Lindolf and Taylor (2017), using the appropriate sample procedure enables researchers to connect communication phenomena methodically with the least wasted effort. This means that to ensure that data is properly obtained for a study, the sampling technique is crucial. According to Daymon and Holloway (2011), the fundamental idea of gathering comprehensive information drives the sampling techniques used by qualitative researchers. The decision of who, where, and when to participate in a study is based on a set of standards that are established by its goal. Investigating the incorporation of digital media into public relations education in Ghana was the goal of the current study. This made it necessary to sample universities that offer public relations programs.

There are two types of sampling procedures, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2013). These are probability and non-probability sampling procedures. They point out that probability sampling uses mathematical principles, giving each unit an equal chance of selection. On the other hand, non-probability sampling does not adhere to any mathematical principles. Since there were no mathematical guidelines used in the sampling process for the current investigation, the non-probability sampling method was used. The non-probability sampling process employs a variety of sample strategies, as suggested by Wimmer and Dominick (2013). These strategies include; convenience sampling, purposeful sampling, unqualified volunteer sampling, and snowball sampling (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). Specifically, I employed the purposive sampling technique. Creswell and Creswell (2022) define purposive sampling as the process of choosing participants or sites that will aid the researcher in understanding the problem and the research question. For Wimmer and Dominick (2013), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which respondents are intentionally chosen for a study based on particular traits or attributes and those who fall short of these qualities are disqualified.

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2017), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which places and cases are chosen because there may be solid grounds to assume that what occurs there is crucial to understanding a specific procedure or concept. Per the claims above, the University of Media, Arts, and Communication (UniMAC-GIJ), previously known as the Ghana Institute of Journalism, and the University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA), were purposefully selected for this study. These public institutions were the pioneers in offering undergraduate public relations programs in Ghana, with UPSA commencing in 2008 (www.upsa.edu.gh) and UniMAC-GIJ in 2006 (www.gij.edu.gh).

Undergraduate communication students at UniMAC-GIJ have the option to specialize in public relations at level 300 of their four-year program. Public relations is available as a specialization for undergraduate students at UPSA from level 100 of the four-year curriculum.

To investigate how digital media has been incorporated into the public relations curriculum at the two universities, all course outlines for the 2019/2020 to 2022/2023 academic years of students who major in public relations were collected. 2019/2020 to 2022/2023 was selected because it is the year that final year undergraduate public relations students started and completed their studies.

Also, public relations educators who teach at the undergraduate level of the two institutions were sampled. The educators were from the public relations departments of the schools. The public relations department heads informed me of their respective faculty numbers. UniMAC-GIJ had 6 undergraduate public relations educators, while UPSA had 16 undergraduate public relations educators. I sampled 7 educators out of the 22. The sample size was determined based on specific criteria: identifying educators teaching digital media as a standalone public relations course and/or identifying educators teaching digital media as topics in their courses. Upon examination of the course outlines it was observed that practical instruction on utilizing digital media for public relations was actively delivered by a limited set. Specifically, among the identified educators, only three (3) from UPSA and four (4) from UniMAC-GIJ were found to actively engage students in practical training on digital media usage for public relations purposes. This determination was made by examining the course descriptions, objectives, and learning outcomes within the course outlines taught by these educators. The course descriptions gave me an overview, defining the scope, content, and context of the course. It provided an understanding of what the course entails and its relevance

to their education and future careers. The course objectives articulated specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals that the course aimed to accomplish. They gave me an understanding of the intended outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies that students were expected to acquire by the course's end. The learning outcomes of the courses specified the observable and measurable results or capabilities that students should demonstrate after completing the course. They highlighted the practical and specific abilities students should possess and served as a guide to assess their mastery of the course content.

Twelve final-year undergraduate students majoring in public relations as a program were specifically sampled to participate in focus group discussions. Six were selected from UniMAC-GIJ and six were selected from UPSA. The selection criteria focused on final-year bachelor's degree students due to their comprehensive exposure to the entirety of the public relations curriculum offered at their respective institutions. Krueger and Casey (2014) maintain that focus groups with six participants make for a manageable group size. Discussions can be more in-depth and give every participant a chance to voice their opinions when there are six people involved, guaranteeing a thorough exploration of ideas and experiences (Stewart &Shamdasani, 2014).

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2017), qualitative investigations, like the present study, do not generate data that can be subjected to rigorous statistical processes and, as a result, cannot allow generalization to a population. It also follows from the fact that the distribution of these social activities within a population is irrelevant and that qualitative studies concentrate on the social activities in a particular historical or cultural milieu.

3.3.1 An Overview of Selected Universities

Following the recommendations of a commission, the Institution College of the Gold Coast became the first in Ghana to award degrees from the University of London in 1948, as noted by Teferra and Knight (2008). In 1961, Ghanaian public universities were given full independence and the power to confer their own degrees, as per legislation passed by Parliament, aiming for global recognition (Teferra & Knight, 2008). Since 2006, numerous private tertiary institutions have also been accredited by the National Accreditation Board, allowing them to offer a range of degree and diploma programs. (Yusif et al., 2013).

3.3.2 University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA)

The University of Professional Studies, Accra, is used in this study as a case study. The University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA), established in 1965 as a private institution, was taken over by the Government of Ghana in 1978, and later established as a tertiary institution with a mandate to offer Business Professional Education by the University of Professional Studies Act, 1999 (Act 566) (www.upsa.edu.gh). The University received its Presidential Charter in September 2008 as a result of its high-caliber production and adherence to established national requirements. The University was granted full university status under this Charter, giving it the authority to grant its degrees, diplomas, and certificates. On July 31, 2012, the Ghanaian Parliament approved a measure to rename the Institute of Professional Studies (IPS) as the University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA) (www.upsa.edu.gh).

To offer instruction in public relations and information technology management, the Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Studies was founded in 2008. The Department of Communication Studies and the Department of Information

Technology Studies are the two departments within the faculty (www.upsa.edu.gh). The Department of Communication Studies offers Diploma in Public Relations Management, Bachelor of Arts (B.A) in Public Relations Management, and post-graduate programmes in public relations (www.upsa.edu.gh).

3.3.3 University of Media, Arts and Communication - Ghana Institute of Journalism (UniMAC-GIJ)

This study uses UniMAC-GIJ as a case study. According to Nyantakyi-Baah et al (2016), Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, initially established the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) to train journalists who would contribute to the liberation of Africa. It was inaugurated on October 16, 1959, by Kofi Baako, who served as the Minister of Information and Broadcasting at the time. It was a department part of the Accra Technical Institute (now Accra Polytechnic) and was known as the School of Journalism (Nyantakyi-Baah, et al., 2016). Mr. Richard McMillian served as its first director and journalism instructor before retiring as the head of the British Information Service in Ghana. According to Blankson (2004), formal public relations education in Ghana began in the 1960s when Mr. Harold Macmillan (former British Prime Minister) and Mr. Jimmy Moxon (Director of Information Services of Ghana and public relations adviser to President Nkrumah started GIJ to train officers who had been employed in the public service after independence.

Nyantakyi-Baah et al (2016) note that the Ghana Institute of Journalism Act, 2006 (Act 717) was enacted by the President and the Fourth Republic's parliament to turn the Institute into a tertiary institution that grants degrees. In September 2006, the President authorized the Institute to grant its own certificates, diplomas, and degrees for communication programs recognized by the National Accreditation Board (NAB). The

goal of UniMAC-GIJ is to establish itself as Africa's premier center for communication studies (Nyantakyi-Baah, et al., 2016). The Ghana National Accreditation Board (NAB) authorized the Ghana Institute of Journalism to offer post-graduate Master of Arts degrees in journalism, public relations, media management, and development communications in 2014 (Boateng, 2017). The institution also offers post-graduate diplomas and Doctor of Philosophy communication programmes (www.gij.edu.gh).

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Process

In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observational techniques, and document and material culture analysis are typically the four data collection methods used by qualitative researchers (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). These four core methods are, however, supplemented by additional secondary and specific data collection methods. However, the four data collection techniques continue to form the basis of qualitative inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Data, according to Aina (2004), refers to unprocessed and unrefined facts. However, information is created when data is transformed or processed. To gather data for this study, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and document analysis were used. Creswell and Creswell (2022) propose that using different data sources assists in providing relevant information to help meet the goal of research of this nature. Creswell and Creswell's (2022) argument supports Patton's (1990) and Yin's (2018) assertions that the employment of a multiple-methods approach is an effective method in research since it ensures data credibility.

3.4.1 Document Analysis

Document analysis according to Bowen (2009), is "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (p.27). Document analysis calls for data to be studied

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and interpreted to extract meaning, gain insight, and create empirical knowledge, similar to other analytical techniques in qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Syvertsen (2004) describes a document as "written or audio-visual remains not produced or generated by the researcher" (p.215). Many different types of documents can be utilized for systematic evaluation as part of a study according to Bowen (2009). These include; advertisements, agendas, attendance lists, and minutes of meetings. There are also manuals, background papers, books, brochures, diaries, journals, printed event programs, letters, memos, maps, charts, newspapers (clippings/articles), press releases, program proposals, application forms, scripts for radio and television shows, reports from organizations or institutions, survey results, and various public records (Bowen, 2009).

Excerpts, quotations, or complete passages are obtained from document analysis, and these data are then explicitly organized into major themes, categories, and case examples through content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003). Document analysis is frequently used as a means of triangulation in conjunction with other qualitative research techniques (Bowen, 2009). Triangulation is the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Denzin, 2010). The qualitative researcher is supposed to use multiple (at least two) sources of evidence, that is to look for convergence and corroboration by utilizing several data sources and research techniques. These sources, in addition to written materials, also include participant or non-participant observation, interviews, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2018). Document analysis is particularly useful as a research method for qualitative case studies which are in-depth investigations that result in extensive descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization, or program (Yin, 2018). In the current study, document analysis

was employed to examine how digital media has been incorporated into the public relations curricula of the two universities under consideration.

To examine how digital media has been incorporated into the public relations education of the two universities, all course outlines for the 2019/2020 to 2022/2023 academic years of students who majored in public relations were collected. For UPSA, I collected forty-nine (49) course outlines and forty-nine (48) for UniMAC-GIJ.

Next, I singled out and analyzed only public relations courses in the stream of course outlines collected to identify the incorporation of digital media. The public relations courses for UPSA have the course code PBPR. Only undergraduate students studying public relations enroll in PBPR courses. The PBPR courses were 34. For UniMAC-GIJ, the public relations courses came with the course code CSPR. The CSPR courses were 17. I sought clarification on the meaning of the course codes from the heads of the public relations departments of the schools under study. To identify the infusion of digital media into the public relations curriculum of the two universities, I looked out for digital media as a standalone public relations course and digital media as topics embedded in courses. The course descriptions, course objectives, weekly topics, and learning outcomes of the public relations courses that infused digital media were also analyzed.

I analyzed the course descriptions to understand the courses' overall purpose and scope. I also examined the courses' stated objectives to determine their precise aims. Further, I evaluated the learning outcomes of the courses to determine the intended skills or competencies students ought to acquire.

3.4.2 In-depth Interviews (IDIs)

In-depth interviews were another way of data collection in this study. Interviews are one of the most crucial data-gathering techniques in qualitative research, according to Fetterman (2010). According to Wimmer and Dominick (2013), an in-depth interview provides thorough context for the justifications provided by respondents for their responses, enabling researchers to collect in-depth information on the beliefs, motives, perceptions, experiences, and emotions of respondents. Thus, the method enables a researcher to look for detailed information that further clarifies the issue under inquiry. As a result, an in-depth interview was carried out to probe for information from participants about the incorporation of digital media into public relations education. Lindlof and Taylor (2017) also postulate that a qualitative interview is an event in which the interviewer encourages participants to express their interests and experiences openly.

Undergraduate public relations educators from the two universities who teach digital media either as a distinct course within the public relations curriculum or as topics within broader course outlines were interviewed to explore the incorporation of digital media into public relations education.

Before the interviews, permission was sought from the heads of the public relations departments of the schools to allow me to interview the participants for the study. I contacted the participants through the assistance of the heads of the public relations departments of the schools, following the presentation of an introductory letter and an ethical clearance letter from the ethics committee of UPSA.

After several phone calls and field visits, interview dates, the time, and the venue were agreed upon by the interviewees and me. Interviews can be conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or online (Hair et al., 2007).

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and telephone. Seven (7) interviews were conducted in total. Four (4) were conducted at UniMAC-GIJ and three (3) at UPSA. For UniMAC-GIJ 3 interviews were conducted via telephone and one was conducted via Zoom on the preference of the interviewees. For UPSA, two were conducted via telephone and one was conducted via Zoom, depending on the preference of the interviewee. An interview guide was given to the participants prior to the interview to enable them examine the requirements for the interview and the questions in the interview before the scheduled date.

Structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews are the three forms of interviews utilized by researchers in qualitative research (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). To have a detailed discussion on the topic, a semi-structured interview guide which contained open-ended questions was used. This interview format afforded me the opportunity for attention-grabbing developments and allowed the interviewees to elaborate on various issues. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions give both interviewees and interviewers a greater degree of freedom when it comes to preparing the interview topics and questions. The interviews lasted between 30-35 minutes in each case. The ones conducted via telephone were recorded with my Infinix Note 8i and notes were also taken. The ones conducted via Zoom were recorded on the Zoom App with notes also taken. This was to aid me in transcribing the interviews for analysis. The participants were asked questions on digital media in the public relations curriculum of their universities.

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Furthermore, participants' extensive knowledge, professional standing, and expertise positioned them at the center of the study and enabled them to respond to a variety of questions that were essential to achieving the study's goals. These participants' interviews helped elucidate, validate, and clarify questions that arose from the document analysis and also answered research questions one and three.

3.4.3 Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussion was another data collection method employed in this study. The study employed focus group discussions because it can be a more efficient use of time when gathering a variety of viewpoints and experiences from several people at once than individual interviews as argued by Creswell and Creswell (2022). Focus group discussions, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2017), have advanced to the point where they can function independently as a data collection method in as much as a form of interview. Creswell and Creswell (2022) posit that focus group discussion is the process of collecting information from a group of people through interviews. The researcher typically gathers the group to find out their ideas, attitudes, and feelings regarding the issue under study (Denscombe, 2007). Creswell and Creswell (2022) maintain that focus group discussions yield better outcomes when participants share similarities and come from comparable backgrounds. Additionally, it becomes necessary when group discussions are likely to yield fresher insights. Focus groups, according to Dilshad and Latif (2013), allow those in marginalized situations to participate in the discussion as well, resulting in a variety of viewpoints. Again, focus groups offer a more natural environment than of an individual interview because participants are influenced by others just as they are in real life, according to Krueger and Casey (2014). As avowed by Patton (2002) and Stewart and Shamdasani (2014), focus groups get a substantial

amount of information from participants on their experiences, feelings, and ideas in a social setting. In line with these views, I employed focus group discussion because it helped me to seek different views from participants on research questions two and three.

I conducted focus group discussions with final year bachelor's degree public relations students of the 2019/2020- 2022/2023 academic years at each university to help me answer the second and third research questions. These students were in their final semester. As stated earlier, final year bachelor's degree public relations students were sampled because they were the category of students who have had a full public relations education experience in their institutions. I sought permission from the heads of the public relations departments of the two universities to conduct it. The focus group discussion participants comprised six public relations students from each university. For UniMAC-GIJ, I reached out to a final-year public relations student with the help of the Head of the Department. Subsequently, I requested the student to invite five additional colleagues willing to participate in a focus group discussion. The discussion was held at an empty lecture hall in the school. The venue was chosen by the participants. Before that, I met all the participants and briefed them about the study, gave them copies of the interview questions, and agreed on a time and venue for the discussion. I moderated the discussion. This was to ensure that the discussion was well coordinated and the questions asked were in line with the objectives of the study.

Before the discussion began, chairs were arranged in a semi-circle fashion. This style of seating was employed because Krueger and Casey (2014) aver that a semi-circle seating arrangement expedites interaction among participants as it enables them to freely see and hear each other. I sat in the middle to moderate the discussion. This is in

line with Krueger and Casey's (2014) argument that a focus group should have a moderator who has adequate knowledge of the phenomena under study.

The focus group discussion lasted about 45 minutes. This aligns well with Krueger and Casey's (2014) assertion that to minimize boredom, focus group discussions should not be stretched beyond 2 hours. At the beginning of the discussion, I welcomed the participants, introduced myself, and explained to the participants the purpose of the discussion. I then urged the participants to feel comfortable and be open-minded as they communicated their views. I recorded the discussion with the permission of the participants on an Infinix Note 8i. Participants were encouraged to speak louder so the discussion could be recorded. The English language was used throughout the discussion process. This was because all six participants were comfortable with it. Occasionally, the discussion process was filled with comments and jokes to stir up the interest of the participants to respond to issues and also reduce tension. A semi-structured interview guided the session. In a simple and coordinated manner, questions were set simply and clearly to allow participants to talk freely and spontaneously. It was also to help me keep the conversation on track. At points where the discussion drifted from the norm, I politely intervened to bring the discussion back on track. Nevertheless, any off-track statement that was of relevance to my findings was recorded. Also, I noted participants' non-verbal cues during the discussions in the field note.

The focus group discussion session with UPSA was held online via Zoom because the participants had just ended their academic semester but had not graduated. In order not to create any inconvenience, the participants and me agreed on a Zoom meeting. The head of the department of the public relations department of the school helped me reach six students willing to participate in the focus group discussion. After getting all six

participants, I called all participants individually to explain the purpose of the discussion and sought their permission. Then, I created a WhatsApp group page for the participants where the date and time for the discussion were agreed on and the link to the Zoom meeting was posted. I created a Zoom invite on the page a day before the interview and encouraged the participants to get a location with a stable internet connection and little to no distractions.

I hosted the meeting on her laptop at the Postgraduate discussion room of the University of Education, Winneba. I was the only one present in the room, this was to avoid distractions and pay attention to the exercise. Thirty minutes into the discussion, I sent an internet bundle to each of the participants and urged them to click on the Zoom link to join the meeting. The discussion started 15 minutes after the agreed time. This was because some of the participants did not join early, however, this did not affect the discussion as I waited for all participants to be present before starting the discussion. The discussion was recorded on the Zoom App and saved on my laptop with the permission of the participant. This was to enable me transcribe the data for analysis. The discussion lasted about 45 minutes.

Occasionally, the discussion process was filled with comments and jokes to stir up the interest of the participants to respond to issues and also reduce tension. A semi-structured interview guided the session. In a simple and coordinated manner, questions were set simply and clearly to allow participants to talk freely and spontaneously. It was also to help me keep the conversation on track. The questions were also typed and displayed in the chat session of the Zoom app for the participants. At points where the discussion drifted, I politely intervened to bring the discussion back on track. Nevertheless, any off-track statement that was of relevance to my findings was recorded.

3.5 Data Analysis

Cataloging and dissecting raw data, and then reconstituting them into patterns, themes, concepts, and propositions is the process of data analysis (Lindolf and Taylor, 2017). For Creswell and Creswell (2022), data analysis is a data reduction process. That is, the methodical procedure a researcher uses to break down enormous amounts of data so that they may be understood. Patton (1999) further proposes three broad approaches to carrying out a data analysis: data organization, data reduction (by summarization and categorization), and identification and linkage of data through patterns and themes. Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) also corroborate these claims when they aver that data analysis is the process of combining all the information a researcher has gathered while conducting fieldwork and logically connecting the lines between the data to answer the researcher's specific research questions.

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis

Smith and Firth (2011, p. 3) define thematic analysis as an "interpretive process, whereby data is searched systematically to identify patterns within the data to provide an illuminating description of the phenomenon." This means that by applying thematic analysis, I identified recurring patterns, codes, or themes and provided an in-depth description of the codes. Also, thematic analysis is a technique for locating, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data, according to Braun and Clarke (2020).

I conducted the thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2020) six-step thematic analysis approach. The approach was used because according to Byrne (2021), it is one of the most well-defined approaches for performing thematic analysis. These steps are; familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing

themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

Familiarization with the Data: I familiarized with the data by first attentively listening to each audio recording once and manually transcribing it. Then I proceeded to go over the transcript several times to have a general idea of its contents. This was done to gain an overall understanding of its content. I made preliminary notes regarding any intriguing features or possible trends in the data.

Generating Initial Codes: I then began by manually coding the data by identifying specific points related to the research questions. The coding was carried out using the comment feature in Microsoft Word. In this procedure, I identified and highlighted segments of the text that were indicative of specific codes. These codes were then annotated directly in the comments section, and linked to the corresponding text fragments. For instance, codes in the data included, 'need for a studio', 'poor internet connectivity' 'crucial for PR education', and 'crucial for the job market', etc.

Searching for Themes: Next, these codes were then grouped into potential themes. For instance, codes like 'lack of internet connectivity', 'need for a studio', and 'poor internet connectivity' were grouped under a broader theme "Infrastructural and Technological Hurdles. Similarly, 'crucial for PR education', and 'crucial for the job market were grouped under a broader theme 'digital media as a necessity in PR education'.

Reviewing Themes: Then I examined whether the themes work in the context of the coded extracts and the whole data. During this stage, I discarded insignificant themes, combined, and split some of them.

Defining and Naming Themes: Further, I refined each theme and clearly explained and defined what they meant. For instance, the theme 'Infrastructure and technological hurdles' included various aspects of technology-related issues faced by both educators and students.

Producing the report: Lastly, I combined the ideas with pertinent passages to create an analytical story. Supported by instances from the extracts, the analytical narrative explained the themes and how they connect to the research questions.

For the analysis of the course outlines, I followed these steps:

Familiarization with Data: I read through the weekly topics of the courses carefully, focusing on references to digital media, social media, new technologies, and their applications in public relations. I also read through the course descriptions, course objectives and learning outcomes of the course outlines.

Generating Initial Codes: I coded passages that mention digital media elements. For example, 'Social Media,' 'Blogs', 'Wikis', 'New Media' etc.

Searching for Themes: I looked for patterns within the codes to identify potential themes. The themes emerged around the types of digital media discussed, and their applications in PR.

Reviewing Themes: I checked whether or not the themes accurately reflect the coded data and the entire data set.

Defining and Naming Themes: I defined each theme and give it a concise, descriptive name. For instance, *Digital Media Platforms in PR* focused on specific digital platforms like social media, blogs, wikis, and podcasts mentioned across courses. *Digital Strategy and Application* captured discussions on utilizing digital media for PR strategies.

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Digital Metrics and Evaluation addressed how courses cover monitoring, evaluation, and analytics of social media and other digital platforms.

Producing the Report: Finally, I presented the findings, guided by the themes I identified. I described how each theme is represented in the PR curriculum, providing examples from the course outlines to illustrate the presence and integration of digital media.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Creswell (2022) note that it is unethical to enter an organization or social group to gather data without the organization's gatekeepers' consent in research. Jennings (2003) defined ethics as a subfield of philosophy that aims to address morality-related issues. According to Jennings (2003), morality relates to norms or convictions regarding concepts like good and bad, right and wrong.

Ethics assumes a normative role when it serves as the foundation for regulating individual and societal behavior, assisting people in thinking through how they ought to act morally (Vanclay, et al., 2013). Halai (2006) observes that comprehensive research should be dedicated to ensuring that the participants are safeguarded from harm because it is a moral and ethical endeavor. The current study took steps to protect the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of research participants. I took an ethical clearance letter from UPSA before the data collection. Also, only participants who consented to the study were interviewed. Participants in the study were informed about it before data collection began, given assurances of anonymity, and treated with the utmost respect throughout. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, but they were told they could stop at any point if the interviewing process made them uncomfortable. Before recording the responses, the participants' permission was

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requested. I attempted to be as neutral as possible, and there was no attempt or knowledge of any misrepresentation of the participant's responses. More specifically, all private problems that were discussed were kept in complete confidentiality, except for those that were essential to the study and needed to be in the know. The participants' names were kept completely anonymous by not disclosing them in any way. Instead, alphanumeric codes were used to represent them.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Four broad criteria are the foundation of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approach to trustworthiness. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are these. Stahl and King (2020) argue that using triangulation techniques is one way to increase trust. Using multiple sources of data or field procedures to consistently identify recognizable patterns is known as triangulation (Stahl and King, 2020). Thus, after gathering data from the document analysis, I augmented the findings with data collected from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Member checking, in which study participants are given manuscripts of research transcripts to get their input on data accuracy, is another technique to guarantee credibility (Stahl and King 2020). To verify whether the information matched the participants' answers, I gave the participants back the transcripts that were taken from the audio recordings. After going over everything, they were able to verify that those were accurate representations of their answers. I also provided rich and detailed descriptions, particularly when analyzing the data.

For transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) are of the view that thick descriptions must be provided by I so that those wishing to apply the findings to their own location can assess transferability. In line with this, the study gave a thick description of the phenomenon under study. With dependability, Stahl and King (2020) avow that peer

examination and peer debriefing are effective communication practices that foster trust. Readers can assess the reliability of the research more accurately when they can see how it was conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, I also employed Peer briefing, especially as the study came to an end. By doing this, contributions were made, errors were fixed, and accuracy was guaranteed.

The goal of confirmability is to show that the researcher's conclusions and interpretations are logically drawn from the data. To do this, the researcher must provide evidence of the methods used to arrive at these conclusions (Tobin & Begley, 2004). I made sure that the experiences and opinions of the participants, not my inclinations, shaped the work's conclusions. To aid others in understanding the process and rationale behind judgments made, I also presented the justifications for theoretical, methodological, and analytical decisions taken during the investigation.

3.7 Chapter Summary

The research took a qualitative approach fixed on a case study design to analyze the incorporation of digital media into public relations education in Ghana; the chapter focused on the methods and procedures used to gather data for the research. The data from the field was gathered using a variety of data-gathering techniques, including content analysis, interviews, and focus group discussions. Also, each technique employed was rationalized. Additionally, the research was based on confidentiality, anonymity, and reciprocity, informed, and voluntary consent. In summary, the chapter explains the research approach, research design, sampling technique and size, data collection method, data collection process, methods of data collection, and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

The discussion of the findings from interviews with undergraduate public relations educators, focus group discussions with undergraduate public relations students, and analysis of course outlines on the incorporation of digital media into the public relations curricula of the two universities are presented in this chapter. The data collected were condensed into numerous topics to facilitate easy analysis and interpretation.

4.1 RQ1. How have public relations educators incorporated digital media into public relations education in the selected universities?

This research question sought to explore the extent to which public relations educators in the two institutions infuse digital media into their undergraduate curriculum. From the data analysis, the study derived the following overarching themes based on the codes generated from the research question: *purposeful digital integration in curriculum and diverse approaches in digital media education.* These themes are examined to explain how digital media has been incorporated into public relations education in Ghana.

4.1.1 Purposeful Digital Integration in Curriculum

This theme encapsulates the inclusion of and the teaching of digital media courses and digital media-related topics in the public relations curricula of the two universities. The theme of *purposeful digital integration in curriculum* illustrates how public relations educators responded to the digital transformation in their curricula. It emphasizes how digital media has been adapted and included in the public relations curricula. This

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theme highlights how public relations educators in the two universities have realized the value of digital media and subsequently reshaped the curriculum to incorporate pertinent digital courses and topics.

The existence of digital media courses and the topics relating to digital media in other courses were found during the first step of the investigation process, which involved analyzing the course outlines for the 2019/2020- 2022/2023 academic years of the two universities. Alexander (2016) believes that the shift in public relations practice brought about by digital technology has prompted several considerations for educators who design public relations curricula.

From the analysis of the course outlines at UPSA, undergraduate public relations students begin to specialize in their program at level 100. Undergraduate public relations students take forty-nine (49) courses. Thirty-four (34) of these courses are taken by public relations students because of their specialization in public relations. These courses have the course code PBPR. Only undergraduate students studying public relations enroll in PBPR courses. These courses are;

> *Mass Media and Society, NGO Public Relations, Integrated Marketing Communication 1, Integrated Marketing Communication 2, Public Relations Research, Public Relations in Higher Education, Issues and Crisis Management, Technical Writing, Corporate Social Responsibility, Public Relations Strategy and Campaign, Speech Writing, Employee Relations, Development Communication, Political Communication, Indigenous Communication, Applied Sociology, Applied Psychology, Applied Political Science, Organizational Behaviour, Communication Theories, Media Law, History of Mass Media in Africa, Technical Writing, Public Relations Ethics, English Language, Public Relations1, Public Relations 2, Introduction to Mass Communication, Public Relations Workshop, Public Sector Public Relations, Public Speaking and Presentation, Media Relations, New Media in Public Relations and International Public Relations.*

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The table below shows how public relations educators have incorporated digital media into UPSA's public relations curriculum, as detailed by the course outlines studied:

PBPR course	Weekly topics
1. Integrated Marketing Communication 2	The New Media • What is the New Media? • Social Media • Comparisons of the New Media with Traditional Media
2. International Public Relations	• The Internet and International Public Relations
3. Media Relations	Media Relations and New Media, • Digitalization and social media (The PR Toolkit) • Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, social bookmarks. • Media Relations and New Media, Digitalization, and Social Media (The PR Toolkit) • Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, Social Bookmarks (Continued)
4. New Media in Public Relations	• New media Policy-making for PR success • Collaborating with other internal units for new media effectiveness • Testing new media technologies • New media: a different communication process • New media and crisis management • Building connections and communities on social media for effective PR • Reputation building and management on new media • Metrics & analytics – monitoring and evaluation of social media
5. Public Relations 1	• Contemporary techniques and tools necessary for public relations practice
6. Public Relations Workshop	• Social Media
7. Public Speaking and Presentation	• Using Visual Aids, PowerPoint & Infographics
8. Public Sector Public Relations	• The impact of technology on public sector public relations • Traditional and social media
9. Public Relations in Higher Education	• Innovative channels for reaching stakeholders

The table indicates that nine (9) of the PBPR courses focus on digital media. The course *New Media in Public Relations* focuses on digital media in public relations, while the other eight (8) courses also cover digital media-related topics.

From the analysis of the course outlines at UniMAC-GIJ, communication students who specialize in public relations offer forty-eight (48) courses. Seventeen (17) of these courses are taken by public relations students because of their specialization in public relations. These courses have the course code CSPR. Only undergraduate public relations students enroll in CSPR courses.

> These courses are *Introduction to Business Law, Introduction to Social Psychology, Strategic Public Relations, Event Marketing and Promotion, Case Studies in Public Relations, Advertising Media Planning, Advertising Creative Strategies, Project Work, Crisis Management, Government Relations, Measurement and Evaluation, Media Relations, Online, and Print Media Production, Public Relations Writing, Public Speaking and Presentation, Principles of Advertising, Strategic Community Relations.*

The table below shows how public relations educators have incorporated digital media into UniMAC-GIJ's public relations curriculum, as detailed in the course outlines studied.

CSPR courses	Weekly topics
1. Advertising Media Planning	Advertising and advertising media (Exploring the Media) • Advertising media options (Traditional media, digital media, social media, etc).
2. Case Studies in Public Relations	• Social media
3. Creative Advertising Strategies	• Internet advertising and social media strategy

4. Crisis Management	• The media's (traditional and digital) role in crisis communication
5. Government Relations	• Digital Lobbying
6. Measurement and Evaluation	Social Media Monitoring and Measurement • Social Media Monitoring and Listening • Social Media Measurement (Watch: Video: Social Media Monitoring and Measurement Youtube Channel: Teacher Onomah)
7. Media Relations	Contemporary Media Relations Management • Emergence of social media • Use of influencers • Key bloggers • Building your online newsroom
8. Online Production	Introduction to Online Media Production • Digital Marketing for Public Relations Social Media Management • Social Media Strategy • Social Media Marketing & Advertising Digital Content Creation • Using Digital Content Creation tools for effective communication • Blogging for Public relations
9. Public Relations Writing	• Guidelines for Writing for Social Media
10. Principles of Advertising	• Online advertising
11. Public Speaking and Presentation	• Technological Aids
12. PR and Society	Globalization, Technology and Public relations • Technology • The Internet, globalization, and public relations • The concept of globalization and public relations • Future issues in PR; AI and Public Relations

Twelve (12) of the CSPR courses have a focus on digital media, as the table demonstrates. Digital media is covered in the *Online Production* course and the other eleven (11) courses treat topics relating to digital media.

For UPSA, the topic: *The New Media* is covered in the course *Integrated Marketing Communication 2*, which suggests educators teach students about emerging digital media platforms and channels. Again, UPSA's course *International Public Relations* covers the topic *The Internet and international public relations*, indicating that students are instructed on the significance of digital platforms in global public relations initiatives. Also*, Social Media* is a topic covered in UPSA's *Public Relations Workshop* course, suggesting training on the practical experience in using social media for public relations. The course *New Media in PR* tackles topics like *Testing new media technologies* and *collaborating with other internal units for new media effectiveness* illustrating that students are instructed on how digital tools and public relations strategies are put to use in the real world. The course *Public Relations in Higher Education* has weekly topics that indicate that students are instructed on how higher education institutions can use digital channels for stakeholder engagement. The course *Public Sector Public Relations* suggests training on how digital media has transformed public relations in the public sector. Also, the course *Public Relations 1* has the weekly topic *Innovative channels for reaching stakeholders* which suggests students are taught the latest trends and technologies in the field.

For UniMAC-GIJ, the course *Online Production* emphasizes that students are taught the value of content creation and blogging for public relations in the digital sphere. Topics like *Using Digital Content Creation Tools for Effective Communication* and *Blogging for Public Relations* are included. Again, for UniMAC-GIJ, digital media is explicitly acknowledged as a component of advertising in the topics of the courses

Creative Advertising Strategies, *Advertising Media Planning*, and *Principles of Advertising*. This suggests that students are exposed to online advertising techniques and social media advertising strategies.

Moreover, the mention of *social media* in the *Case Studies in Public Relations* course connotes that students are exposed to practical instances of social media's application in public relations. Topics like *Social media monitoring and measurement* imply that public relations educators teach students how to assess the effectiveness of digital media strategies. It is suggested by the topic *Guidelines for Writing for Social Media* that educators instruct students on how to write for digital media. The course *PR and Society* covers the relationship between technology and public relations, in topics like *AI and Public Relations*. This hints that the students are taught how digital media technologies such as artificial intelligence are impacting the field. It also indicates that public relations educators are preparing their students for the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead in the digital age. Both universities include topics relating to using technology for presentations, such as *Technological Aids* and *Using Visual Aids*, *PowerPoint, and Infographics*. This implies the recognition of the role of technology in effective presentation skills. Digital media is emphasized in the context of media relations, as seen by the topics *Emergence of social media*, *Use of influencers*, and *building your online newsroom*, *Media Relations, and New Media* in the *Media Relations* courses of both institutions. It implies that students are taught how to manage online content, interact with influencers, and use social media within a public relations context.

Both curricula include digital media as revealed by the document analysis, yet they differ in their methodological approaches. UPSA offers a specialized focus by introducing a standalone course, "New Media in Public Relations", while also

integrating digital themes across various public relations courses. On the other hand, UniMAC-GIJ does not feature a specific course exclusively focused on digital practices in public relations. Instead, digital media is woven into courses like "Online Production". Despite this difference, both institutions prioritize the practical application of digital skills.

Overall, the examination of the course outlines reveals a notable Purposeful Digital Integration in the Curricula of both universities. The courses and topics cover various aspects of digital media, including social media, online advertising, digital marketing, data analytics, crisis management in the digital age, and the impact of technology on public relations. This reflects a forward-looking approach by public relations educators to prepare students for digital public relations.

These courses and topics can give students an understanding of the digital environment and give them the abilities and information required to succeed in contemporary public relations industry. Using this approach guarantees that students may be ready to use technology and digital media in their careers. These findings of the presence of digital media course and courses in the two curricula affirm the statement of the Commission on Public Relations Education report (2018) that in addition to practitioners attempting to figure out how to incorporate these changes into their tactics and techniques, educators are also redeveloping course topics and contents as the industry shifts quickly due to technology and other factors.

The findings also corroborate the findings of Luttrell et al. (2021), who, through a content analysis of their course descriptions, gave an overview of the status of curriculum offerings of accredited public relations programs in the US. The researchers found an integration of social media, digital media, and data analytics in the curriculum.

Similarly, digital media education and courses are common among advertising and public relations majors, according to Fang et al. (2019) who conducted a content study of curriculum from 99 universities offering public relations and advertising programs. To address how educational institutions, satisfy the industry's demand for digital capabilities, Alexander (2016) contends that digital public relations principles must be integrated into every aspect of a modern undergraduate public relations curriculum.

4.1.1.1 Diverse Approaches in Digital Media Education

In-depth interviews were conducted with sampled public relations educators who teach digital media in the public relations curriculum of the two universities. The data from the in-depth interviews revealed that public relations educators in the two institutions use various methods or approaches to teach digital media courses and topics related to digital media in the curriculum. The data demonstrated that these methods include; giving *practical applications and assignments, using case studies and critiques*, *doing simulations,* and *utilizing a variety of digital tools and platforms to teach*.

Participants revealed how they use practical applications and assignments to instruct public relations students on digital media in public relations. Participant 1 from UniMAC-GIJ (P1G) explains ways he uses practical applications to instruct students on digital media in his courses *Public Speaking and Presentation* and *Public Relations Writing*:

> *...for the public speaking and presentation, I teach them how to use advanced PPT to do presentations, how to use 3DS, and how to use media effects to augment their presentations. So, I inculcate that. I give them productions to do as exams. I tell them to do videos, produce their documentaries, and produce their own public speaking engagements. I teach them how to use*

> *media effects to do presentations and how to use a teleprompter*
> *in their presentations* (P 1G).

In line with the wider integration of digital media into public relations education in the two institutions, this viewpoint illustrates the practical incorporation of digital media to enhance the students' public speaking and presentation skills. Particularly emphasized are the applications of media effects, teleprompters, 3DS, and advanced PowerPoint (PPT) techniques. Media effects and 3DS are mentioned, which suggests the incorporation of multimedia components into presentations. Also, students are encouraged by the instructor to produce their own documentaries, videos, and public speaking engagements. This shows the efforts of public relations educators to impart presentation skills to public relations students. Marchis (2010) argued that students' having the capacity to do presentations professionally using a digital format is crucial in the modern digital business environment (Marchis, 2010). Neill and Schauster (2015) also found that employers desire presentation skills in their hires. This finding aligns with Sosas (2021) who found that speaking instruction can be supported by technology in an interactive way that enables students to speak effectively.

> *The course has components of writing for social media, writing*
> *for digital media, and writing for YouTube and others. I give*
> *them assignments, case studies, and productions. They produced*
> *social media campaigns, wrote for new media, did simulations,*
> *etc* (P1G).

As evident in the excerpt above, the educator stated he has included digital media writing skills in his public relations writing course. The educator's course covers a wide range of digital media topics, focusing on writing for various online platforms. This suggests a curriculum that takes into account the many writing techniques and styles needed for various digital media. He mentioned that his students create social media

campaigns. This method can give students the practical abilities needed in the workplace and the theoretical knowledge they need. Auger and Cho (2016) found that writing proficiency emerges as the paramount skill sought for entry-level roles. With the increasing adoption of digital media among practitioners in Africa, as documented by studies like Ngondo (2019), the ability to effectively write for digital media becomes increasingly crucial.

Another educator from UniMAC-GIJ, (P2G), revealed that he lets his students organize simulated press conferences in teaching his course Media Relations. This is evident in the excerpt below:

> *...I let them organize a practical press conference that they sometimes livestream to their other colleagues who are not in the class. I also bring in social media influencers to engage the students* (P2G,).

This approach by the educators aligns with the work of, Veil (2010) who made public relations students organize a simulated press conference. In the simulated press conference, student reporters abruptly barged into a public relations classroom and started asking students questions. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2013) developed a social media crisis simulator for the public relations classroom. A survey was conducted with students who had taken part in the exercise. Findings indicated that as a whole, students had favorable impressions of the exercise. Students also pointed out the practical application of Hoot suite, Twitter, and Facebook dashboards as being very beneficial.

An educator from UPSA, (P3U), also states how he uses practical applications to teach his course, public Relations Workshop he stated:

> *As a group, they will have to evolve a brand name, a company name, you know, then give subjectivities around their*

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> *newsletters, and develop their own newsletters. And then, when it comes to how to use influencers, you have to demonstrate or do a mock relation of being an influencer. So, they demonstrate all these practically. For instance, when it comes to press conferencing. We teach them how to do even digital press kits.*

To improve students' comprehension of digital public relations techniques, the educator's statement highlights innovative teaching strategies by focusing on hands-on learning approaches. Participant (P3U) introduces role-playing activities in which students act out relationships between influencers and brands. Students can learn about the intricacies of influencer marketing by putting themselves in the shoes of influencers and understanding how it affects audience engagement and brand strategies. He also teaches students how to create digital press kits, in order to give students practical experience in creating digital tools for media relations. It is noteworthy that the educator teaches about influencers. Wolf and Archer (2018) contend that influencer engagement embodies the fundamental elements of public relations, including the necessity of establishing deep connections between influencers and their followers, as well as, eventually, between an organization and other stakeholder groups. Aja et al. (2019) and Ndinojuo et al. (2016) have identified a deficiency in expertise as a significant barrier preventing practitioners in Nigeria from keeping up with new technologies in media relations. The integration of practical exercises in media relations courses, as highlighted by these findings, presents a strategic approach that can equip students with the necessary skills.

Anani-Bossman's (2023) study revealed that most practitioners acknowledged using social media for most of their time. For researchers such as Kinsky et al. (2016) and Freberg and Kim (2018), the task of creating useful pedagogical strategies for teaching social media in the rapidly evolving digital world falls on educators. The study provided

evidence that public relations educators in UniMAC-GIJ use practical assignments to teach social media in public relations. This is evident in the following excerpts:

> *...they have an assignment. Aside from teaching them, they are tasked to adopt an organization. A lot of them adopted organizations like AirtelTigo, Vodafone, Banks, and so on. Once you adopt the organization, you study the organization and you develop a two-week social media campaign for them. (P3 G).*

> *...I am guided by the faculty. We are encouraged to introduce these social media into our courses. Our course outlines are approved by the Head of Department. We allow the students to identify PR activities that have taken place on these platforms done by other organizations. So, they submit assignments where they identify corporate organizations that are making use of functional websites, say a Facebook page. We also allow the students to post stories that we monitor on their Facebook page (P 2G).*

These methods illustrate a hands-on, real-world approach to education where students can translate and apply what they have learned about social media to public relations. The educators draw attention to the courses' practicality. Using this method, students can gain practical skills by managing social media campaigns for real organizations, in addition to learning theoretical concepts.

Again, participant 7, a public relations educator from UPSA (P7U) teaching New Media in PR employs case studies and critiques to teach new media concepts within public relations, as evidenced in the excerpts below:

> *in new media and crisis management, there are good and bad examples of how organizations have dealt with issues. So, I show them examples and you analyze them looking at what has been done wrong and what has been done right. So, mostly it is*

> *case studies that we use to teach. The good thing about teaching new media is that there are always case studies. In reputation management and new media, I teach them that there are limits to what you can post. I use case studies and best practices that can be used or applied to the cases.* (P7U).

> *...so, if we take a particular case like Mawako food poisoning, we try to look into the situation, what happened? We analyze the entire case. Then after that, I take the students through what they would have done differently if they were confronted with such a situation. So, it means we critique what the organizations did and specifically we look at their communication departments* (P7U).

These case studies can give students useful, real-world examples of how theoretical concepts are applied. According to the educators, students can analyze real-world examples from the case studies to gain insight into how organizations have handled different situations, both successfully and unsuccessfully.

The use of case studies and critiques, discovered in this study, utilized by public relations educators for social media instruction, serve as supplementary additions to the diverse approaches already documented in the existing public relations education literature. For instance, Fraustino et al. (2015) found that incorporating case study discussions fosters an environment that would enable students to engage in experiential learning and share ideas and theories with fellow students.

The educators' strategies of involving students in practical activities as revealed by the findings provide students with direct experiences. The findings reveal that public relations educators across both universities make the effort to engage students in Kolb's (1984) learning cycles: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. The practical activities allow students

to immerse themselves in real-world public relations tasks, directly engaging with digital media tools and platforms. This aligns with the Concrete Experience stage of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory where learners actively participate in an experience. The use of case studies, critiques, and simulations of actual public relations scenarios, such as the Mawako food poisoning case, may serve as Reflective Observation opportunities in experiential learning. Students analyze what was done right or wrong in real-life cases, encouraging them to think critically about the application of digital media in public relations. This reflection may help students understand the complexities of digital public relations, including crisis management and reputation management on digital platforms.

Through these reflections, students are led to Abstract Conceptualizations, where they generalize their observations into broader public relations and digital media principles. Educators guide students to conceptualize how digital media strategies can be employed in public relations, including the use of influencers, social media campaigns, and digital press kits. This stage moves learners from specific instances to general rules, helping them to understand underpinning theories that guide practical digital public relations. Then students apply what they have learnt in new situations. Assignments that require developing a social media campaign or using a teleprompter are examples of Active Experimentation.

According to Wurdinger (2005), through discussions, collaborative tasks, practical involvement, and applying content outside of the classroom, experiential learning engages students in the process of learning. Cantor (1997) argues that learners are prepared for the demands of the workplace through the effective combination of real-world experience and concrete observation that takes place during experiential learning.

Participants from the two institutions also revealed they have also been implementing a variety of digital tools and platforms to teach which enhance student engagement while equipping them with digital literacy. The following excerpts from the interview bolster this finding:

> *...we use WhatsApp to discuss questions that students ask outside class hours. Class time is limited. We use WhatsApp to send examples of what I teach. When we do not have a choice like on holidays, we use Zoom. Post-COVID, we were using Zoom sometimes for teaching. And even in revision week when classrooms are locked. I also encourage students to send Emails* (P2G).

> *...during COVID a lot of teaching shifted to Zoom. We use WhatsApp, Zoom and Telegram. We use Google Docs for assignments. We host classes on these platforms. Microsoft Teams is my favorite. I use it a lot for my classes. Students create WhatsApp groups for interaction and I am always a member of my class pages. These are ways of applying digital tools* (P7U).

> *...also, we employ digital media in our teaching sometimes. We use WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams, and sometimes do project videos. The good thing is that most of these students are even more technologically driven than lecturers. For the few students who are not technologically inclined, you need to encourage them to be on the same pace* (P6U).

The educators' use of digital platforms for teaching aligns with the observations of Kim and Freberg (2018) and Childers and Levenshus (2016), who note that integrating social media and other digital platforms has been a defining feature of contemporary public relations education. The educators revealed their use of WhatsApp to communicate with students in real-time as it acts as a forum for responding to inquiries, offering

explanations, and resolving issues that come up outside of scheduled class times. This practice supports Ellison et al.'s (2007) viewpoint that social media gives students additional opportunities to peruse, talk about, and use course material, extending the boundaries of the traditional classroom beyond the designated location and periods of physical contact.

Also, the mention of the switch to Zoom during COVID-19 illustrates how digital platforms have made it possible for education to continue even in the face of physical constraints. By engaging in online discussions and utilizing digital media tools, educators can actively encourage students to participate in the learning process. They also understand that many students are tech-savvy, and their engagement tactics are made to work with a range of technological skill levels. This reinforces scholarly claims that today's students are social media experts (McCollough, 2021).

While digital tools are widely used, the educators maintain a balance by combining digital methods with traditional teaching practices, for example, organizing Zoom sessions to demonstrate practical aspects not feasible in a traditional classroom setting. The excerpt below makes this apparent:

> *...I happen to teach with another organization which I put online and sometimes I invite my students to the class. Sometimes some of the things cannot be taught standing in the class. I think I remember one or two occasions where I had to organize a Zoom session for them so that they could see me practice the things that I am talking about for instance, how to run an ad* (P3G).

Another educator from UniMAC-GIJ brings up the use of social media as an efficient way to engage students. He has included YouTube. The excerpt below illustrates this:

> *...I realized that one of the effects of social media that research has shown is that millennials have a shorter attention span. When you are teaching them, two hours is too long for them to sit and listen and remember everything you are saying. So, I think I needed to find another way of engaging them to help them remember everything that they have said in class. Since social media is permanent and even after school, when they need a refresher course, they can always go to my YouTube channel and look at what is happening. Social media is what millennials use to learn. I do that with all the courses I teach* (P4G).

It's noteworthy that the educator uses YouTube to provide video content. This provides a platform for creating and disseminating everlasting educational materials that students can use as a reference after graduation and during their courses. This approach capitalizes on the enduring nature and wide accessibility of digital media, as highlighted by Shirky (2011). The educator (P4G) acknowledges that social media is millennials' main source of learning materials. The educator talks about using this strategy in every course he teaches. This shows his dedication to integrating digital media into the curriculum for all his courses, realizing its ability to improve the educational process.

This finding of educators' use of digital platforms for instructional purposes is consistent with the research of Madden et al. (2016), which showed how social media sites like YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are frequently used to teach and learn public relations skills like corporate writing, marketing, advertising, and campaign strategy.

According to Fraustino et al. (2015), utilizing digital media in the classroom fosters students' digital literacy while enabling them to investigate significant concepts in novel ways. In line with Kolb's (1984) stages of experiential learning, public relations educators are making the effort to create opportunities for students to gain hands-on

experience with digital media tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and YouTube. By incorporating these technologies into the teaching and learning process, students not just know about these tools theoretically but are using them in real-time, which serves as the Concrete Experience phase of the experiential learning theory. The use of digital platforms like WhatsApp groups for class interaction and Google Docs for assignments facilitates a space where students can reflect on their learning and the application of digital tools in the real world. Aside from assignment submission and communication, these digital platforms serve as a space to reflect on their learning experiences.

Then for Abstract Conceptualization, through the encouragement of using digital tools for class activities, educators are helping students conceptualize the role and impact of digital media in public relations strategies. Finally, with Active Experimentation, assigning projects that require the use of digital tools such as Zoom sessions to demonstrate practical skills or developing social media campaigns, educators are enabling students to experiment with the concepts and tools they have learned about. This experimentation is a direct application of their knowledge in real or simulated professional contexts, allowing them to explore outcomes, innovate, and refine their skills.

4.2 RQ2 What are students' perspectives on incorporating digital media into public relations education in Ghana?

Perspectives of public relations students have to do with the views and thoughts of students on how digital media has been infused and taught into their public relations curriculum. The focus group discussion comprised six final-year public relations students from each university. Having engaged in public relations courses for four

years, it is pertinent to explore their perspectives on how digital media has been incorporated into their school's public relations curriculum. The study inductively came up with themes from the data gathered. The themes derived from the responses are *Digital media as a necessity and Digital media lessons as lacking practicality*. These themes were analyzed with the aid of the experiential learning theory.

4.2.1 Digital media as a necessity

The theme means students perceive digital media incorporation into the undergraduate public relations curriculum as necessary. The data from the focus group discussion shows that undergraduate public relations students view digital media incorporation as an essential component of public relations education. The students perceive digital media lessons as necessary due to various reasons. Their responses suggest that they recognize the increasing reliance on digital media tools in the public relations field and believe that acquiring digital media skills is crucial for success in the industry.

In light of this, a participant from UPSA views digital media in public relations education as essential because it is indispensable in the field. The student recognizes that in today's communication landscape, public relations professionals must possess digital media proficiency. The participant stated that:

> *I think it is beneficial to incorporate it because we cannot do without digital media. You cannot put someone into the PR field without giving them the necessary digital media skills* (R1U, FGD).

The participant's statement demonstrates an awareness of how public relations is changing and how much it now depends on digital channels for interaction and communication. It also demonstrates how challenging it will be for today's public relations professionals to function if they do not have digital media competencies.

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Digital technologies are currently considered to be common for public relations practitioners, according to Wolf and Archer's (2018) research.

Another participant from UPSA acknowledges that digital media skills are necessary for public relations training because it is a crucial component of it and it aids students in research for studies. The participant states that:

> *I think new media is very necessary and I think it is one of the major things that should be incorporated into PR education. We need new media skills for PR education to be effective. It helps in gathering more information and materials for studies too (R3U, FGD).*

A participant also from UPSA noted that this integration is essential to provide students with the necessary tools to successfully navigate the modern digital world. The participant mentioned that although public relations is often thought of as a writing-focused profession, it entails a great deal of research, proficiency in the use of digital software, and the production of interesting content. The participant expressed concern about the possibility that experts who graduated twenty years ago could not be familiar with the latest technologies used in the field today. He expressed the opinion that if this integration is delayed, there could be a substantial difference between the educational system and the workforce needs. The statement below makes this evident:

> *We can all attest to the fact that we are in the digital era. Even though the job of PR professionals is perceived as a writing job, our job involves a lot of research, using some software, and being able to come up with compelling content. So, it is important that we are able to incorporate new media into the teaching and learning of the PR course so that students who are churned out are well-cooked for the digital world. I don't think a PR professional who graduated 20 years ago is privy to some*

> *of the technology we have now. So, it is important we*
> *incorporate it now before it is too late* (R6U, FGD).

Additionally, a participant mentioned that digital media skills are necessary for public relations training because some jobs require these skills. This student argued that since digital platforms are often the source of crises, digital media has grown in prominence relative to conventional media.

> *I think we have gotten to a point where we cannot go without*
> *digital media. It is now part of our jobs. There is a need for those*
> *in school to learn it so that when they enter into the job market,*
> *they do not struggle. And possibly they may not get a job because*
> *some job opportunities come with those requirements. Digital*
> *media has become more important than traditional media*
> *because most of the crises that occur stem from digital platforms*
> (R9U, FGD).

The students' acknowledgment of digital media competencies as crucial for future careers in public relations is consistent with the findings of Bernhard and Russmann (2022) and Brunner et al. (2018). By analyzing 62,391 job advertisements for public relations professionals, Bernhard and Russmann (2022) investigated how digitization has affected the skill sets required by practitioners. Of the twenty-five hard skills that were examined, they discovered that digital media skills scored second. Similarly, Brunner et al. (2018) explored the skills companies consider when employing people with experience in public relations. Their study found evidence that the use of social media was highly prioritized by employers.

Furthermore, a student noted that she believes digital media is necessary for public relations education to train practitioners who can balance traditional and new media. The students mentioned that:

> *We must incorporate it so that those learning PR practice would be able to strike a balance between traditional methods and new media methods because though we argue that new media makes our work easier, we cannot do away with our traditional methods. There are specific things you have to do using traditional methods and others using new media. So digital media should be incorporated so that students strike that balance* (R7U, FGD).

This viewpoint stresses the necessity of integrating digital media into public relations education to achieve a balanced skill set. It recognizes that although new media is more convenient and efficient, conventional approaches are still important in some public relations contexts. According to Permasatarri et al. (2021), traditional and digital media are synergistic in the field of public relations. It implies that being able to balance the two is crucial for those who want to become professionals. It acknowledges that every strategy has advantages and is appropriate in different public relations situations. This harmony may enable aspiring to acquire a broad range of skills, knowing when to leverage traditional methods and when to make appropriate use of digital media tools. Other scholars such as Wright and Hinson (2009), and Wolf and Archer (2018) are also of the view that digital media and traditional media complement each other.

Participants from UniMAC-GIJ also mentioned that they believe incorporating digital media into public relations education is beneficial. A participant stated:

> *It is very important because first-degree holders are usually communication technicians and not managers. And here we have opportunities coming with digital media. You will need these skills for social media management for instance. Incorporating it will give them skills for their careers.* (R1G, FGD).

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The above point of view illustrates how vital students perceive digital media in undergraduate public relations education. It also recognizes the diverse possibilities that digital media is bringing to the workplace, especially in fields like social media management. It implies that learning how to use digital media is essential to navigating and succeeding in modern job routes in the communication industry. This viewpoint conforms with Bernhard and Russmand's (2023) assertion that while senior positions were more likely to demand research and issue/crisis management skills, entry-level employment focused mostly on digital media skills. Todd (2014) avers that having the requisite competencies and skills is essential for success when looking for employment. This underscores the significance of incorporating instruction in digital media into public relations programs so that graduates have the wide range of skills required by the changing nature of the workplace, particularly in managing digital platforms and taking advantage of new opportunities that come with them.

Another participant stressed that he perceives digital media as necessary in public relations education, emphasizing that digital skills are now vital for public relations activities, now predominantly carried out through digital media. The participant notes:

> *It is necessary. There are different aspects of the PR profession such as measurement and evaluation, strategic planning, and all. And in doing that, you may need those tools such as social media and digital analytics* (R2G, FGD).

Also, the participant stated that:

> *So, I think is a technologically driven world and most organizations are moving towards digital media platforms. Newspapers have social media handles. It is very important for us to have an idea about them and to know how to incorporate these technologies in our work and the advantages and disadvantages* (R3G, FGD).

The student mentioned the shift towards technology-driven platforms within organizations. He noted the evolution of traditional media, such as newspapers, which have embraced social media as part of their operations. Moreover, the mention of understanding the pros and cons emphasizes the need for a comprehensive grasp of these tools to maximize their potential in the field of public relations.

Both UPSA and UniMAC-GIJ public relations students believe digital media education in the public relations curriculum is critical for future public relations professionals. Students from both institutions see digital media as a non-negotiable component of public relations education. Students' perspectives offer a vital yet overlooked angle in the discourse of digital skills in public relations education. Existing literature predominantly provides evidence for insights from educators and industry players on the significance of digital skills in public relations education, yet it largely seems to neglect valuable input and experiences from students, which this study has attempted to provide evidence for.
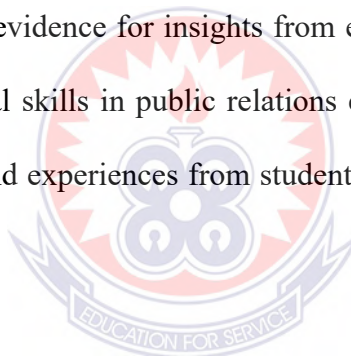
4.2.2 Digital media lessons as lacking practicality

The theme "Digital Media Lessons as Lacking Practicality" means undergraduate public relations students feel that their public relations education's digital media instructions do not offer enough real-world application or hands-on practice. Their perspectives reflect an imbalance between the theoretical knowledge and real-world expertise required for negotiating the digital environment in their prospective public relations professions.

A common perspective from undergraduate public relations students of both universities on the incorporation of digital media into public relations education is the fact that what they are taught is mostly theoretical. Though the students perceived

digital media skills as a necessity, they felt how it has been incorporated heavily relied on theory with little emphasis on hands-on experiences.

The students felt the digital media lessons are usually theory-inclined with few practical experiences. For example, a UPSA participant illustrated this by saying:

> *I feel like it shouldn't just be incorporated. It should be practicalized. When we did the new media, most of it was theory. In fact, it was all theory and I believe if they had made it more practical. I believe if it is more practical, it would do us a lot of good… (R6U, FGD).*

Another participant from UPSA highlighted that he is familiar with some technologies, such as Slug and Google Analytics, but he laments not having had the chance to learn how to make use of them. He blames time restrictions and argues that not enough attention has been paid to the usefulness of learning these techniques. This is explained in the extract below:

> *The application is quite a problem. We know about it. We know Slug and we know there is Google Analytics. Our lecturer tried to give us images of what it looks like and all that but we did not get the opportunity to learn how to use them. I will also blame the time. The practical aspect is a bit of an issue* (R1U, FGD).

The statement implies that students perceive they do not have practical experiences of data literacy in public relations. Considering its significance, Ridsdale et al. (2016) gave recommendations for teaching data literacy, this includes emphasizing the advantages of using data, connecting workshops to real-world situations, utilizing real-world data to pique students' interests, and module- and project-driven instruction that applies to

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the real world. However, the student's sentiment reveals a gap in practice, showing that educators have not fully embraced these methods.

Again, a participant lamented the discrepancy between theoretical learning of digital media and practical application of the concepts. According to her, the class lessons appeared simple but their applications were complex. She mentioned that she could not use Google Analytics when she was employed to use it. This is evident in the excerpt below:
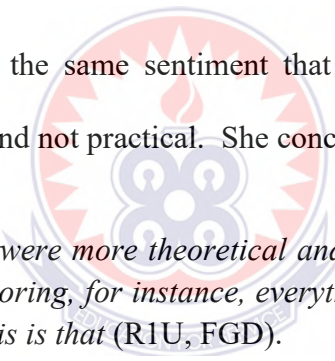
> *Our lecturer tried his best to give us an idea of how the things were. During Zoom meetings, he would screen share and, on his laptop, he would try and open the various digital apps. But it wasn't enough. I wanted to do something on the side. So, someone asked me to manage his business' social media. I was like okay; I would apply what I am learning in school. That was when I realized I did not learn anything. All of a sudden, I didn't know what I was doing. This was the first time I was really applying what I learnt. What the lecturer did on Zoom made it look so simple but I was looking at Google Analytics and I had no idea how to go about it. I was so confused. The whole thing is like, you are learning and go and write on a piece of paper. Then that is it you get your grade and you go. I think there is not enough practicality. I even had to go back to the slides to see if I could get some step-by-step tips to follow. I was struggling to handle the business' social media. That was how serious it was. Initially, I thought it was very simple but it wasn't. I realized it was something I would have to do continuously to gain experience* (R2U, FGD).

The student's deficiency in practical digital analytics echoes what Meng et al (2019) found. The pre-and post-test results of their study provided proof that students lack both basic and specialized knowledge in social analytics, although, during their internships,

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they were frequently required to do social analytics in a variety of settings without receiving any on-the-job training.

Meng et al. (2019) contend that academics and researchers found that public relations students are more employable if they acquire a particular degree of expertise in monitoring and evaluating social discussions during their education. Meng et al.'s (2019) argument and this finding highlight how crucial practical knowledge is for public relations students' readiness in the job market when it comes to monitoring and evaluating social interactions, especially with tools like Google Analytics. The absence of practical exposure to tools like Google Analytics might pose a concern for students as could hinder their preparedness for real-world public relations tasks.

Also, a student reported the same sentiment that the lessons in monitoring social discussions were theory and not practical. She concluded that:

> *The lessons were more theoretical and not practical. In social media monitoring, for instance, everything was theory. We just know that this is that* (R1U, FGD).

According to Mpho (2018), the educator maintains complete control over the classroom's operations when instruction is theoretical. He further concluded that this prevents students from expressing themselves, posing queries, and taking charge of their own education.

Neill and Schauster (2015) concluded that, although companies still valued writing and presentation abilities, recruits also needed to be skilled in mathematics and data analysis—skills that are typically connected to social media monitoring and listening. To better prepare students for their professional positions in the sector, it becomes

imperative as evidenced by this study, to incorporate enough hands-on training using tools like Google Analytics into the public relations curriculum.

Again, a student expressed an appreciation for digital media lessons in public relations education. However, his concern lies in the timing of the practical aspects of the lessons, which potentially limits hands-on experience. This excerpt below demonstrates this:

> *Well, I think so far, they are doing well. The incorporation level is good but not enough, in the courses, they just brush on it. There is social media, there is this and that's all. They should make it more practical. They start late with the practicals. It is later in the semester. We should start practicals from the beginning* (R2U, FGD).

Just like that of UPSA, the data collected from the students from UniMAC-GIJ revealed that public relations educators mention the various digital media tools and what they can be used for in class but they do not effectively teach the students how to use them. Hence, the students are aware of these tools and how they are relevant to public relations practice but in a situation where the students are to apply the tools, they think they cannot do that. A student expresses that:

> *We have general knowledge about new media and digital media how PR practitioners can leverage the platforms for organizational success, what they should consider, and how they should even measure. For instance, social media analytics and some tools to use but the hard skills are a problem. For example, social media tools like Hootsuite and those kinds of apps and software we know about them but we haven't explored them in class so that we can have an idea about how it is used so that we*

> *can incorporate it into our work. The idea is there but the hard*
> *skills or how to implement it is a problem* (R2G, FGD).

A student from UniMAC-GIJ described the educators' mere mention of the tools without them teaching the students how to use them as *they are showing you where to farm but not how to farm*. According to the data, the educators say *have you heard there's Hootsuite, have you heard there is Canva* but they *don't know teach to use them.*

There was a consensus that while the curriculum introduces or mentions these technologies, there is a significant deficit in how to use them in real-world situations. Just like it was expressed by UPSA students, UniMAC-GIJ students also believed they were not adequately trained in how to use or navigate digital media tools, especially tools for social media listening and measurement. This is clear in the excerpts below:

> *This is a communication school. We are doing PR and they are*
> *trying to teach us digital media for our line of work. As to what*
> *point we can apply it, they are doing well but as to going the*
> *extra mile to show. For example, you know that if you want to*
> *let's say do analytics of how well you have been doing with your*
> *social media you can use Keyhole but no lecturer takes you*
> *through the interface* (R3G, FGD).

They also noted that there seems to be a disconnect between the educators' knowledge of digital media and their ability to impart practical knowledge of them to students. One highlighted that,

> *The lecturers have PhDs in their fields but the practicality is the*
> *problem. They have an idea but as to how to take us through how*
> *to use these tools is difficult. They just mention them* (R5G,
> FGD).

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This observation is in sync with Moody and Bates's (2013) critique, which suggests that communication educators are not as practical as they need to be in relating the realities of the workplace to the classroom and how students need to be prepared.

The perspectives shared by the students highlight a significant issue: a notable gap in digital analytics among public relations students. This deficiency could be attributed to the lack of expertise among Ghanaian public relations educators in providing practical digital analytics training. Kim and Freberg (2018) also found that educators frequently encounter difficulties when it comes to teaching analytics and digital evaluation because a significant number of analytic platforms access is restricted to paid users, and social media sites are constantly evolving, making it challenging to stay up to date with the most recent advancements. Adams and Lee's (2021) research accentuates the demand among communication managers for new hires with robust digital analytical skills and the capacity to derive insights from diverse data sources. This demonstrates that foundational education in digital analytics is necessary for the digital job market. Consequently, the absence of analytics skills among undergraduate public relations students could significantly hinder their employment prospects.

Overall, this theme demonstrated that public relations students in both universities feel they have theoretical knowledge of digital media yet they believe they have not enough acquired hands-on experience in digital media which limits real-world experiences. This finding that digital media lessons in public relations education is in line with Affum's (2021) and Sende and Vladmir's (2021) findings. Affum (2021) found that postgraduate students perceive public relations education as theoretical with limited practical experiences. Sende and Vladimir (2021) examined how the public relations curriculum in South Africa prepares students with knowledge of cultural diversity. According to the research, public relations students have a solid theoretical

understanding of public relations and cultural diversity. However, they lack the practical experience needed to use this in a professional setting.

Kolb (1984) in his experiential learning theory proposed that learners must go through Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. However, the findings show that the students believe that there is not enough consideration of these when public relations educators are instructing them in digital media.

The findings revealed that there is a significant emphasis on the theory (Abstract Conceptualization) of digital media in the educational process described by the students. However, the critical components of experiential learning, particularly Concrete Experience and Active Experimentation, seem to be insufficiently incorporated. The Concrete Experience stage according to Kolb (1984) involves engaging students in new experiences directly. Though the interview with educators demonstrates that they made efforts to incorporate experiential learning, the students' comments indicate a scarcity of hands-on, practical experiences with digital media tools such as Google Analytics and Hootsuite. Their learning primarily revolved around theoretical understanding, with minimal opportunities to engage directly with the tools and platforms they were learning about. This lack of Concrete Experience can leave students unprepared for real-world applications, as evidenced by their struggles when attempting to apply their knowledge in actual settings, such as managing a business's social media. Reflective Observation involves contemplating one's experiences from various perspectives (Kolb, 1984). While the students did engage in reflection, it was often in the context of realizing their lack of practical skills and understanding post-experience. This indicates a missed opportunity for structured reflection guided by

educators that could have facilitated deeper learning and a bridge between theory and practice.

The data clearly show that the educational approach emphasized Abstract Conceptualization, where students were exposed to theories and concepts of digital media. They gained general knowledge about new media, digital media strategies, and the theoretical application of social media analytics tools. However, this conceptual understanding was not sufficiently complemented by practical application, which limited the students' ability to internalize and fully comprehend these concepts. Active Experimentation involves applying what one has learnt to the world around them to see what results (Kolb, 1984). Students expressed a desire for a more practical application and experimentation with digital media tools within their coursework. The reflections suggest that when students attempted to apply their theoretical knowledge. This gap hindered their ability to experiment effectively with the tools and concepts they learned about, impacting their confidence and skill development.

Thus, the feedback from the students underscores a significant gap in the application of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory in the teaching of digital media in public relations education. While theoretical knowledge (Abstract Conceptualization) is adequately covered, the stages of Concrete Experience and Active Experimentation which are also crucial are underrepresented. This imbalance hinders students' ability to fully engage with the material and develop the necessary practical skills and competencies required in the digital media field.

According to Xie et al. (2018), public relations agencies believe that current educational programs do not adequately prepare students for the rapidly evolving sectors, particularly concerning navigating emerging media technologies. In addition, agency

executives demanded addressing real-world situations and assisting students in gaining a realistic comprehension of the nature of industries.

4.3 What are the emerging issues associated with digital media incorporation into public relations education of the selected universities?

This research question sought to investigate the present difficulties and considerations associated with incorporating digital media into public relations education in the two universities. It sought to explore the problems that come up as public relations education aims to give students the digital media competencies required for public relations practice. This also entails the difficulties educators face in their efforts to teach these tools and the problems that students face when learning these tools. Luttrell et al. (2021) maintain that while incorporating digital media is regarded as a necessary modification for public relations education, there are hurdles involved. Alexander (2016) also notes that new media's impact on public relations is posing new challenges for public relations education. The themes that emerged are *Infrastructural and Technological Hurdles*, *Faculty Digital Proficiency and Training Needs, Lack of Early and Comprehensive Exposure, and Need for Curriculum Update.*

4.3.1 Infrastructural and Technological Hurdles

This theme highlights the hindrances and constraints that come with inadequate infrastructure and technological development, making it difficult to successfully adopt and incorporate digital media into the public relations curricula of the two universities.

Public relations educators from both universities noted that students' lack of financial capacity to purchase laptops and smartphones acts as a barrier to equipping students with digital media skills. This is exemplified in the following excerpts:

Some of the students cannot afford laptops (P3G).

Some students do not have smartphones (P2G).

The majority of the students are still living in the traditional age. Some of them do not have the logistics: computers and Android phones. So, logistical challenges were one of them (P1G).

Also, these students themselves have what they want to do with their phones. Most of them do not have laptops. Most of them cannot afford to have data (P7U).

Students cannot afford laptops (P6U)

Most students also do not have access to laptops, you know, for financial reasons. So, these are also some of the things where assuming students are able to have access to laptops, that would have been better (P8U).

The educators emphasized that some students cannot afford laptops. This financial constraint inhibits their access to a crucial tool in their learning of digital media and engaging in digital learning platforms. Also, disparities in access to technology are revealed by these difficulties, which highlight a digital divide in public relations education in the two institutions. This finding agrees with Afzal et al.'s (2023) and Bormann et al.'s (2021) studies. Afzal et al, (2023) found that students from lower-income families had less access to technology, suggesting a divide in accessibility to technology due to socioeconomic background. Bormann et al. (2021) also found that students' socio-economic status hampers their digital media education.

Moreover, the educators also identified institutional challenges such as poor internet connectivity. Public relations educators at UPSA mentioned that poor internet connectivity is a major hindrance to teaching students digital media. According to the educators, lack of internet access affects digital media instruction, requiring them to use their laptops and data for lessons. The extract below makes this clear:

The number one challenge is internet connectivity (P7U).

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> *I think the internet is the basic challenge. Today, I'll be using my phone to port my laptop but if you have lecture theatres where the internet is just a click away, it becomes easier and students can even pick certain things from YouTube and see things practically for themselves (P8U).*

> *… we provide our own laptops. When it gets spoiled you are faced with a challenge. We also have to use our own data in the case of flow internet connectivity (P2G).*

Additionally, the data demonstrated that outdated equipment, a lack of studios dedicated to practical lessons in digital media, a lack of educational software, and a lack of computer labs all make it difficult to teach digital media effectively. The excerpts below demonstrate this:

> *We need a studio. A production studio for PR writing and presentation is very important for a practical feel. Digital communication is not about theory but practice (P1G).*

This educator from UniMAC-GIJ emphasizes how crucial it is to have a production studio for PR writing and presentations for practical lessons in the course he teaches. He underlines the need for practical experience in a studio setting to help students grasp and become proficient in digital public relations. A student from UniMAC-GIJ also mentioned this during the focus group discussion:

> *There should be a digital media studio for practicals. Developed schools have studios. The school needs a studio. Getting a well-equipped room for PR students to learn more, research more, and practice. A studio for digital content creation (R3G, FGD).*

Again, the data pointed out that a lack of well-equipped computer labs and larger classes pose a significant challenge to digital media instruction. This was echoed by educators and students from the two universities.

A public relations educator from UniMAC-GIJ expresses the necessity for well-equipped labs. He also stated that with huge class size, ensuring active engagement for every student becomes a daunting task due to the insufficient number of machines. Consequently, he resorts to using projectors, which can limit hands-on interaction and practical learning experiences. This is clear in the excerpt below:

> *We need well-functioning computer labs. The number of computers at the lab is limited. We have a class of almost 100 students. So, if you want to do something where everybody is involved, you will not be able to get the number of machines. We resort to showing them the things on a projector. Ideally, there should be a bigger lab* (P4G).

Udoaka and Nda (2020) discovered that communication educators face a deficiency in an environment conducive to teaching and learning digital media within mass communication, a finding that aligns with the observations presented here.

A student from UPSA also hinted that they are unable to get adequate instruction in digital media because of the size of the class. The student implied that instructors feel dissuaded by the large class size. Overburdened educators might find it difficult to interact with and instruct a large cohort. This is expressed in the extracts below:

> *The class size is a factor. We are too many. We are about 120 in my class. This also discourages the lecturers* (R2U, FGD).

A participant from UPSA points out the impediment that large class sizes pose in efficiently enabling the translation of theoretical knowledge in digital media into practical skills. He understands the importance of theoretical knowledge in digital media, but with so many students, it can be difficult to find practical applications for this knowledge according to him. This is expressed in the extracts below:

> *I think it's a general challenge, that class sizes are also too large. PR today is no longer theory. PR today is, is It's*

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appreciating of the theory, but its ability to translate theory into practice. That is what PR is about today. But when you have a large class of over 100 students, how do you do that practically? It becomes a challenge (P8U).

The data showed that there is a predominance of theoretical instruction in digital media because it is challenging to lead practical exercises for a large class size. Engaging every student in practical activities is hampered by this. As a result, the instructional approach mainly relies on case studies and theoretical instruction, which might offer insights into scenarios but might also fail to provide hands-on training on digital media. An educator from UPSA expresses this:

It is more theory-inclined with a bit of experiential learning in there. The problem is you are teaching a class of at least 100 students. It is difficult to get all of them to practice. It is mostly theory-inclined with case studies (P7U).

Again, the results revealed the challenge of the unavailability of digital media software and modern equipment for teaching digital media courses. This lack of essential tools, poses a significant obstacle, hindering the ability to effectively instruct students in digital media. Educators from UPSA expressed their efforts in making the most of the few resources available which reflects a proactive stance toward addressing the existing inadequacies. They proposed that to improve the standard of instruction given to students in courses related to digital media, there is a need for software, better-equipped facilities, and general improvements in the resources available. The excerpt below demonstrates this:

...the lack of availability of some of these software that we must use to teach the students. I think you have regular problems like space (P7U).

We do not have enough modern gadgets. We are managing our little while management is encouraged to acquire modern tools

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>> *to take the students through. We need State-of-the-art equipment*
>> (P8U).

Additionally, a student from UniMAC-GIJ during the focus group discussion brought up the possibility of a disconnect between the education received and the real-world application of that education when she mentioned that she felt unprepared for the public relations industry because there were not enough resources available to her. This illustrates the idea that providing students with the tools to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world situations is just as important as teaching them digital media theory. The participant stated that although they are learning about digital media, they do not have access to the necessary tools and equipment to use this knowledge efficiently. The excerpt below reveals this:

>> *As it stands now, our part of the world lacks enough knowledge about technology and how to use it. So, if they are giving us knowledge of digital media, they should give us the tools and equipment so they help us know how to navigate. Some of us, are not really prepared* (R5G, FGD).

Infrastructural and technological barriers are frequently cited obstacles to digital media education in literature. This claim is corroborated by findings from studies by Boateng and Tindi (2022), Udoaka and Nda (2020), Harvey et al. (2022), Christensen et al. (2017), and Bormann et al. (2021) These studies collectively found technological and infrastructural obstacles as significant impediments to digital media education and literacy.

At the Concrete Experience stage of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, learners actively experience an activity. The lack of access to essential tools like laptops and smartphones, as mentioned in the excerpts, can severely limit students' ability to engage with digital media platforms and tools. This lack of access prevents students from having the hands-on experiences necessary to form the basis of their learning. Without

the ability to experiment with digital tools and platforms, students miss out on critical experiences that are foundational to understanding digital media's practical aspects. After experiencing, learners reflect on the experience. However, the findings highlight a significant barrier in this stage: limited internet connectivity and the absence of facilities like studios. These issues can prevent students from effectively reflecting on their experiences by researching further information, engaging in online forums for discussion, or even observing how professionals navigate digital media challenges. The inability to access a rich variety of resources for reflection stymies deeper understanding and learning.

In Abstract Conceptualization, learners conceptualize a theory or model of what is observed (Kolb, 1984). When students cannot actively engage with digital tools or access sufficient digital resources, their ability to formulate or relate to abstract concepts is limited. Finally, during Active Experimentation, learners use their insights to experiment with the world. The findings reveal students' struggle to apply their theoretical knowledge in practical settings. Without the opportunity to experiment with digital media tools and platforms in a controlled learning environment, students find themselves not fully prepared for real-world applications.

This study's evidence that digital media instruction in public relations education in the two institutions is hampered by infrastructural and technological issues which further impede experiential learning, is consistent with that of Obi and Christopher (2021) who found some barriers to experiential learning, such as unequal resource distribution, a dearth of learning resources, a lack of and restricted access to computers and the internet in labs and workshops.

4.3.2 Faculty Digital Proficiency and Training Needs

The theme of faculty digital proficiency and training highlights the gaps in digital literacy among educators and the need for continuous training for educators. Enwerem and Chuks-Enwerem (2018) avow that the ubiquity of new media has led to obvious deficiencies in skills that could make it more difficult for teachers to instruct in several crucial areas. Educators of communication who are not technologically proficient may find it difficult to teach digital areas to students who are more adept and compliant with technology (Enwerem & Chuks-Enwerem, 2018). The data revealed suggestions that educators may need further training to stay abreast with digital media advancements. In this regard, a respondent from UniMAC-GIJ (P2G) espoused:

> *We the teachers sometimes do not understand the entire system so for example, if I teach Facebook, there are things as a lecturer I know about Facebook but there are a lot more about Facebook that I may not know but I encourage them to try and explore the tools. That is where you need I.T. so there must be complementary synergy in every faculty with the PR people teaching how to use these things, and also someone who is teaching students how to understand the system. Most of us educators were not taught the technology so we are now adjusting* (P2G).

Despite teaching digital media platforms like Facebook, the educator admits to only having a cursory understanding of them. He clarifies that while he possesses certain insights, the vastness of the features of these tools surpasses his expertise. The educator encourages students to experiment with these tools despite his limited knowledge. This approach may support experiential learning and empower students with technology independently. He urged a concerted effort across faculties to improve the understanding and utilization of technology in public relations education. This reveals

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the necessity of ongoing professional development to improve the level of digital literacy of educators.

Furthermore, the interview data revealed that, in line with the changing needs of contemporary public relations education, educators realize they need to invest in their digital knowledge and abilities. It stresses the necessity for public relations educators in Ghana to engage in ongoing professional development and emphasizes the need for them to acquire digital skills despite limited resources. In this regard, a participant from UPSA explained:

> *Even we lecturers, it is necessary for us to build our capacity in the area of digitalization. Most of our universities lack some of these modern tools as compared to advanced countries. So, we do the little we can do. That is why we as lecturers must build our capacity in the area of technology* (P8U).

Again, the data revealed that educators acknowledge that digitally competent faculty is necessary because of the enduring nature of digital media. The educator avers that due to its enduring nature, its incorporation is non-negotiable. Therefore, he stresses that faculty must be digitally savvy to impart such skills to future practitioners. This is made apparent in the excerpt below:

> *All I want to say is that, whether we like it or not, digital media has come to stay. Therefore, whether you are a PR educator, or a PR student, quipping yourself, with modern ways is critical for education. For students, there is a need for them to leverage digital media. As we are training them to become PR practitioners, there is a need for us to leverage more on digital media* (P6U).

Furthermore, an educator from UniMAC-GIJ (P2G) acknowledged the potential of the social media platform, Twitter as an educational tool in public relations education but drew attention to his deficiencies in terms of using it for instruction. Fraustino et al.

(2015) believe that Twitter is a great tool for implementing experiential learning in public relations education. This educator's admission indicates a willingness to explore new teaching approaches and platforms, but it also points out the difficulty educators have incorporating some digital tools into their curriculum because of their lack of experience or knowledge in the area:

> *One of the things that personally, I haven't used to teach is Twitter though people host events on the platform. That's because I am limited in my knowledge about it. These are spaces where you can now engage your students to host activities that you can monitor and see how they can provide news materials to their stakeholders* (P2G).

Additionally, students during the focus group discussions, also stressed how crucial it is for public relations educators to undergo training in digital media to properly prepare them. The students from both universities mentioned that the public relations curriculum may need to adapt to the rapidly changing technological environment. Some noted that younger generations might be more tech-savvy than their teachers. They also explained that some educators have been noted to be reluctant to adopt AI, presumably because they are unfamiliar with it or doubt its applicability to academic settings. These are illustrated in the following excerpts:

> *Time is moving faster than what we are learning here. People are employing AI in a different way that we are not practicing in Ghana here. Mind you, we are the Gen Zs we tend to know more than the lecturers so I think that they might not even be abreast with the modern tech. They are shocked when we present something new to them. So, there is more to be done* (R5G, FGD).

> *Some even discourage the use of AI for studies. But people are using it even if not for studies. If possible, the lecturers can*

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> *undertake courses and the school too should consider young lecturers who know about AI and Web 2.0, not those who still read newspapers and who don't have time for social media* (R1G, FGD).

This finding that faculty digital proficiency and training needs are crucial to digital media skills incorporation in public relations education aligns with that of Boateng and Tindi (2022). Boateng and Tindi (2022) examined the use of new media technologies by educators in the delivery of curriculum. They found that issues, such as a lack of digital literacy, limit the use of digital technology by educators. Similarly, Harvey et al. (2022) concluded that a lack of training is one of the main barriers preventing instructors from providing instruction in digital media literacy. Boateng and Tindi (2022) highlight that low digital literacy is considered a personal obstacle as these are individual cases, meaning the lack of digital skills and knowledge varies from person to person, rather than being a uniform issue. This variability makes it a personal obstruction because the impact on technology adoption and utilization is dependent on each individual's specific background, education, and experience with digital tools. The implication is that addressing low digital literacy requires targeted approaches to education and training that consider the unique needs of each individual.

Kolb's Concrete Experience stage involves direct experience with the subject matter. The findings suggest that public relations educators themselves are sometimes not fully vexed in the digital media tools they are teaching. This lack of comprehensive understanding can limit the range and depth of concrete experiences students are exposed to. If educators are still adjusting to technologies and relying on students to explore these tools independently, it may result in missed opportunities for students to gain a solid foundational experience in digital media practices.

Reflective observation requires the learner to think critically about their experiences. The effectiveness of this stage depends heavily on the educators' ability to guide these reflections, and framing discussions that deepen understanding. However, if educators are not fully knowledgeable about the digital media landscape, their ability to prompt insightful reflection may be compromised. At the Abstract Conceptualization stage, learners develop concepts and generalize learning from their experiences. The findings indicate a challenge in this area, as educators themselves are in the process of building capacity in digitalization. When educators lack a strong grasp of emerging technologies, it can hinder their ability to help students conceptualize modern digital media strategies and understand the implications of digital technologies on public relations. Active Experimentation involves applying what has been learned to new situations. The findings reveal a concern that some educators are not abreast with modern technologies, impacting their ability to facilitate active experimentation with current digital media tools and practices. This limitation can restrict students' opportunities to apply their learning in contemporary ways.

4.3.3 Lack of Early and Comprehensive Exposure

The theme of lack of early and comprehensive exposure means undergraduate public relations students are not exposed to topics and courses related to digital media early, which limits them from having an in-depth knowledge of these tools throughout their undergraduate education.

It emphasizes the need for public relations students to become familiar with digital media concepts and tools at an early stage of their education to prepare them for the public relations industry in the digital world. Also, it emphasizes the value of thorough exposure and suggests that the learning process should encompass a range of digital

media topics, from fundamental features to real-world applications in the context of public relations.

The data revealed that students and educators from the two schools desire to start digital media education early in the undergraduate public relations curriculum so that students have a greater chance to learn about, experiment with, and adjust to these digital media. Participants expressed the need for a thorough curriculum overhaul that would prioritize digital media education as a fundamental and ongoing area of study. This perspective aligns with Alexander's (2016) inquiry into the extent to which digital media should be prioritized across all public relations curricula. It became evident that early and comprehensive exposure was required.

An educator from UPSA and one from UniMAC-GIJ mentioned that instead of limiting digital media courses to a specific academic level, they should be included at all levels. The educators underscored the value of proficiency with digital media in public relations. For him, it's a fundamental competency rather than just an added skill. Moreno et al. (2015) found that social media skills are essential for communicators in today's fast-paced, global world, and his argument supports that conclusion. The educator highlighted that digital media skills should be taught from the very beginning of the undergraduate public relations curriculum as they are an essential component of a public relations practitioner's toolkit.

This is clear in the excerpts below:

> It is exceedingly important. In my university, I advocate that they should be taught digital media from level 100. Social media communication, and website development because now, it is not an additional skill, it is a core skill for every PR person (P1G).

> Also, I suggested to the faculty that it should be at every year. Not only in a particular year. It has to be happening throughout not only a semester (P7U).

A student from UPSA stressed that their New Media course's scope needs to be broadened in the public relations curriculum. She emphasized that the course be integrated into the curriculum at a wider range of levels, not just at a higher level such as the 400 level but at every level. This implies that public relations students should be exposed to digital media concepts, techniques, and applications from the very beginning of public relations education. She also called for more hands-on sessions, indicating a search for experiential learning opportunities at all levels and in line with the goal of a curriculum that actively immerses students in the real-world applications of new media in public relations. This is evident in the excerpt below:

> *Yes, the New Media course should be taught at every level rather than at only level 400. Just teaching it at level 400 is not enough. It needs to be incorporated at every level. As PR students we need more practicals* (R1U, FGD).

In addition, a student from the UPSA also expressed the same sentiment. According to the student, the new media course is interesting and it broadened their horizon beyond merely navigating conventional social media platforms but he suggested that it should be introduced right from level 100 through to level 400.

> *The New Media course introduced us to new media bringing on board new perspectives. First, our mindset was going to the internet, your likes determine whether or not people are following but we got to know how to use analytics. It also introduced to us new media technologies we had no idea of. For example, digital signage, the intranet, and Google Meet. I believe we should have even learnt the course in level 100 which will make the learning of PR more entertaining but we did it in level 400. I feel it should be incorporated right from level 100 to 400 (R2U, FGD).*

Furthermore, the students from UniMAC-GIJ conveyed their displeasure with the depth of the instruction given on digital media. They believe that the emphasis was placed too

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much on basic concepts of digital media which are insufficient in light of current needs.

This indicates a more thorough curriculum that surpasses introductory levels. This is

evident in the excerpt below:

> *They should put in a proper effort for us to learn digital media.*
> *What they did was the basics. We are far behind. Not just what*
> *we did level 400 first semester. Not just creating social media*
> *accounts* (R2G, FGD).

The students blamed insufficient time for the lack of thorough instruction on digital

media. UPSA students expressed their liking for their New Media in PR but according

to them, there was not enough time to explore the course thoroughly. The excerpt below

makes this evident:

> *I think we did not have enough time. The New Media course was*
> *interesting and there was potential for a lot of things but I think*
> *we did not have enough time to go into details* (R2U, FGD).
>
> *The time frame for academic work is also limited. We were*
> *having 12 weeks but now we are using 9 weeks for lectures. So,*
> *students are in a hurry to finish up assignments and pass,*
> *lecturers are in a hurry to mark and submit scores. Everybody*
> *is in a hurry* (R2G, FGD).

UniMAC-GIJ students also mentioned that insufficient time puts pressure on both

educators and students. There is pressure on lecturers and students to finish their

assignments quickly. To fulfill academic requirements on time, students rush through

assignments and tests. Educators are under pressure to evaluate and grade assignments

quickly to meet the shorter deadline. Both students and educators experience stress as

a result of the shortened time frame's sense of urgency. The rapid pace may be

detrimental to learning and reduce students' comprehension of digital media concepts.

While both UPSA and UniMAC-GIJ advocated for early and comprehensive exposure

to digital media, UPSA's community highlighted concerns about the late introduction

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of digital media (level 400) and suggested a missed opportunity for earlier and more engaging learning experiences. Conversely, UniMAC-GIJ pointed to the compressed timeframe for academic instruction and the lessons being too simplistic which curtails the opportunity for in-depth exploration of digital media topics.

Moreover, the findings suggest that current educational practices may not fully meet the need for deep, practical knowledge in digital media. This gap can impact students' readiness for the public relations field. The advocacy for early and comprehensive exposure finds support in literature. Brunner et al (2018), and Auger and Cho (2016) emphasize writing as an essential skill in public relations. Alexander (2016) focuses on the importance of teaching social media management, while Ewing et al. (2018) stress the significance of digital analytics. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the growing demand for digital competencies. Furthermore, Ngongo's (2019) and Anani-Bossman's (2023) studies show the growing adoption of digital media in the African public relations landscape, indicating a regional shift that necessitates robust digital media training. Aja et al. (2019) and Ndinojuo et al. (2016) point to a lack of expertise and integration of digital media into public relations education. This emphasizes the need for curricular reforms that prioritize digital media skills from the onset of public relations education.

Kolb's experiential learning theory offers a valuable lens for understanding the benefits of early and comprehensive exposure. For Concrete Experience, early and comprehensive exposure ensures that students engage with digital media tools and platforms from the onset of their education. This immersion from level 100 allows students to accumulate a variety of concrete experiences with digital media over time. By interacting with a broad range of technologies early in their academic journey, students can build a strong foundation of experiences. The call for digital media to be

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taught at every level emphasizes the need for ongoing Reflective Observation. By visiting digital media concepts and practices throughout their education, students can continuously reflect on their experiences with these technologies.

Incorporating digital media education throughout the curriculum allows for the development of Abstract Conceptualization. Students can generalize from their experiences and reflections to form theories about effective digital communication strategies. Early exposure ensures that students begin this conceptualization process sooner, enabling them to understand and predict digital media trends and the impact of digital technologies on public relations. This depth of understanding is necessary for navigating the digital media landscape. The findings highlight a need for more (comprehensive) practical application which suggests that Active Experimentation is crucial. Early and comprehensive exposure facilitates ongoing opportunities for students to apply what they have learnt in new real-world contexts. By engaging with digital media across their education, students can experiment with various technologies, from creating and managing social media accounts to utilizing advanced digital tools.

4.3.4 Need for Curriculum Update

The theme highlights the need for the curriculum to be updated to include current digital trends, tools, and applications to keep public relations education relevant. According to James (2007), with the emergence of new media and the responses of the industry, public relations educators might want to reassess their course offerings. Both students and educators from the two universities mentioned that the public relations curriculum be updated.

The data from UniMAC-GIJ students revealed the need for locally relevant case studies that should be employed in digital media education in the public relations

curriculum. They draw attention to the fact that the majority of the case studies in the current curriculum are beyond ours, which they might not fully relate to. It was suggested that the curriculum be updated to better prepare students for the Ghanaian public relations industry by incorporating local case studies into the teaching of digital media to students. The excerpts below show this:

> *The curriculum should made to catch up with the changing digital media trends in Ghana. The case studies we learn are foreign ones, not local ones. It is good to study local cases and not only Western ones. So that when we get into the field, we can apply. Plus, the ability to bridge the classroom-industry gap* (R4G, FGD).

> *PR educational institutions should catch up. They should do it flexibly so that students can explore other digital media platforms that coming. It should be very broad* (R6G, FGD).

This finding that case studies used in digital media instruction within public relations education are predominantly foreign and lack local relevance aligns with Thompson's (2018) findings. Thompson identified that the public relations curriculum in Ghana is significantly shaped by Western practices, theories, and concepts. This presents a hurdle for educators who must contextualize these materials to suit the Ghanaian public relations sector.

Also, UPSA students suggested a flexible curriculum that accommodates digital media such as SEO and cybersecurity and the need for a well-structured curriculum where all digital media topics will be under one course. As demonstrated by the document analysis of UPSA, digital media topics have been dispersed across multiple public relations courses including dedicating a course to it. However, the data provided evidence that the students desired a more consolidated approach. Rather than being dispersed across various courses, they indicated that all topics on digital media

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should be concentrated in a single course. This approach may create a structured and cohesive learning experience, enabling students to delve deeper into digital media concepts without repetition or fragmentation. The excerpt below reveals this:

> *Cyber security. Search Engine Optimization is also important are students should be taught. It was mentioned but we were not taught how to do it* (R2U, FGD).

> *We have the same topics running across different courses. I think if the courses are well structured. For example, when it gets to a topic, the lecturer will tell you I know you did this in the other course so let's move on. Then the other lecturer will probably say, when you get to this course, you will do this. I think all the digital media topics should be under one course so that we can learn it well* (R5U, FGD).

Additionally, the interview data revealed that educators at UniMAC-GIJ expressed the need to incorporate trends such as AI into the public relations curriculum. This is seen in the following excerpts:

> *The use of artificial intelligence. That is one thing that we have to gear up for. It helps mainly in content generation. An AI tool can be instructed to write a press release. AI tools can help you design a simple flyer. It is here already but its usage will increase in the future* (P3G).

> *We need to look at AI and its implications on students' assignments and output. Even for us lecturers we need to look at how it can enhance teaching. But we need to look at how best we can still get quality when using some of these tools because technology sometimes compromises quality* (P2G).

> *AI is the future now. So how do we incorporate AI into our writing skills to make sure we are not left behind* (P1G)?

These insights demonstrate a recognition of AI's transformative potential in public relations education, prompting a consideration of the most effective ways to use AI technologies without disregarding the industry's standards. The educators acknowledged that artificial intelligence is quickly becoming a crucial component of

public relations and that education should proactively incorporate AI to prepare students for the changing nature of the profession. This discussion around AI can be linked to Sutherland and Ward's (2018) exploration of immersive simulation as a teaching tool in public relations education. Osei-Mensah et al. (2023) argue that AI has immense potential in several fields, one of which is communication. Harry (2023) argues that the way we teach and learn could be completely transformed by artificial intelligence, which could make the process more efficient, personalized, and interesting. However, some of the issues that need to be resolved are potential prejudice, cost, lack of confidence, and security and confidentiality worries (Harry, 2023).

Others from both UPSA and UniMAC-GIJ expressed the need for the curriculum to consider the cautious incorporation of AI. This is seen in the excerpts below:

> *One thing that would worry PR personnel and students ought to know is how to identify deep fakes. It is something we ought to pay attention to* (P4G).

> *I know a lot of people will mention AI I am not so enthused about AI. They need to be aware of the threats of AI. Someone can create a deep fake of Nana Addo sayings he has not said. Then the PR person must go and respond to it. There are virtual reality and augmented reality to explore but those are technologies I think we cannot afford. I am not going to suggest we should go in for the bigger ones. I want us to look at the basics for now* (P7U).

Deep fakes are media manipulations that frequently use artificial intelligence to produce deceptive information. This shows that educators are aware of the possible harm that deep fakes can do to reputation management in public relations. It also suggests that one of the priorities in public relations education should be to address the issues that come with digital media.

Though educators from both institutions expressed the need for the curriculum to reflect digital media trends, UniMAC-GIJ's discourse heavily centered on opportunities AI presents for the public relations industry, from content creation to identifying deep fakes. In contrast, as demonstrated in the extract, the UPSA educator voiced reservations about diving too deeply into advanced technologies like AI due to cost concerns and potential threats. This cautious stance reflects a more conservative approach to curriculum updates, prioritizing foundational digital skills over emerging technologies that may pose ethical and financial hurdles. A unique point raised by an educator from UPSA is the need for a heightened focus on environmental scanning and monitoring within the digital public relations curriculum. He notes that:

> *The trend now is being able to scan the environment. And scanning the environment. PR today needs to be more awakened. As a PR instructor, you need to be more current in terms of what is happening around you. And these are some of the trends. Because day in and day out, with a click, a piece of information is sent. So, one of the trends is monitoring. Unfortunately, the monitoring aspect of PR instructions is always played down. Most instructors are teaching them how to use PR, and how to do PR, but most instructors are failing when it comes to the monitoring and the measurement aspect you were talking about. So, this is, this is something that as much as the trend is what I'm talking about, but for us to be abreast of the terrain if you are not measuring, you can't do a good PR in this age of digital communication* (P8U).

The educator criticized the pedagogical strategy used in public relations education, pointing out that although instructors frequently concentrate on teaching students how to apply public relations strategies, there is a deficiency in the way that monitoring and measuring are addressed. It is implied that this failure to emphasize the value of assessment in public relations education is a potential shortcoming that might obstruct efficient public relations strategies.

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Kolb's experiential learning theory offers a valuable lens for understanding the benefits of curriculum update. For Concrete Experience, introducing local case studies and emerging digital media trends into the curriculum offers students tangible and relatable experiences. Learning from local contexts allows students to see the direct application of their studies in their immediate environment, making the learning experience more relevant and engaging. Reflective observation involves learners thinking through their experiences. By analyzing local cases and practical applications of new technologies like AI, students can reflect on challenges and opportunities within the Ghanaian context. This stage moves students from specific observations to general theories. Updating the curriculum to include the latest digital media trends, cybersecurity, search engine optimization, and AI technologies encourages students to conceptualize how these elements can be integrated into broader public relations tactics. Active experimentation involves students applying what they have learnt in novel situations, and experimenting with the theories and concepts they have developed. A curriculum that encompasses a broad range of digital media skills and technologies enables students to test various public relations strategies.

4.4 Summary of Chapter

This chapter discussed the findings and analysis of the research questions for the study. The data collected on the three research questions were critically explained, described, and analyzed through the lenses of the experiential learning theory. Three themes emerged from the first research question, which examined how Ghanaian public relations instructors have incorporated digital media into their curriculum. The themes are; *Purposeful Digital Integration in Curriculum and Diverse Approaches in Digital Media Education.* Concerning research questions two and three, a total of six themes

were analyzed and discussed. Research question two had two themes; *Digital media as a necessity and Digital media lessons in public relations education as lacking practicality*. Research question three also had four themes; *Infrastructure and Technological Hurdles*, *Faculty Digital Proficiency and Training Needs, Lack of Early and Comprehensive Exposure, and Need for Curriculum Update.*

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study and specifically pays attention to drawing conclusions based on the major findings of the study. Additionally, the chapter offers suggestions for the academic community based on the study results derived from the collected data. This chapter also lists the study's limitations and suggests areas for further study.

5.1 Summary

Research indicates that public relations professionals are using digital media more and more in their work. To provide aspiring practitioners with these skills that are now necessary for the field, there is a clear need to incorporate digital media into the public relations curriculum, as highlighted by recent discussions among academics in the field. Given that, this study was conducted to explore the incorporation of digital media into public relations education in Ghana, focusing on two public universities. Additionally, it examined the perspectives of students on incorporating digital media into public relations education. Once more, the study examined the emerging issues associated with incorporating digital media into the selected universities.

For the research to realize its objectives, three major research questions were asked;

1. How have public relations educators incorporated digital media into public relations education in the selected universities?

2. What are students' perspectives on the incorporation of digital media into public relations education of the selected universities?

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3. What are the emerging issues associated with digital media incorporation into public relations education in the selected universities?

Additionally, a thorough review of the literature provided the foundation for a critical analysis of the research's findings. Not only did these reviews help me understand what has been studied in the literature in the area of interest, but they also made it possible for me to pinpoint the gaps in the research area. I was able to construct the research focus and make it relevant to the literature with the help of this knowledge. To explain the data, the research also applied the experiential learning theory. Making sense of the collected data was made possible by the theory.

This study used a qualitative research approach and a case study design. These provided me with the opportunity to explore how digital media has been infused into the public relations curricula of the two universities and also enabled me to gain a deeper comprehension of the significance they assigned to the phenomena in their natural setting. Public relations students and public relations educators were the study's participants. Focus group discussions, document analysis, and in-depth interviews were the methods employed to collect data.

The study involved 19 participants. 12 public relations students and 7 public relations educators. I interviewed 4 educators from UniMAC-GIJ and 3 from UPSA. The focus group discussions also comprised 6 final year public relations students from each school. Finally, thematic analysis was used to describe the data.

From the in-depth interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions emerged 9 themes to answer the three research questions. The themes that answered the first research questions were *Purposeful Digital Integration in Curriculum and Diverse Approaches in Digital Media Education.* With regards to research question two; *Digital*

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media as a necessity and Digital media lessons as lacking practicality were themes identified in answering the research question. Finally, the themes of *Infrastructural and Technological Hurdles*, *Faculty Digital Proficiency and Training Needs, Lack of Early and Comprehensive Exposure, and Need for Curriculum Update* answered research question three.

5.2 Main Findings and Conclusions

Following the analysis of the data, some conclusions were drawn from the main data findings. As mentioned previously, the study aimed to address three research questions.

1. In answering research question one, which explored how public relations educators have integrated digital media into the public relations education of the two universities, it emerged that the two universities infuse and teach digital media courses and topics related to digital media in their public relations curricula. Once more, public relations educators at the two universities articulated that they employed various strategies to teach digital media and provide students with digital skills. These strategies included case studies and critiques, practical applications and assignments, and utilizing an array of digital tools like YouTube, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom, and WhatsApp aimed at enhancing student engagement while equipping them with digital literacy.

2. The findings of the second research question, which sought to explore public relations students' perspectives on incorporating digital media into their curricula, indicated that while the students believed that digital media skills were pertinent to public relations education and industry, they believed a more hands-on approach to learning digital media would be more effective.

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3. The third research question's findings highlighted the issues associated with incorporating digital media into the two universities' public relations curricula. Students and public relations educators both expressed these concerns. These issues collectively underline the complexities in equipping public relations students with digital literacies relevant to their careers, encompassing technological, infrastructural, and pedagogical aspects that need attention and resolution. Inadequate technical support, a lack of studio space for hands-on instruction, and inadequate internet access are infrastructure and technological hurdles that hinder the incorporation of digital media into the public relations curriculum. Faculty Digital Proficiency and Training Needs underline the need for educators to acquire the skills and knowledge of digital media to incorporate it into the curriculum. This covers training for educators, workshops, and continuing professional development. Lack of Early and Comprehensive Exposure highlights the need for in-depth coverage and early introduction of digital media concepts in undergraduate public relations education at all levels, from 100 to 400. The participants expressed concerns about delayed and limited exposure to digital literacy. The issues of curriculum update have to do with creating a curriculum that keeps up with the quickly evolving digital media landscape. It entails developing instructional strategies that practically engage students with digital platforms, as well as producing pertinent course content, properly organizing topics, and updating the curriculum to take into account trends like artificial intelligence. As has been lacking in the literature, these findings offer empirical evidence of Ghana's undergraduate public relations education's incorporation of digital media.

5.3 Study Limitations

This study's first limitation is that it focused solely on two public universities. The results of this study cannot therefore be generalized to other public and private universities that offer public relations programs. Any attempt to generalize the results would be to ignore the significant differences in philosophy, tactics, and models among universities. Another limitation is that this study focuses only on public relations; mass communication as a whole and its subfields are not included. This study only examines the undergraduate public relations curriculum; it does not include the post-graduate public relations curriculum. These limitations, however, did not diminish the study's credibility because it has implications for further studies.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Researchers in the future can build on this work by conducting a comparative analysis to identify the areas of convergence and divergence between the ways that Ghanaian undergraduate public relations education at public and private universities incorporates digital skills. Future studies can also study how Ghanaian post-graduate public relations curriculum incorporates digital media. Again, future research can study how other subfields of communication incorporate digital media into their curriculum. Furthermore, future studies can focus on integrating the perspectives of hiring managers, experienced specialists in the field, and beginning professionals regarding the concepts, standards of practice, and essential digital abilities that most appropriately match the field's demands and meet the demand for more effective industry collaboration in the public relations classroom.

5.5 Recommendations for Academia and Industry

The study recommends that authorities at both universities improve internet accessibility, provide technological resources such as software for learning digital media, and set up a studio where students can receive practical instruction in digital media. These institutions should also have contingency plans in case of technical difficulties.

Additionally, the public relations departments of the universities should also regularly offer faculty members training programs to keep them up to date on digital media knowledge and skills. These programs should also foster networking and collaboration with professionals in the industry. Further, the public relations industry players can provide educators with workshops, seminars, or mentorship programs that offer insights into the latest digital media tools and trends in the industry.

Additionally, public relations educators should make concerted efforts to introduce courses on digital media starting from level 100 and throughout all undergraduate levels to ensure early and comprehensive coverage. Public relations educators should also include relevant courses such as SEO, systematically organize digital media topics into a well-structured curriculum, and regularly update the curriculum to incorporate emerging trends like artificial intelligence.

Digital media lessons in both curricula should also be given enough time by the educators. Public relations educators at both institutions should introduce more practical assignments or internships that expose students to digital media applications in the real world.

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APPENDIX

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to gain insights into the incorporation of digital media into public relations education in Ghana. Your perspectives and experiences are valuable in understanding the current practices and emerging issues in this area. With your permission, this interview will be recorded for accuracy purposes.

Background Information

1. Kindly describe yourself briefly.

2. How long have you been involved in PR education, and what undergraduate public relations course (s) do you teach in your institution?

Incorporation of Digital Media

3. In recent years, how have you seen digital media change the practice of public relations in Ghana?

4. How important is it for PR educators to incorporate digital media into undergraduate PR courses they teach?

5. What digital media knowledge and skills are most relevant for future PR practitioners and how does your course equip students with that?

6. How have you personally integrated digital media into the PR course you teach?

Emerging Issues

7. What challenges have you encountered when integrating digital media into PR education?

8. What resources or support would be beneficial for you and other educators to enhance digital media integration in PR education?

9. In your opinion, what are the trends in digital media that PR educators in Ghana should be prepared to explore and incorporate into their teaching?

    Conclusion

Is there anything else you would like to add or any insights you think are important to share regarding the integration of digital media in PR education in Ghana?

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to gain insights into the incorporation of digital media into public relations education in Ghana. Your perspectives and experiences are valuable in understanding the current practices and emerging issues in this area. With your permission, this interview will be recorded for accuracy purposes.

Background Information

1. Kindly introduce yourself briefly.

Incorporation of Digital Media

2. How necessary is digital media for public relations in Ghana?

3. How important is it for PR educators to incorporate digital media into the undergraduate PR curriculum?

4. How do you think that your instruction on digital media as a student has prepared you as a future PR practitioner?

5. In your opinion, what relevant digital media knowledge and skills should be emphasized in public relations education to better prepare students for industry in Ghana?

6. What are the trends in digital media that Ghana's PR education should be prepared to explore and incorporate into their teaching?

Emerging issues

7. Are there any areas within digital media that are not covered in current PR education? If yes, what are they?

8. What resources and infrastructure do you perceive as necessary for students to support the incorporation of digital media into public relations education in Ghana?