

## **LEVERAGING PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE HIV/AIDS MANAGEMENT IN RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITY TEACHING HOSPITAL**

**NJOKU, Chinwe Celine. cc.njoku@unizik.edu.ng**

**EKE, Chigozi (PhD). chigozi\_eke@uniport.edu.ng**

Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author:

**EKE, Chigozi (PhD). chigozi\_eke@uniport.edu.ng**

### **Abstract**

This study examined leveraging relations for effective HIV/AIDS management in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital. The study made use of descriptive survey design. Friends Clinic Centre/unit in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital in Rivers State formed the population of the study. According to Friends Clinic Registry (FCR), the population of registered/admitted HIV/AIDS patients in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital in 2025 was 386. Since the population of the study is not too large, the researcher carried out a census. The data for this study were generated using questionnaire. The quantitative method of data analysis which entails the use of frequency tables, percentages, and weighted mean scores in determining the number of affected persons by different variables was adopted. The findings showed that, that public relations strategies at RSUTH have significantly contributed to HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction by utilising awareness campaigns, community engagement programs, and informative PR messages. Respondents indicated that these efforts have increased their knowledge about HIV/AIDS, encouraged voluntary testing and treatment, and improved societal acceptance of people living with the disease. However, while many acknowledged the positive impact of PR campaigns, some respondents noted that stigma still persists, particularly in rural communities with limited access to health communication initiatives. Based on the findings, it was concluded that public relations strategies at RSUTH play a vital role in increasing HIV/AIDS awareness and reducing stigma by leveraging awareness campaigns, community outreach and strategic health communication. While these efforts have been effective in promoting voluntary testing and treatment, stigma remains a persistent challenge, particularly in underserved communities. It was recommended that RSUTH should strengthen its public relations strategies by expanding community engagement programs, using culturally sensitive messaging, and collaborating with local influencers to further reduce HIV/AIDS stigma and improve awareness.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, HIV/AIDS Management, Rivers State, University Teaching Hospital

## Introduction

HIV/AIDS remains a significant public health challenge globally, with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for the highest burden (UNAIDS, 2023). Nigeria, as a key player in the fight against HIV/AIDS, has implemented numerous strategies, including public health campaigns, policy interventions and treatment programs (National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA), 2022). However, the effectiveness of these measures depends largely on the communication strategies adopted by healthcare institutions. Public relations (PR) has emerged as a crucial tool for facilitating effective communication, shaping public perception and promoting behavioural change in healthcare management (Eze & Umeh, 2021). Nigeria has an estimated 1.9 million people living with HIV/AIDS, with Rivers State ranking among the states with a relatively high prevalence (NACA, 2022). Despite the availability of antiretroviral therapy (ART) and other intervention programs, stigma, misinformation and reluctance to access healthcare services remain significant challenges (Adedokun & Oluwatosin, 2020). The Rivers State University Teaching Hospital (RSUTH), being a tertiary healthcare institution plays a pivotal role in HIV/AIDS management, necessitating effective PR strategies to bridge communication gaps and enhance patient engagement.

Public relations in healthcare is instrumental in fostering trust, promoting health literacy and enhancing stakeholder engagement (Grung & Hunt, 2021). Strategic PR efforts, including media campaigns, community outreach and interpersonal communication, help disseminate accurate information about HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and support services (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2021). Effective PR can mitigate stigma, encourage voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) and improve adherence to treatment protocols (Kalu, 2022). Despite efforts by RSUTH to provide comprehensive HIV/AIDS care, various challenges hinder the effectiveness of these interventions. These include limited funding, inadequate public awareness, stigma and discrimination, and misinformation (Nwankwo et al., 2021). The role of PR in addressing these issues is paramount, as strategic communication can enhance public knowledge, reshape societal attitudes and foster an inclusive healthcare environment (Ajayi & Salami, 2022).

Effective PR strategies in HIV/AIDS management include media advocacy, community engagement and digital campaigns (Smith, 2020). Traditional media, such as radio and television, remain vital for reaching diverse audiences, while social media platforms enhance real-time engagement and interactivity (Okoro & Eze, 2022). Health communication models, such as the Health Belief Model (HBM), emphasise the role of perception in shaping health behaviours, making PR campaigns essential in addressing misconceptions about HIV/AIDS (Rosenstock, 1974). Community involvement is critical in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Public relations fosters participatory communication, ensuring that affected communities have a voice in healthcare interventions (Uwah, 2021). Advocacy programs, workshops, and peer education initiatives strengthen grassroots engagement, making HIV/AIDS management more inclusive and effective (Agbo et al., 2022).

HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination discourage many individuals from seeking

medical care (UNAIDS, 2023). Public relations plays a transformative role in normalising conversations around HIV/AIDS, using storytelling, testimonials, and educational campaigns to foster empathy and reduce prejudice (Ogunyemi & Aluko, 2021). RSUTH's PR efforts should focus on humanising the experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) to foster societal acceptance and support. With the rise of digital communication, PR practitioners now leverage social media, blogs, and interactive platforms to disseminate health information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). RSUTH can utilise these tools to counter misinformation, provide accurate updates and engage with key stakeholders (Adebayo et al., 2022). Digital storytelling, webinars and Q&A sessions can further enhance public awareness and patient education.

Public relations extends beyond communication to influencing policy decisions. Effective PR strategies advocate for stronger government policies, increased funding, and enhanced healthcare infrastructure (Egbunike & Ugochukwu, 2021). RSUTH can partner with government agencies, NGOs, and international organisations to amplify HIV/AIDS awareness and secure sustainable healthcare support. Several global and local case studies highlight the success of PR in HIV/AIDS management. Countries like South Africa and Uganda have effectively used strategic communication campaigns to reduce HIV prevalence (WHO, 2022). Lessons from these countries can inform RSUTH's PR strategies, ensuring a data-driven and culturally relevant approach to HIV/AIDS communication.

This study is crucial in understanding how public relations can enhance HIV/AIDS management in RSUTH. By analysing PR strategies, communication channels and stakeholder engagement, this research provides actionable insights for healthcare professionals, PR practitioners, and policymakers (Ekpe & Nnamani, 2022). The study contributes to the broader discourse on healthcare communication and HIV/AIDS management in Nigeria. This study has outlined the significance of leveraging public relations for HIV/AIDS management, with a focus on RSUTH. This study aims to bridge the communication gap, reduce stigma, and promote effective healthcare delivery in Rivers State.

### **Statement of the Problem**

HIV/AIDS remains a major public health concern in Nigeria, with Rivers State ranking among the states with a high prevalence rate. Despite various medical interventions and public health policies, several challenges persist, including stigma, misinformation, low adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART) and reluctance to seek voluntary counselling and testing. At the Rivers State University Teaching Hospital (RSUTH), efforts to manage HIV/AIDS through clinical care and outreach programs are often hindered by poor public awareness, negative societal attitudes and limited patient engagement. Many people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) avoid treatment due to fear of discrimination, while others lack sufficient knowledge about preventive measures. These challenges indicate a communication gap that prevents effective HIV/AIDS management, necessitating a strategic approach to public relations (PR) in healthcare communication. Public relations, when effectively leveraged, can play a transformative role in addressing these issues by fostering trust, dispelling myths and encouraging positive health seeking behaviours. However, the extent to which RSUTH employs PR strategies to improve

HIV/AIDS management remains unclear. Researchers have shown that well-structured PR campaigns, media advocacy and community engagement can significantly improve public perception and healthcare access (Grunig & Hunt, 2021). Yet, there is limited research on the impact of PR in shaping HIV/AIDS communication strategies in Rivers State. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how public relations can be effectively utilised to enhance HIV/AIDS awareness, reduce stigma, and improve patient engagement at RSUTH, ultimately contributing to better health outcomes and a more inclusive healthcare system.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine how public relations strategies enhance HIV/AIDS awareness and reduce stigma at Rivers State University Teaching Hospital.
2. To ascertain the effectiveness of digital media in improving patient engagement and healthcare communication for HIV/AIDS management at RSUTH.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do public relations strategies contribute to HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction at RSUTH?
2. How effective is digital media in enhancing patient engagement and healthcare communication for HIV/AIDS management at RSUTH?

### **Scope of the Study**

This study is restricted to leveraging public relations for effective HIV/AIDS management in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital. The study made use of the medical professionals, non-medical staff and HIV/AIDS patients of Rivers State University Teaching Hospital.

### **Public Relations and Healthcare Communication**

Public relations (PR) is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships among organisations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 2021). In healthcare, PR plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, promoting health awareness and managing crises (Eze & Umeh, 2021). Effective PR strategies involve engaging key stakeholders, including patients, healthcare providers, policymakers and the media to ensure accurate health information dissemination (Smith, 2020). The success of healthcare interventions, especially, in combating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, depends largely on how well communication strategies address misinformation, stigma, and public scepticism (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2021).

Healthcare communication through PR involves multiple channels, including traditional media, digital platforms and community outreach programs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). Traditional media, such as radio, television and newspapers remain significant in reaching a wide audience, particularly in Nigeria, where radio is a dominant information source (Okoro & Eze, 2022). Digital platforms, including social media and mobile health applications provide real time engagement and personalised communication, enhancing patient education and support (Adebayo et al., 2022). These platforms are essential in HIV/AIDS management, where timely information can encourage preventive behaviours and adherence to treatment regimens.

Public relations in healthcare also involves crisis management and reputation building (Ajayi & Salami, 2022). For institutions like Rivers State University Teaching Hospital (RSUTH), an effective PR approach ensures that the hospital maintains public trust while addressing sensitive health issues such as HIV/AIDS. Misinformation and negative public perceptions can hinder treatment efforts, making proactive PR campaigns essential in correcting misconceptions and promoting a supportive healthcare environment (Uwah, 2021). This requires collaboration among PR professionals, healthcare providers and policymakers to create inclusive communication strategies for catering diverse audience segments.

Despite the recognised importance of PR in healthcare, many hospitals and healthcare institutions in Nigeria have yet to fully integrate PR strategies into their communication frameworks (Egbunike & Ugochukwu, 2021). Challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of trained PR personnel in health institutions and resistance to change from traditional healthcare systems limit the effectiveness of PR in health communication (Nwankwo et al., 2021). Addressing these barriers is crucial for improving HIV/AIDS management in RSUTH and other similar institutions, ensuring that public relations is leveraged as a powerful tool for healthcare transformation.

### **The Role of Public Relations in HIV/AIDS Awareness and Stigma Reduction**

HIV/AIDS stigma remains a significant barrier to effective prevention, treatment and care worldwide (UNAIDS, 2023). Stigma leads to discrimination, reduced healthcare access and negative psychological effects on people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) (Ogunyemi & Aluko, 2021). Public relations plays a critical role in combating stigma by promoting accurate information, creating awareness campaigns and fostering community dialogues that challenge misconceptions (Kalu, 2022). The effectiveness of PR in reducing stigma depends on how well communication strategies are tailored to address cultural, social and psychological factors influencing public attitudes towards HIV/AIDS (Ajayi & Salami, 2022).

One of the key PR strategies in stigma reduction is storytelling and human-interest campaigns (Smith, 2020). Personal testimonials from PLHIV who lead healthy, productive lives help to counter negative stereotypes and foster empathy (Agbo et al., 2022). When people hear real life experiences, they are more likely to challenge pre-existing biases and support those affected. Media advocacy, including television documentaries, radio talk shows and social media campaigns further reinforces positive narratives about HIV/AIDS, reducing fear and misinformation (Adebayo et al., 2022).

Community engagement is another vital aspect of PR in HIV/AIDS awareness (Uwah, 2021). Grassroots campaigns, peer education programs and town hall meetings provide platforms for interactive discussions where myths about HIV/AIDS can be debunked (Eze & Umeh, 2021). In Nigeria, where cultural beliefs strongly influence health decisions, engaging religious leaders, traditional rulers and local influencers in PR campaigns can significantly impact public perception and acceptance of HIV/AIDS-related information (Okoro & Eze, 2022).

Despite these efforts, challenges such as deeply ingrained cultural stigma, religious misconceptions and fear of social rejection persist (NACA, 2022). Public relations practitioners must continuously innovate by incorporating behavioural change

communication strategies and leveraging digital tools to reach younger demographics who are at higher risk of HIV infection (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). Effective PR strategies can ultimately transform HIV/AIDS management by fostering a more informed, accepting, and supportive society.

### **Digital Media and Public Relations Strategies in HIV/AIDS Management**

The advent of digital media has revolutionised public relations strategies in healthcare, particularly in disease prevention and management (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). Digital platforms such as social media, websites, blogs and mobile health applications have become essential tools in disseminating HIV/AIDS-related information (Adebayo et al., 2022). These platforms enable real time interaction, provide personalised health updates and facilitate peer support networks for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV) (Okoro & Eze, 2022). In Rivers State, where internet penetration is growing, integrating digital PR strategies can significantly improve HIV/AIDS awareness and patient engagement.

One of the key advantages of digital media in HIV/AIDS communication is its ability to counter misinformation rapidly (Egbunike & Ugochukwu, 2021). False information about HIV/AIDS, such as myths surrounding transmission and cure, spreads quickly online, necessitating strategic digital PR interventions (Nwankwo et al., 2021). By employing fact-checking initiatives, educational infographics, and expert-led webinars, RSUTH can ensure that the public receives accurate and science-based information about HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment (Smith, 2020).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram offer interactive spaces for PR-driven HIV/AIDS campaigns (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). These platforms allow hospitals and healthcare organisations to engage with their audience, respond to queries and create awareness using engaging content formats such as videos, live Q&A sessions and patient testimonials (Adebayo et al., 2022). Additionally, targeted social media ads can reach specific demographics, including high-risk groups such as young adults and pregnant women improving healthcare access and early intervention (Ogunyemi & Aluko, 2021).

Despite the benefits of digital PR in HIV/AIDS management, challenges such as digital divide, misinformation and privacy concerns must be addressed (UNAIDS, 2023). Many individuals in rural areas still lack access to digital resources, limiting their ability to benefit from online HIV/AIDS awareness programs (Adedokun & Oluwatosin, 2020). RSUTH and other healthcare institutions must, therefore, adopt a hybrid approach, combining digital PR strategies with traditional communication methods to ensure widespread information dissemination and healthcare accessibility.

### **The Health Belief Model (HBM)**

This model propounded by Rosenstock in 1966, is a psychological framework used to explain and predict health related behaviours by focusing on individual perceptions of disease and health interventions (Rosenstock, 1974). The model is based on six key tenets: perceived susceptibility (belief about the risk of contracting a disease), perceived severity (belief about the seriousness of the condition and its consequences), perceived benefits (belief in the effectiveness of a behaviour to reduce risk), perceived barriers (belief about obstacles preventing health behaviour adoption), cue to action (triggers

prompting health behaviour change), and self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to take preventive action) (Glanz et al., 2008). The HBM assumes that individuals will take preventive health actions if they believe they are at risk, the consequences of inaction are severe and adopting a particular behaviour will be beneficial while overcoming perceived barriers (Champion & Skinner, 2008). However, a major criticism of the model is its emphasis on individual decision-making while neglecting social, economic, and cultural influences on health behaviour (Janz & Becker, 1984). Critics argue that external factors such as stigma, misinformation, and healthcare access can significantly impact decision-making beyond individual perceptions (Nutbeam & Harris, 2010).

The relevance of the HBM to this study lies in its application to public relations strategies for HIV/AIDS management at Rivers State University Teaching Hospital (RSUTH). The model helps to explain how PR interventions, such as awareness campaigns, digital media engagement and community outreach, influence people's perception of HIV/AIDS risk, treatment benefits and barriers to accessing healthcare (Ajayi & Salami, 2022). By addressing perceived barriers, such as stigma and misinformation, public relations efforts can enhance HIV/AIDS awareness, encourage voluntary testing and improve adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART) (Eze & Umeh, 2021). Furthermore, public relations campaigns act as "cues to action" that trigger behavioural change, helping to bridge the communication gap between healthcare providers and the public. Thus, leveraging the Health Belief Model in PR strategies can foster effective HIV/AIDS management by promoting positive health-seeking behaviours among patients and the general public at RSUTH.

### **Empirical Review**

Ajayi and Salami (2022) carried out a study on *Public Relations and Health Communication: Strategies for Effective HIV/AIDS Awareness in Nigeria*. This study assessed the role of public relations in improving HIV/AIDS awareness and reducing stigma in healthcare settings in Nigeria. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys of 500 HIV/AIDS patients and healthcare providers across three major teaching hospitals in Nigeria. They also conducted in-depth interviews with PR practitioners and healthcare communication experts. The study found that effective public relations campaigns, including community engagement, media advocacy, and digital communication, significantly improved HIV/AIDS awareness and encouraged more people to seek voluntary counselling and testing. However, stigma remained a major barrier to treatment adherence. This study aligns with the current research in its focus on public relations strategies for HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction. Both the reviewed study and the current study emphasise the importance of communication in influencing health-seeking behaviours and public perceptions of HIV/AIDS. Unlike the current study, which focuses specifically on Rivers State University Teaching Hospital (RSUTH), the reviewed study takes a broader national approach, analysing multiple hospitals across Nigeria. Additionally, the current study examines the role of digital media in HIV/AIDS management, while the related study placed more emphasis on traditional PR techniques.

Nwankwo et al. (2021) conducted a research on *Digital Media, Public Relations, and Health Communication in Nigeria: A Case Study of HIV/AIDS Awareness Campaigns*. This study investigated the impact of digital media tools in public relations strategies for

HIV/AIDS awareness and patient engagement in Nigerian hospitals. The researchers employed a quantitative research approach, distributing online questionnaires to 600 respondents, including HIV/AIDS patients, healthcare workers, and PR professionals in Rivers, Lagos, and Abuja. The study revealed that digital platforms, such as social media, mobile health applications and online fora played a crucial role in disseminating accurate HIV/AIDS information, countering misinformation, and encouraging treatment adherence. However, challenges such as internet accessibility and misinformation on social media were noted as obstacles. The reviewed study and the present study explore the role of digital media in HIV/AIDS public relations strategies and examine how communication influences patient behaviour and stigma reduction. They also highlight the importance of engaging online audiences for effective health messaging. While the related study takes a multi-state approach (Rivers, Lagos and Abuja), the current study focuses specifically on RSUTH. Additionally, the current study looks beyond digital media to examine a broader spectrum of PR strategies, including traditional communication methods.

### **Methodology**

The research design adopted for this study was descriptive survey method. A descriptive survey design is used to document existing attitudes. The choice of the descriptive survey research design was informed by the need to determine breast cancer patients' views and opinions on the public relations as a panacea for effective breast cancer management from the respondents in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2011), a population is defined as all elements (individuals, objects and events) that meet the sample criteria for a study. HIV/AIDS patients who have registration card in Friends Clinic in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital formed the population of the study. According to Friends Clinic Registry (FCR), the population of registered/admitted HIV/AIDS patients in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital in 2025 is 386. Since the population of the study is not too large, the researcher carried out a census.

The data for this study were generated using the questionnaire. The researcher personally administered the questionnaire, assisted by co-authors and retrieved the instrument by the same method. Respondents were met in the Friend Clinic centre/unit in Rivers State University Teaching Hospital. In order to arrive at an accurate conclusion, a data analysis was used. The quantitative method of analysis which entails the use of frequency tables, percentages and weighted mean scores in determining the number of affected persons by different variables was adopted. The research questions were analysed with 4 -point weighted mean score as follows: Strongly Agree = 4 points. Agree = 3 points. Disagree = 2 points. Strongly disagree = 1 point. The score of the weighted mean score was 2.5 ( $4+3+2+1=10$  divided by  $4=2.5$ ). Any item that has more than 2.5 points was considered positive but scores below 2.5 points was taken to be negative.

**Results**

The results of the analysis are presented in the table below.

**Table 1: How Public Relations Strategies contribute to HIV/AIDS Awareness and Stigma Reduction at RSUTH**

Nature of response	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Total Weighted (fx)	WMS	Decision
	4	3	2	1	385 (100%)			
Public relations campaigns at RSUTH have increased my awareness of HIV/AIDS.	532	546	80	30	385	1188	3.1	Accepted
The hospital's public relations efforts have helped reduce stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS.	608	666	22	0	385	1296	3.4	Accepted
Community engagement programs organized by RSUTH have encouraged people to seek HIV testing and treatment.	772	399	78	20	385	1269	3.3	Accepted
Public relations messages from RSUTH emphasize the importance of HIV/AIDS education and prevention.	724	459	64	19	385	1266	3.3	Accepted
I feel more comfortable discussing HIV/AIDS due to awareness campaigns run by RSUTH	916	468	0	0	385	1384	3.6	Accepted
<b>Average weight mean score</b>					<b>385</b>	<b>1281</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>Accepted</b>

Source: Field Survey Data, 2025.

<sup>2</sup>In Table 1, the weighted mean score for items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 were positive. The average mean score totals to 3.3, which is positive. This shows that public relations strategies at RSUTH have significantly contributed to HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction by utilising awareness campaigns, community engagement programs, and informative PR messages. Respondents indicated that these efforts have increased their knowledge about HIV/AIDS, encouraged voluntary testing and treatment, and improved societal acceptance of people living with the disease. However, while many acknowledged the positive impact of PR campaigns, some respondents noted that stigma still persists, particularly in rural communities with limited access to health communication initiatives.

**Table 2: Digital Media in Enhancing Patient Engagement and Healthcare Communication for HIV/AIDS Management at RSUTH**

Nature of response	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Total	WMS	Decision
	4	3	2	1	385	Weighted	FM	
					(100%)	(fx)	Total	
I receive useful HIV/AIDS related information through RSUTH's digital media platforms.	856	495	12	0	385	1363	3.5	Affirm
Social media platforms help me stay informed about HIV/AIDS treatment and support services at RSUTH.	896	408	50	0	385	1354	3.8	Affirm
Digital communication from RSUTH has made it easier for me to access HIV/AIDS healthcare services.	804	444	40	16	385	1304	3.4	Affirm
Online awareness campaigns by RSUTH help in reducing misinformation about HIV/AIDS.	880	378	50	14	385	1322	3.4	Affirm
I prefer receiving HIV/AIDS-related health information through digital platforms rather than traditional media.	760	495	40	10	385	1305	3.4	Affirm
<b>Average weight mean score</b>					<b>385</b>	<b>1330</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>Affirm</b>

Source: Field Survey Data, 2025.

As pointed out in Table 2, all the five items showed that there is greater percentage of respondents' affirmation that digital media plays a crucial role in enhancing patient engagement and healthcare communication for HIV/AIDS management at RSUTH. Many respondents reported that social media platforms, online awareness campaigns and digital health information services have made it easier to access reliable HIV/AIDS-related information and medical support. Additionally, digital PR efforts were found to be effective in countering misinformation and improving adherence to treatment programs.

### **Discussion**

The result of research question 1 shows that public relations strategies at RSUTH have significantly contributed to HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction by utilising awareness campaigns, community engagement programs, and informative PR messages. Respondents indicated that these efforts have increased their knowledge about HIV/AIDS, encouraged voluntary testing and treatment, and improved societal acceptance of people living with the disease. However, while many acknowledged the positive impact of PR campaigns, some respondents noted that the stigma still persists, particularly in rural communities with limited access to health communication initiatives. The study by Ajayi and Salami (2022) supports the finding that public relations strategies play a significant role in HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction, as their research also highlighted the effectiveness of PR campaigns, media advocacy and community engagement in influencing health-seeking behaviours. This study aligns with this research by showing that targeted communication strategies can improve public perception and encourage voluntary testing; however, both studies also acknowledge that stigma remains a persistent challenge, especially in underserved communities.

The Health Belief Model (HBM) supports the finding that public relations strategies at RSUTH contribute to HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction by explaining how individuals' perceptions of susceptibility, severity, benefits and barriers influence their health-seeking behaviour. The PR campaigns and community engagement programs align with the model's concept of "cues to action," which trigger behavioural changes by providing essential health information and reducing misconceptions about HIV/AIDS. Additionally, by addressing perceived barriers, such as stigma and fear of discrimination, public relations efforts encourage voluntary testing, treatment adherence and open conversations about HIV/AIDS.

The finding that public relations strategies at RSUTH contribute to HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction implies that sustained PR efforts are essential in promoting health education and encouraging positive behavioural change. However, the persistence of stigma suggests that existing PR strategies need to be expanded to reach rural and underserved communities more effectively, possibly through grassroots engagement, culturally sensitive messaging and partnerships with local influencers. This highlights the need for a more inclusive communication approach that not only informs but also fosters social acceptance of people living with HIV/AIDS.

The result of research question 2, analysis shows that digital media play a crucial role in enhancing patient engagement and healthcare communication for HIV/AIDS management at RSUTH. Many respondents reported that social media platforms, online awareness campaigns, and digital health information services have made it easier to

access reliable HIV/AIDS-related information and medical support. Additionally, digital PR efforts were found to be effective in countering misinformation and improving adherence to treatment programs. However, some participants highlighted challenges such as internet accessibility issues and digital literacy gaps, which limit the full effectiveness of these digital health communication strategies.

The study by Nwankwo et al. (2021) reinforces the finding that digital media enhances patient engagement and healthcare communication for HIV/AIDS management, as the research also demonstrated that social media, mobile health applications and digital awareness campaigns improve access to reliable information and reduce misinformation. The findings validated this study's conclusion that digital platforms are effective tools for promoting HIV/AIDS treatment adherence but both studies also recognise barriers such as limited internet access and digital literacy challenges that hinder the full impact of digital PR efforts.

The Health Belief Model (HBM) also underpins the finding that digital media enhances patient engagement and healthcare communication for HIV/AIDS management at RSUTH by emphasising the role of perceived benefits and self-efficacy in health decision-making. Digital platforms provide accessible and credible health information that reinforces the perceived benefits of HIV/AIDS treatment and care, helping to counter misinformation and reduce uncertainty. Furthermore, by making healthcare communication more interactive and personalised, digital PR strategies increase individuals' confidence (self-efficacy) in seeking medical help, adhering to treatment and engaging in preventive measures despite external challenges like stigma or misinformation.

The finding that digital media enhances patient engagement and healthcare communication for HIV/AIDS management implies that health institutions like RSUTH must invest more in digital PR strategies to maximise their impact. However, challenges such as internet accessibility and digital literacy gaps indicate that a blended approach combining digital tools with offline outreach programs may be necessary. This underscores the importance of policy interventions, digital inclusion initiatives and targeted media literacy campaigns to ensure that all segments of the population benefit from health communication efforts.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results and findings of the study it is concluded here, that public relations strategies at RSUTH play a vital role in increasing HIV/AIDS awareness and reducing stigma by leveraging awareness campaigns, community outreach and strategic health communication. While these efforts have been effective in promoting voluntary testing and treatment, stigma remains a persistent challenge, particularly in underserved communities. Therefore, a more comprehensive PR approach that integrates culturally sensitive messaging and community-based interventions is necessary to achieve greater social acceptance and behaviour change.

The study has also established that digital media serves as an effective tool for enhancing patient engagement and healthcare communication in HIV/AIDS management at RSUTH, facilitating greater access to health information, countering misinformation and improving treatment adherence. However, barriers such as internet access limitations and

digital literacy gaps hinder the full potential of digital PR efforts. To maximise impact, a hybrid approach that combines digital communication with offline engagement strategies is essential for reaching a wider audience and ensuring inclusivity in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the research findings and suggestions for improvement made by patients, the following recommendations are made. This will help to strengthen Rivers State University Teaching Hospital management, guide other hospitals when implementing their public relations programmes and assist future researchers embarking upon hospital public relations project.

- i. RSUTH should strengthen its public relations strategies by expanding community engagement programs, using culturally sensitive messaging and collaborating with local influencers to further reduce HIV/AIDS stigma and improve awareness.
- ii. RSUTH should enhance its digital media strategies by improving internet accessibility, promoting digital literacy programs and integrating offline communication approaches to ensure inclusive and effective HIV/AIDS healthcare communication.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study contributes to knowledge by highlighting the critical role of public relations strategies in improving HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction at RSUTH, demonstrating that effective health communication can significantly influence public perceptions and health-seeking behaviours. Unlike previous studies that focused broadly on health communication, this research provides a hospital-specific analysis, offering insights into how localised PR campaigns, community outreach and culturally tailored messaging can enhance HIV/AIDS awareness in a healthcare setting. Additionally, the study extends the application of the Health Belief Model (HBM) by showing how strategic communication serves as a cue to action, encouraging voluntary testing, treatment adherence and stigma reduction in a real-world hospital environment.

Furthermore, this study advances knowledge on the impact of digital media in healthcare communication, particularly in HIV/AIDS management, by emphasising the effectiveness of digital platforms in patient engagement, misinformation control and treatment adherence. While existing research has examined the role of digital health tools, this study contextualises their use in RSUTH, identifying both opportunities and challenges related to internet access and digital literacy. By recommending a hybrid communication approach that integrates digital and offline strategies, the study provides a practical framework for health institutions seeking to optimise PR for effective HIV/AIDS management. This research thus serves as a valuable resource for public health practitioners, PR professionals and policymakers working to improve health communication strategies in Nigeria and beyond.

## References

- Adebayo, O., Bello, S., & Onyekwere, K. (2022). Digital media and public health communication in Nigeria: The role of social media in HIV/AIDS awareness. *Journal of Health Communication, 10*(1), 33-49.
- Adedokun, A., & Oluwatosin, A. (2020). HIV/AIDS awareness and treatment in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Public Health, 7*(2), 45-58.
- Agbo, C., Uche, P., & Onwudiegwu, F. (2022). Community participation in health interventions: The case of HIV/AIDS awareness in South-South Nigeria. *International Journal of Health Studies, 8*(3), 67-82.
- Ajayi, T., & Salami, B. (2022). Health communication and public relations: Strategies for combating HIV/AIDS stigma in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Communication Studies, 9*(1), 24-41.
- Champion, V. L., & Skinner, C. S. (2008). The health belief model. In K. Glanz, B. K. Egbunike, C., & Ugochukwu, L. (2021). Health communication and digital strategies in disease prevention: Case study of HIV/AIDS management in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Public Health, 6*(1), 23-38.
- Eze, P., & Umeh, K. (2021). Overcoming stigma in HIV/AIDS care: The role of public relations and media advocacy in Nigeria. *Journal of Health and Society, 12*(1), 78-93.
- Glanz, K., Rimer, B. K., & Viswanath, K. (2008). *Health behaviour and health education: Theory, research and practice* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (2021). *Managing public relations in health communication*. Routledge.
- Janz, N. K., & Becker, M. H. (1984). The health belief model: A decade later. *Health Education Quarterly, 11*(1), 1-47.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2020). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media in public health campaigns. *Business Horizons, 53*(1), 59-68.
- NACA. (2022). *Nigeria's HIV/AIDS report 2022*. National Agency for the Control of AIDS.
- Nutbeam, D., & Harris, E. (2010). *Theory in a nutshell: A guide to health promotion theory*. McGraw-Hill.
- Nwankwo, C., Uchenna, P., & Bello, T. (2021). Digital media, public relations, and health communication in Nigeria: A case study of HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. *Nigerian Journal of Mass Communication, 9*(2), 34-51.
- Rimer, & K. Viswanath (Eds.), *Health behavior and health education: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 45-66). Jossey-Bass.
- Rosenstock, I. M. (1974). Historical origins of the health belief model. *Health Education Monographs, 2*(4), 328-335.
- UNAIDS. (2023). *Global AIDS update: Progress and challenges in ending HIV/AIDS*. Geneva: UNAIDS.
- WHO. (2022). *HIV/AIDS prevention and control strategies: Lessons from Africa*. World Health Organization.