

# NEW FRONTIERS

*A Journal in the Humanities*

ISSN 2536-6203

Published by the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja

---

Volume 4 (2026), Article 9, <https://doi.org/10.70118/NFJH0009>

---

## Ethical Accountability and Professional Regulation in Nigerian Public Relations Practice

Hassan Zaggi

Gabriel T. Nyitse, PhD

*Department of Mass Communication, Bingham University, Karu*

### Abstract

Public Relations practice in Nigeria stands at a critical juncture, confronted by persistent challenges of unethical conduct regulation despite the existence of a statutory framework. Although the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) was established to regulate the profession and uphold ethical standards, evidence suggests that non-professionals continue to operate with relative impunity, thereby undermining public trust and professional credibility. Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, this qualitative study interrogates the structural, leadership, and institutional factors responsible for the sustained prevalence of unethical practices within the Nigerian public relations landscape. The study adopted an in-depth interview method, drawing data from twenty purposively selected core public relations professionals working as organizational spokespersons and private practitioners. Findings indicate a paradoxical situation in which growing awareness and increased enrolment in NIPR coexist with the continued dominance of quacks and ethical infractions. While respondents acknowledge recent efforts by the current NIPR leadership to address these challenges, the study reveals that weak enforcement of the NIPR Act, inadequate advocacy, poor employer compliance, and leadership deficits remain central obstacles to reform. The study concludes that quackery and unethical practices in Nigerian public relations are fundamentally governance and leadership challenges rather than external conspiracies. It recommends the creation of a comprehensive national practitioner database, stricter enforcement of existing laws, sustained stakeholder advocacy, and renewed institutional commitment to ethical professionalism. By foregrounding practitioner perspectives, this study contributes to ongoing debates on professional regulation, ethics, and accountability in public relations practice within emerging democracies.

**Keywords:** Public Relations Practice, Professional Regulation, Ethical Accountability, Quackery

## Introduction

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) Practitioners Act came into force in June 1990, initially promulgated as Decree No. 16 of 1990 and later codified as CAP N114, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (2014). This statute provides the legal and professional framework for regulating public relations practice in Nigeria, establishing standards of conduct and safeguarding the integrity of the profession. More than three decades after its enactment, however, public relations practice in Nigeria continues to grapple with persistent challenges of quackery, unethical conduct, and weak enforcement of professional regulation. This enduring disjunction between regulatory intent and professional reality raises fundamental questions about institutional capacity, leadership effectiveness, and the political will required to enforce professional norms. Section 19(2) of the NIPR Act explicitly mandates that all individuals practicing public relations in Nigeria must be registered members of the Institute. It criminalises the practice of public relations by non-members and prohibits public and private organisations from appointing unregistered individuals as public relations officers, spokespersons, or corporate communication managers. In principle, this legal provision places public relations alongside other regulated professions in Nigeria, such as law and medicine. In practice, however, enforcement has remained weak, inconsistent, or entirely absent, allowing non-professionals to occupy sensitive communication positions with little accountability or sanction.

Despite the clarity of the law, public relations practice in Nigeria is characterised by widespread non-compliance, ethical infractions, and what many stakeholders describe as the normalisation of quackery. Untrained and unregistered individuals increasingly occupy influential communication roles within government ministries, agencies, and private organisations, often shaping narratives that directly affect governance, corporate reputation, and public trust. This situation has not only undermined the credibility of the profession but has also fuelled mistrust among journalists, policymakers, and the general public, who frequently struggle to distinguish between qualified practitioners and impostors. Scholars and practitioners have consistently expressed concern over the implications of this trend. Opara (2016) famously described the Nigerian public relations industry as facing an “identity crisis,” arguing that the problem extends beyond institutional weakness to a deeper uncertainty about what constitutes professional public relations practice. Adekunle (2021) similarly observes that because public relations operates largely behind the scenes, ethical lapses – whether committed by registered practitioners or quacks masquerading as professionals – tend to inflict disproportionate reputational damage on the entire field. In such a climate, public confidence erodes rapidly, while professional authority becomes increasingly difficult to assert.

Several commentators attribute the persistence of quackery and unethical conduct to structural vulnerabilities within the profession, particularly low entry barriers and inadequate sanctions for misconduct. Opayemi (2019) argues that the absence of stringent accreditation and effective enforcement mechanisms has turned public relations into an “all-comers affair,” where professional identity is often self-ascribed rather than institutionally validated. Stephen (2018) reinforces this view by linking the surge in unethical practices to the rapid expansion of the profession without a corresponding strengthening of regulatory oversight. From this perspective, quackery is less an anomaly than a predictable outcome of institutional laxity. Counter-arguments, however, suggest that low entry barriers may also reflect professional openness, inclusivity, and adaptability, especially in a rapidly evolving communication environment shaped by digital media and integrated marketing communication. Proponents of this view argue that excessive regulation could stifle creativity and exclude competent communicators who lack formal credentials but possess practical expertise. While this argument carries theoretical merit, particularly in global communication debates, its applicability to the Nigerian context remains contested. In the absence of effective self-regulation, ethical accountability, and institutional enforcement, openness has tended to result in professional dilution rather than innovation or diversification of standards.

Former leaders of the NIPR have, at various times, acknowledged these challenges and pledged reforms aimed at reclaiming professional legitimacy. Oladele (2014), for instance, emphasised the need for the Institute to maximise its statutory powers through prosecution of illegal practitioners, enhanced professional training, and strategic collaboration with local and international bodies such as the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) and the Chartered Institute of Public

Relations (CIPR) in the United Kingdom. Yet, despite such commitments, tangible and sustained outcomes have remained limited, reinforcing perceptions of institutional inertia and selective enforcement. The persistence of quackery has also reignited debates about leadership effectiveness within the NIPR. Samaila (2015) and Nnolim and Nwaizugbo (2014) argue that ethical breaches are rarely addressed in ways that deter future violations, thereby emboldening both quacks and unethical registered practitioners. From this standpoint, the problem lies not merely in the presence of unethical actors but in the failure of professional leadership to apply sanctions consistently, transparently, and without fear or favour. The consequence is a regulatory environment in which violations are normalised rather than corrected.

More recently, the election of Dr. Ike Neliaku as President of the NIPR in 2023 renewed expectations regarding professional reform and ethical reorientation. His campaign foregrounded professionalism and the urgent need to reclaim the field from quacks, raising optimism among practitioners and observers alike. However, one year into his tenure, questions persist regarding the extent to which these commitments have translated into concrete institutional action. High-profile controversies surrounding the professional status of government spokespersons have become symbolic tests of the Institute's resolve and regulatory authority.

It is against this backdrop that the present study examines the long-standing prevalence of unethical practices in public relations practice in Nigeria. The study is driven by the need to interrogate why, more than thirty years after the enactment of a clear regulatory framework, quackery and ethical infractions remain deeply entrenched within the profession. Specifically, it seeks to identify the institutional and leadership factors responsible for the NIPR's inability to eliminate quackery, to examine why public relations practice has become a fertile ground for unethical actors, to assess whether external forces play any significant role in sustaining regulatory failure, and to explore the challenges confronting the NIPR leadership in enforcing ethical standards.

By foregrounding the perspectives of core public relations professionals and situating their insights within broader debates on professional regulation and social responsibility, this study aims to contribute empirically grounded understanding to ongoing discussions on ethics, accountability, and professional legitimacy in Nigerian public relations practice. In doing so, it positions unethical practice and quackery not merely as individual moral failings, but as structural and governance challenges that demand institutional resolve, ethical leadership, and sustained regulatory commitment.

## Literature Review

Public relations scholarship consistently emphasises professionalism, ethical conduct, and social responsibility as the cornerstones of credible practice. As a profession concerned with reputation management, relationship building, and strategic communication, public relations operates at the intersection of organisational interests and public welfare. Consequently, the ethical orientation of practitioners and the integrity of regulatory frameworks are not optional attributes but defining features of professional legitimacy. In contexts where these foundations are weak or poorly enforced, the profession becomes vulnerable to abuse, misrepresentation, and reputational decline. Within the Nigerian context, scholarly and practitioner discourse on public relations has been dominated by concerns over quackery, unethical practices, and weak institutional enforcement. These concerns are not merely anecdotal; they reflect a sustained pattern of professional anxiety spanning several decades. Despite the existence of a statutory regulatory body and a clearly articulated legal framework, public relations practice in Nigeria continues to struggle with identity, authority, and public trust. This paradox – formal regulation coexisting with pervasive non-compliance – has become a central theme in Nigerian public relations literature.

Existing studies reveal a profession caught between aspiration and reality. On the one hand, public relations is recognised as a strategic management function essential to organisational success and democratic engagement. On the other hand, its practice is frequently undermined by untrained actors, ethical compromises, and institutional inertia. Scholars such as Opara (2016) and Nwakanma (2023) argue that this contradiction has produced an identity crisis in which the boundaries of professional practice remain blurred and contested. As a result, public relations in Nigeria often struggles to command the respect accorded to other regulated professions. The literature also suggests that the problem is not simply the presence of unethical individuals, but

the systemic conditions that allow unethical behaviour to flourish. Weak enforcement of professional standards, limited sanctions for misconduct, and inconsistent leadership commitment have combined to create an environment in which professional norms are routinely violated without consequence. Within this environment, quackery and unethical practices become normalised rather than exceptional, thereby eroding professional culture from within.

At the same time, scholars caution against overly simplistic explanations that frame quackery solely as moral failure. Some argue that broader socio-economic pressures, evolving communication ecosystems, and the convergence of media-related professions complicate traditional notions of professional boundaries. While these dynamics do not absolve unethical conduct, they underscore the need for nuanced analysis that situates quackery and ethics within wider institutional and theoretical contexts. It is within this contested terrain that the concepts of quackery, ethics, and professional responsibility must be carefully examined.

### Conceptualising Quackery and Ethics in Public Relations

Quackery, as a concept, occupies a central place in discussions of professional decline within public relations practice in Nigeria. Although the phenomenon is not unique to public relations, its persistence within a legally regulated profession has raised serious concerns among scholars and practitioners. Udomisor and Osademe (2013) conceptualise quackery as the intrusion of non-members and untrained individuals into professional practice, facilitated largely by weak regulatory oversight and ineffective enforcement mechanisms. In this sense, quackery is both a symptom and a consequence of institutional failure. Onah (1996), as cited in Elem (2018), offers a more evocative characterisation, describing quacks as gate-crashers, charlatans, and professional pretenders who appropriate the identity of the profession without subscribing to its standards. This framing underscores the deceptive dimension of quackery, where individuals deliberately present themselves as professionals in order to access opportunities, influence, and material benefits. The implication is that quackery does not merely dilute professional quality; it actively undermines trust and credibility, which are essential currencies in public relations practice.

Beyond deception, quackery also reflects structural vulnerabilities within the profession. Scholars such as Opayemi (2019) argue that low entry barriers and weak accreditation processes have created an environment in which professional identity is largely self-defined. In such contexts, the distinction between trained practitioners and impostors becomes increasingly blurred, making enforcement both politically sensitive and institutionally difficult. This situation is exacerbated by employer complicity, where organisations prioritise convenience or patronage over professional compliance. Ethics, by contrast, represent the normative backbone of professional conduct in public relations. Ethics define the moral obligations of practitioners, guiding decision-making in situations where legal prescriptions may be inadequate or absent. Ojukwu (2020) defines ethics as the collection of rules and minimum standards by which members of a profession operate, noting that deviation from these standards signals a breakdown of professional discipline. In public relations, ethical conduct is particularly critical because practitioners often operate in environments characterised by information asymmetry, power imbalance, and competing interests.

The ethical framework of public relations is commonly articulated through core professional values such as honesty, advocacy, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness (Ojukwu, 2021; Robins, 2022). These values emphasise the dual responsibility of practitioners to their clients and to society, reinforcing the expectation that public relations professionals must balance organisational objectives with public interest. Ethical practice, therefore, is not merely about compliance with rules, but about cultivating professional judgement and moral sensitivity. However, Nigerian scholars have repeatedly observed that ethical codes lose their deterrent value when violations attract little or no sanction. Joseph (2017) argues that the routine abuse of public relations roles – where practitioners are reduced to errand runners, protocol officers, or political enablers – reflects deeper ethical erosion within the profession. Such practices not only compromise professional dignity but also reinforce public perceptions of public relations as a peripheral or manipulable function. In this sense, unethical practice is both a cause and a consequence of weakened professional identity.

The Social Responsibility Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding ethical obligations and professional accountability in public relations. Developed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956), the theory emerged as a corrective to libertarian media philosophies that privileged freedom without sufficient regard for societal consequences. At its core, the theory argues that professional communicators must exercise freedom responsibly, balancing individual or organisational interests with the broader needs of society. Applied to public relations, Social Responsibility Theory emphasises accuracy, truthfulness, fairness, and sensitivity to societal impact. It positions practitioners not merely as advocates for clients, but as custodians of public trust whose actions shape public discourse and democratic engagement. Uzuegbunam (2015) extends this argument by asserting that public relations professionals must evaluate their decisions in terms of their effects on society, placing public interest above personal or organisational gain.

Within the Nigerian context, this theoretical perspective resonates strongly with concerns about quackery and unethical conduct. The theory underscores the expectation that professional freedom – such as the ability to practice public relations – must be accompanied by accountability, ethical discipline, and regulatory oversight. Where such accountability is absent, freedom becomes licence, and professional practice deteriorates into opportunism. Critics of Social Responsibility Theory, however, argue that it assumes an ideal professional environment in which practitioners and institutions are willing and able to act ethically. Asemah et al. (2017) contend that the theory underestimates the influence of profit motives, political interference, and institutional weakness, particularly in developing contexts. These criticisms are relevant to Nigeria, where regulatory bodies often lack the capacity or political backing to enforce professional standards consistently.

Nonetheless, the theory remains valuable for framing debates about professional regulation and ethical responsibility. It highlights the interconnectedness of ethics, regulation, and leadership, suggesting that professional decline is rarely the result of individual failure alone. Instead, it reflects systemic breakdowns in governance, enforcement, and professional culture. By situating quackery and unethical practice within this theoretical framework, scholars are better positioned to interrogate not only who violates professional standards, but why such violations persist over time.

#### Prevalence of Quackery in Public Relations Practice in Nigeria

The prevalence of quackery in public relations practice in Nigeria has attracted sustained attention from scholars, professional bodies, and industry observers. Over the years, the profession has been described as one of the most vulnerable to infiltration by untrained and unregistered individuals, a situation that has persisted despite the existence of a statutory regulatory framework. Daniel (2018) identifies quackery as one of the most enduring challenges confronting public relations in Nigeria, alongside digital disruption and weak institutional regulation. This observation suggests that quackery is not a peripheral issue but a central structural problem affecting the profession's growth and legitimacy.

Practitioner commentary further illustrates the scale of the problem. Ehiguese (2018), a former President of the Public Relations Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN), characterises the Nigerian public relations space as an “all-comers business,” lamenting the ease with which journalists, retired media practitioners, and untrained individuals assume the identity of public relations consultants. Such role conflation, he argues, distorts professional boundaries and undermines ethical standards. While journalism and public relations are complementary fields, the unregulated crossover between them has raised ethical concerns, particularly when journalists simultaneously function as public relations consultants.

Several scholars link the prevalence of quackery to low entry barriers and weak accreditation processes. Udoinyang (2016) argues that the rapid expansion of public relations practice in Nigeria, without corresponding institutional strengthening, has created fertile ground for unethical actors. This expansion has increased demand for communication services while diluting professional gatekeeping mechanisms. Mallam Sule (2015) similarly observes that many quacks are motivated primarily by financial gain rather than professional commitment, exploiting regulatory loopholes to gain access to lucrative communication roles. However, some scholars caution against framing the issue solely in moralistic terms. They argue that broader socio-economic pressures, including unemployment and the commercialisation of communication, contribute to the influx of untrained practitioners. While these factors help explain the persistence of quackery, critics maintain that

### *Hassan Zaggi & Gabriel T. Nyitse*

they do not justify the continued erosion of professional standards, particularly in a legally regulated profession. Thus, while context matters, institutional responsibility remains paramount.

#### Enforcement of NIPR Laws in Nigeria

Central to the discourse on quackery is the enforcement of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations Act. Section 19(2) of the Act clearly outlines punitive measures against individuals who practice public relations without registration. Despite this clarity, enforcement has remained inconsistent and largely ineffective. Udoh (1999) famously described the Act as a “toothless bulldog,” arguing that its inability to deter illegal practice reflects deeper institutional weaknesses. This characterisation continues to resonate in contemporary scholarship. Nwakanma (2023) identifies weak regulatory enforcement as one of the defining challenges of public relations practice in Nigeria, noting that ethical violations are rarely addressed in ways that deter future misconduct. Similarly, Ehiguese (2018) attributes the persistence of quackery to a fragile regulatory environment in which barriers to entry are virtually non-existent. In such an environment, professional legitimacy becomes difficult to sustain, and practitioners struggle to command respect, authority, or commensurate remuneration.

Some scholars, however, argue that enforcement challenges should not be viewed solely as institutional failure. Fraedrich et al. (1997), as cited in Olaoluwa (2021), suggest that ethical self-regulation may be more effective than coercive legal mechanisms in fostering professional responsibility. From this perspective, over-reliance on punitive enforcement without parallel ethical reorientation risks producing compliance without conviction. While this argument highlights the importance of professional culture, critics counter that self-regulation is unlikely to succeed in contexts where institutional authority is weak and ethical breaches go largely unpunished. Recent efforts by the NIPR leadership to emphasise certification, advocacy, and professional reorientation have been described as commendable but insufficient. Daniels (2023) argues that while certification is important, it must be accompanied by sustained ethical education, leadership resolve, and visible enforcement actions. Without these elements, regulatory initiatives risk being perceived as symbolic rather than transformative.

#### Ethics in Public Relations Practice in Nigeria

Ethical practice remains a central concern in Nigerian public relations discourse. While quackery is often associated with non-members, scholars note that unethical conduct is not limited to unregistered practitioners. Ojukwu (2020) observes that ethical violations are frequently committed by both quacks and registered members, suggesting that ethical erosion is a broader professional problem. This observation complicates narratives that frame quackery as the sole source of professional decline. Ethics in public relations are intended to guide conduct, encourage excellence, and protect public interest. Utor (2009), as cited in Ojukwu (2020), argues that no profession can function effectively without rules, norms, and values to guide behaviour. In the absence of such guiding principles, professional practice risks descending into disorder and opportunism. In Nigeria, however, ethical codes often lack practical relevance due to weak enforcement and selective application.

Joseph (2017) highlights the tendency for public relations practitioners to be reduced to protocol officers or personal assistants, a practice he attributes to ethical and professional erosion. Such role distortion undermines the strategic value of public relations and reinforces public perceptions of the profession as peripheral or expendable. Olaoluwa (2021) similarly contends that ethics, regulation, and law are indispensable instruments for professional control, particularly in environments characterised by institutional weakness. Nevertheless, some scholars note incremental progress. Efforts by the NIPR and allied bodies to promote ethical awareness, certification, and professional dialogue suggest a growing recognition of the problem. Yet, as several commentators argue, ethical reform without enforcement remains fragile. Ethical codes derive authority not merely from articulation but from consistent application and credible sanction.

#### Synthesis and Research Gap

A synthesis of existing literature reveals broad consensus that quackery, weak enforcement, and ethical erosion constitute interrelated challenges confronting public relations practice in Nigeria.

Scholars consistently identify low entry barriers, institutional inertia, leadership deficits, and limited sanctions as factors sustaining professional decline. At the same time, counter-arguments emphasise professional openness, industry convergence, and the limits of legal enforcement, highlighting the complexity of regulating communication professions in dynamic socio-economic contexts.

Despite the richness of existing discourse, much of the literature remains normative or descriptive, focusing on what ought to be done rather than empirically interrogating why regulatory failure persists. There is limited qualitative exploration of practitioner perspectives on leadership capacity, institutional constraints, and the internal dynamics of professional regulation. This gap underscores the need for studies that foreground the lived experiences of practitioners and examine ethical failure as a structural rather than purely individual phenomenon. By engaging core public relations professionals and situating their perspectives within debates on social responsibility, regulation, and ethics, the present study responds to this gap. It seeks to deepen understanding of the institutional and leadership dynamics that continue to shape public relations practice in Nigeria, thereby contributing to more informed debates on professional reform, accountability, and ethical renewal.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, deemed most appropriate for exploring complex professional, ethical, and institutional issues that are deeply embedded in practice and experience. Qualitative research allows for rich, context-sensitive inquiry into perceptions, meanings, and interpretations, particularly in professional settings where formal regulations coexist with informal practices. Given the study's focus on quackery, unethical conduct, and regulatory failure within public relations practice in Nigeria, a qualitative design enabled the researcher to capture nuanced insights from practitioners who possess direct experiential knowledge of the phenomenon. The study employed a survey research design using in-depth interviews (IDIs) as the primary instrument for data collection. This approach was selected to facilitate detailed exploration of respondents' perspectives, allowing them to articulate their experiences, observations, and professional judgements without the constraints of predefined response categories. In-depth interviews are particularly useful in studies addressing sensitive professional issues, as they create space for reflection, clarification, and elaboration.

The study population comprised core public relations professionals in Nigeria, specifically individuals working either as organisational spokespersons within public and private institutions or as practitioners in private public relations firms. These categories were purposively selected because they occupy strategic positions within the profession and are directly affected by issues of quackery, ethics, and regulatory enforcement. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents based on their professional relevance, years of experience, and familiarity with public relations practice in Nigeria. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research where the goal is depth rather than statistical generalisation. In line with Guest, Bunce, and Johnson's (2006) argument that data saturation in qualitative studies often occurs within 20 interviews, the study interviewed a total of twenty (20) respondents. This sample size was considered sufficient to capture diverse yet convergent perspectives on the research problem. To ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance, respondents were anonymised and coded as S1 to S20. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study prior to the interviews.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide comprising twelve open-ended questions. The interview guide was designed to align directly with the four research objectives, ensuring coherence between the research questions and the data generated. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed respondents to express their views freely while enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues for clarity and depth. The interview instrument was validated by the research supervisor to ensure content relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study objectives. Interviews were conducted with respondents who were considered knowledgeable and experienced in public relations practice, thereby enhancing the credibility of the data. Responses were recorded, transcribed, and carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy and consistency with participants' intended meanings.

Data analysis followed an explanation-building technique, a qualitative analytic approach that involves identifying patterns, themes, and causal linkages within narrative data. This method is

*Hassan Zaggi & Gabriel T. Nyitse*

particularly suitable for studies seeking to explain why certain phenomena persist over time despite regulatory frameworks or institutional interventions. Rather than relying on mechanical coding alone, the analysis involved iterative reading of transcripts, comparison of responses across respondents, and synthesis of recurring explanations related to quackery and unethical practice. Analysis proceeded in two stages. The first stage involved demographic analysis to provide contextual understanding of the respondents' professional backgrounds, including gender, age range, years of practice, sector of engagement, and educational qualifications. This information helped situate respondents' perspectives within their professional trajectories.

**Demographic Data**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
------------------	------------------	-----------------------

**Gender:**

Male	16	80
Female	4	20
<b>Total:</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

**Age range**

Above 30	5	25
Above 40	12	60
Above 50	3	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

**Years in PR practice:**

Above 5 years	0	0
Above 10 years	1	5
Above 15 years	6	30
Above 20 years	8	40
Above 25 years	5	25
Above 30 years	0	0
<b>Total:</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

**Industry:**

Organisation	17	85
Private practice	3	15
<b>Total:</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

**Educational qualification**

HND	0	0
BSC	14	70
MA/MSc	4	20

Ph.D	2	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

---

The second stage involved psychographic and thematic analysis of interview responses, structured around the four research objectives. This approach enabled the researcher to organise findings systematically while preserving the richness of individual narratives.

### Psychographic Data Analysis and Findings by Research Objectives

Findings related to the first objective revealed strong consensus among respondents that the NIPR's inability to rid the profession of quackery and unethical practices is largely attributable to weak enforcement of the NIPR Act. Respondents consistently cited lack of aggressive implementation, inadequate sanctions, and poor follow-through on reported violations as critical shortcomings. Many argued that the existence of laws without visible enforcement sends a message of institutional weakness and emboldens both quacks and unethical practitioners. In addition, respondents identified insufficient sensitisation and advocacy as contributing factors. Several interviewees noted that many employers of public relations practitioners remain unaware of the legal requirement to engage only NIPR-registered professionals. This lack of awareness, coupled with weak advocacy by the Institute, has allowed organisations to continue appointing unregistered individuals without fear of consequence.

Analysis of responses to the second objective indicated that respondents overwhelmingly perceive public relations as a breeding ground for quacks due to its low entry barriers and ambiguous professional boundaries. Many interviewees argued that the failure of successive NIPR leaderships to enforce minimum qualification standards has allowed virtually anyone to claim professional identity as a public relations practitioner. Respondents also highlighted the undefined nature of public relations roles within many organisations as a contributing factor. Where job descriptions are vague or conflated with protocol, media liaison, or personal assistance, it becomes easier for untrained individuals to occupy such roles. This ambiguity, respondents argued, creates space for quacks to thrive while marginalising trained professionals.

With respect to the third objective, the majority of respondents rejected the notion that external forces – such as government interference or corporate resistance – are the primary drivers of regulatory failure. Instead, they emphasised internal leadership deficiencies within the NIPR as the dominant factor. According to these respondents, while external pressures may exist, they do not sufficiently explain the prolonged inability of the Institute to enforce its own Act. A minority of respondents acknowledged the possibility of subtle external influence, particularly political considerations that may discourage confrontation with powerful individuals. However, even these respondents maintained that strong leadership and institutional resolve could mitigate such pressures. Overall, the findings suggest that regulatory failure is perceived less as an externally imposed constraint and more as an internally sustained weakness.

Findings related to the fourth objective revealed a range of challenges confronting the NIPR in its efforts to combat quackery and unethical practices. Chief among these is lack of cooperation from government agencies and corporate organisations that continue to recruit non-registered individuals into public relations roles. Respondents argued that without institutional support from employers, enforcement efforts remain severely constrained. Other challenges identified include the absence of a centralised database of registered practitioners and lack of visible identification mechanisms. Several respondents suggested that a comprehensive national database, coupled with unique identification numbers for practitioners, would significantly reduce infiltration and enhance enforcement capacity. These findings underscore the perception that regulatory reform must be both structural and strategic, combining enforcement with systems innovation.

Overall, the qualitative methodology adopted in this study enabled a nuanced exploration of quackery and unethical practice as lived professional realities rather than abstract policy concerns. By integrating demographic context with psychographic analysis, the study provides a layered understanding of how institutional weakness, leadership challenges, and professional ambiguity interact to sustain unethical practices within Nigerian public relations.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reinforce the long-standing position in Nigerian public relations scholarship that quackery and unethical practices are not episodic anomalies but deeply embedded structural challenges. Despite the existence of a clear legal framework through the NIPR Act, evidence from practitioner interviews confirms that quackery remains pervasive, resilient, and largely unchecked. This persistence suggests that regulatory presence alone is insufficient; rather, enforcement capacity, leadership resolve, and institutional credibility are decisive factors in shaping professional conduct. One of the most significant findings of the study is the widespread perception among practitioners that the inability of the NIPR to curb quackery is fundamentally a leadership and governance problem. Respondents consistently attributed regulatory failure to weak enforcement, lack of political will, and inconsistent application of sanctions. This perception aligns with Udoh's (1999) earlier characterisation of the NIPR Act as a "toothless bulldog," a metaphor that continues to resonate decades later. The implication is that laws without visible consequences lose their deterrent power, thereby emboldening both quacks and unethical registered practitioners.

The findings further reveal that inadequate advocacy and sensitisation efforts contribute significantly to the persistence of unethical practices. Many respondents noted that employers – particularly government agencies and private organisations – often remain unaware of their statutory obligation to engage only NIPR-registered practitioners. This gap between legal expectation and organisational practice underscores a critical weakness in stakeholder engagement. Consistent with Opayemi's (2019) argument, professional regulation cannot succeed in isolation; it requires sustained buy-in from employers who function as gatekeepers of professional entry. Another key insight from the study concerns the perception of public relations as a fertile breeding ground for quacks. Respondents overwhelmingly linked this condition to low entry barriers and poorly defined professional roles. Where public relations functions are ambiguously described or conflated with protocol, media liaison, or administrative duties, the profession becomes vulnerable to infiltration by untrained individuals. This finding echoes Stephen's (2018) observation that rapid professional expansion without corresponding regulatory clarity creates opportunities for ethical compromise.

Importantly, the study engages with counter-arguments that frame low entry barriers as professional openness or inclusivity. While respondents acknowledged that communication skills can be acquired through diverse pathways, they maintained that openness without accountability leads to professional dilution rather than innovation. This position challenges liberal professional models that prioritise flexibility over regulation, suggesting that in the Nigerian context – characterised by weak institutional enforcement – openness may exacerbate rather than resolve ethical problems. The findings related to external influence are particularly revealing. Contrary to popular narratives that blame government interference or political pressure for regulatory failure, most respondents rejected the idea that external forces are the primary drivers of the NIPR's inability to enforce its Act. Instead, they emphasised internal leadership shortcomings, arguing that strong institutional resolve could withstand external pressure. This finding complicates dominant explanations that externalise blame and shifts analytical focus inward, towards governance structures and leadership accountability within the Institute.

Nevertheless, the study does not entirely dismiss the role of external constraints. A minority of respondents acknowledged that political considerations and power dynamics may influence enforcement decisions, particularly in high-profile cases. However, even these respondents maintained that selective enforcement undermines institutional legitimacy more than it protects it. This tension reflects the broader dilemma facing professional regulatory bodies operating within politically complex environments. Ethical practice emerges from the findings as a concern that transcends the quack–non-quack binary. Respondents consistently noted that unethical conduct is not limited to unregistered practitioners; registered members also engage in practices that undermine professional integrity. This observation aligns with Ojukwu's (2020) argument that ethical erosion is a systemic issue rather than a marginal problem. It suggests that ethical reform must address professional culture as well as regulatory enforcement.

The study also highlights the absence of practical enforcement tools, such as a centralised

database and practitioner identification system, as a major constraint. Respondents' call for a national register and unique identification numbers reflects a desire for structural solutions that go beyond rhetoric. Such mechanisms, they argued, would make enforcement more objective, reduce discretion, and enhance transparency. This finding resonates with earlier reform proposals by Oladele (2014), indicating continuity between practitioner aspirations and long-standing institutional recommendations. From a theoretical perspective, the findings lend empirical support to the Social Responsibility Theory as applied to public relations practice. The study illustrates how professional freedom, when unaccompanied by accountability, degenerates into opportunism. Practitioners' emphasis on public interest, ethical duty, and institutional responsibility reinforces the theory's core proposition that professional communication must balance autonomy with social obligation. At the same time, the findings validate critiques of the theory that caution against assuming ethical self-regulation in weak institutional environments. Overall, the discussion underscores that quackery and unethical practices in Nigerian public relations are best understood as outcomes of structural and leadership failures rather than individual moral lapses alone. The findings suggest that meaningful reform requires a combination of enforcement, ethical reorientation, stakeholder engagement, and institutional courage. Without these elements, professional regulation risks remaining symbolic, while unethical practices continue to define the lived reality of public relations practice in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

This study set out to examine the enduring prevalence of quackery and unethical practices in public relations practice in Nigeria more than three decades after the profession was formally regulated by statute. Drawing on the perspectives of experienced practitioners, the study demonstrates that the persistence of these challenges is not attributable to the absence of legal frameworks but to weak enforcement, leadership deficits, and institutional inertia within the regulatory system. Despite increased awareness of professional registration and periodic reform initiatives by successive leaderships of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), unethical practices and quackery continue to undermine professional credibility, diminish public trust, and weaken the strategic value of public relations practice in Nigeria. The findings reveal that the failure to curb quackery is largely an internal governance problem rather than the result of overwhelming external interference. While political considerations and organisational non-compliance exist, practitioners overwhelmingly locate the problem in inconsistent enforcement of the NIPR Act, limited advocacy, and the absence of visible sanctions against offenders. This regulatory laxity has normalised professional misconduct, emboldening both quacks and unethical registered practitioners to operate with relative impunity. Consequently, the profession has struggled to assert authority, enforce boundaries, and command respect comparable to other regulated professions.

The study further establishes that public relations has become a fertile ground for quackery due to low entry barriers, ambiguous professional role definitions, and weak employer adherence to statutory requirements. Ethical erosion, the findings suggest, is not confined to unregistered practitioners but reflects a broader professional culture in which ethical codes lack practical force. This underscores the need to reconceptualise quackery and unethical conduct not merely as individual moral failures but as systemic and leadership challenges requiring institutional solutions. Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, the study affirms that professional freedom without accountability undermines both public interest and professional legitimacy, particularly in environments characterised by weak institutional capacity.

To reclaim the profession from the grip of quackery, the study concludes that the NIPR must demonstrate sustained political will through consistent and transparent enforcement of its Act, irrespective of status or influence. Such enforcement must be complemented by intensified advocacy targeted at employers of public relations practitioners, ensuring widespread awareness and compliance with statutory obligations. Structural reforms, including the establishment of a comprehensive national database of registered practitioners and the introduction of unique identification mechanisms, are essential for objective verification and effective regulation. Ethical reform must also extend beyond certification to continuous professional reorientation, ethical education, and leadership by example, reinforcing a culture of accountability among registered practitioners. Ultimately, the future of public relations practice in Nigeria depends on institutional courage, ethical leadership, and unwavering commitment to professional responsibility. Without

these, regulatory frameworks risk remaining symbolic, while quackery and unethical practices continue to define the profession's public image and limit its capacity to contribute meaningfully to organisational and societal development.

### Works Cited

- Adekunle, A. "Public Relations and the Crisis of Professional Identity in Nigeria." *The Guardian Nigeria*, 2021.
- Asemah, E. S., et al. *Theories and Models of Communication*. Jos University Press, 2017.
- Daniel, E. "Why PR Remains the Weakest Link in Nigeria's IMC Mix." *Marketing Edge*, 2018, <https://marketingedge.com.ng/why-pr-remains-the-weakest-link-in-nigerias-imc-mix/>.
- Daniels, D. "Professionalism and the Future of Public Relations Practice in Nigeria." *The Spokesperson's Digest*, 2023.
- Ehiguese, John. "PR Has Become an All-Comers Business in Nigeria." *ThisDay*, 30 Aug. 2018, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/08/30/ehiguese-pr-has-become-an-all-comers-business-in-nigeria/>.
- Elem, S. N. "Repositioning Public Relations Practice in Organisations: Strategies, Challenges and Prospects." *South East Journal of Public Relations*, 2018, <https://www.sejpr.net/paper/repositioning-public-relations-practice-in-organisations-strategies-challenges-and-prospect>.
- Fraedrich, J., et al. "Toward a Conceptual Framework for Ethics in Public Relations." *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1997, pp. 425–438.
- Guest, G., A. Bunce, and L. Johnson. "How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability." *Field Methods*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006, pp. 59–82.
- Joseph, I. "Problems Facing Public Relations Practice in Africa." *Journal of Communication Studies*, 2017.
- Mallam Sule, S. Y. "NIPR to Penalise Illegal Spokespersons." *The Spokesperson's Digest*, 16 Oct. 2015, <https://spokespersonsdigest.com/2015/10/nipr-to-penalise-illegal-spokespersons/>.
- Nnolim, D. A., and C. U. Nwaizugbo. "Ethical Challenges in Public Relations Practice in Nigeria." *Journal of Communication and Media Research*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 45–60.
- Nwakanma, Chido. "Ike Neliaku and the New Era of Nigerian Public Relations." *LinkedIn Articles*, 2 Oct. 2023.
- Oladele, Yomi. "Repositioning the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations for Professional Excellence." Address at the NIPR AGM, 2014.
- Ojukwu, C. S. *Ethics and Professionalism in Public Relations Practice*. Enugu: Rhyce Kerex Publishers, 2020.
- Ojukwu, C. S. "Professional Values and Ethical Obligations in Public Relations Practice." *Journal of Strategic Communication*, 2021.
- Olaoluwa, R. "Exploring the Factors Affecting Ethical Values of Public Relations Practice in Lagos State, Nigeria." *Covenant Journal of Communication*, 2021, <https://journals.covenantuniversity.edu.ng/index.php/cjoc/article/view/2861>.
- Onah, J. O. "Professionalisation of Public Relations Practice in Nigeria." *Nigerian Journal of Communication*, 1996.
- Opayemi, I. "Stakeholders Decry Quackery in Public Relations Profession, Call for Reforms." *The Guardian Nigeria*, 17 Sept. 2019.
- Opara, E. "Issues in Public Relations in Nigeria." *The Cable*, 11 Feb. 2016,

<https://www.thecable.ng/issues-in-public-relations-in-nigeria>.

Siebert, Fred S., Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm. *Four Theories of the Press*. University of Illinois Press, 1956.

Stephen, A. "Quackery and the Challenge of Professional Public Relations Practice in Nigeria." *Journal of Media and Society*, 2018.

Udoh, S. B. "Communication Strategies." *Journal of Communication Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1999.

Udoinyang, P. U. "The Future of Public Relations in Nigeria." *Academia.edu*, 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/29043368/The\\_Future\\_of\\_Public\\_Relations\\_in\\_Nigeria](https://www.academia.edu/29043368/The_Future_of_Public_Relations_in_Nigeria).

Udomisor, I. W., and I. Osademe. "Public Relations Practice and Professionalism in Nigeria." *New Media and Mass Communication*, vol. 20, 2013.

Uzuegbunam, C. "The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press: A Contemporary Review." *ResearchGate*, 2015.