

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA IN COMBATING FAKE NEWS IN 2026 OSUN STATE GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The rise of fake news has become a major threat to electoral integrity in Nigeria, especially with the increasing use of Social media. Ahead of the 2026 Osun State gubernatorial election, misinformation and disinformation are expected to influence voter perception and turnout. This study comparatively examined the effectiveness of public relations and traditional media in combating fake news during the election. The study was anchored on Agenda Setting Theory and Social Responsibility Theory. A survey research design was adopted. The population comprised registered voters, journalists, INEC Officials and political party PROs in Osun State. Using the Taro Yamane formula, a sample size of 400 respondents was selected through multi-stage sampling technique across the three senatorial districts of Osun State. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The instrument was validated and a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.84 was obtained. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 with descriptive statistics of frequency, percentage and mean, while inferential statistics of t-test was used to test hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that both public relations (Mean = 3.38) and traditional media [mean = 3.25] are effective in combating fake news, but Public Relations was perceived as slightly more effective due to its speed and targeted messaging. The t-test result showed a significant difference [$t = 2.14, P < 0.05$]. The study concluded that an integrated approach involving both PR and traditional media is necessary for credible elections. It was recommended that INEC should establish a Joint rapid response team comprising PR practitioners and traditional media houses to debunk fake news in real time using local languages. The synergy between PR and traditional media will yield better results in fighting fake news through the use of continuous voter education in Yoruba and the creation of media monitoring desks by INEC for the 2026 election.

Word Count: 306 Words

KEYWORDS: Public Relations, Traditional media, fake news, Combating, Osun State, Election.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Elections are the bedrock of democracy and their credibility depends largely on the flow of accurate information to the electorate. In the digital age, information has become both a tool for empowerment and a weapon for manipulation. The proliferation of fake news, defined as deliberately fabricated Information presented as Factual news to deceive and mislead (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), poses a serious threat to democratic processes globally. In Nigeria, elections have become a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, especially with the increased penetration of social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, X and TikTok.

As the state prepares for the 2026 gubernatorial election, concerns about fake news and its potential to incite tension, suppress voter turnout and damage the credibility of the independent National Electoral Commission [INEC] have become more pronounced.

In 2018 and 2022, Osun State has witnessed keenly contested gubernatorial elections both of which were accompanied by widespread rumors, false claims about candidates and misinformation about voting procedures. As the state prepares for the 2026 gubernatorial election, there are growing concerns that fake news could undermine voter confidence, suppress turnout and question the credibility of the INEC.

Two Key communication channels are often used to counter fake news: public relations and traditional media. Public relations involve strategic, two-way communication used by organizations like INEC and political parties to build trust, manage reputation and provide timely information [Grunig and Hunt, 1984]. On the other hand, traditional media such as radio, television and Newspapers remain the most accessible and trusted sources of information, especially in rural areas of Osun state where radio in Yoruba is a primary source of news. [Ojo], 2014.

Despite efforts by both, it is unclear which channel is more effective in combating fake news during elections. Public relations involve strategic communication by organizations to build trust, manage reputation and provide accurate information to the public. For elections, INEC's Public Relations Unit, political parties and civil society organizations use press releases, media briefings and fact checking teams to counter falsehoods.

Traditional media: radio, television and newspapers remain the most trusted widely accessed sources of information in Nigeria especially in rural communities like many parts of Osun State. Stations such as OSBC Radio/TV, NTA, and newspapers like Nigerian Tribune play a critical role in voter education and debunking misinformation. [Ojo], 2014.

Despite the efforts of both PR and traditional media, there is limited empirical evidence comparing which of the two is more effective in combating fake news in the Osun Context. This study therefore seeks to comparatively examine their roles ahead of the 2026 Osun State gubernatorial election.

Statement of the Problem

Fake news has become a major weapon of political manipulation and challenge to electoral integrity in Nigeria. During elections, false narratives about candidates, voting procedures and INEC can spread faster than official corrections leading to voter apathy and violence.

Misleading information can influence voter behaviour and perception while INEC and media organizations have deployed PR campaigns and broadcast programs to counter misinformation, the effectiveness of these strategies has not been comparatively measured.

The 2026 Osun gubernatorial election is expected to be highly competitive. Without a clear understanding of whether PR or traditional media works better in debunking fake news, resources may be misdirected and the credibility of the election may be compromised. This Study addresses this gap by comparing the effectiveness of public relations and traditional media in combating fake news in the 2026 Osun State gubernatorial elections.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this Study is to conduct a comparative analysis of public relations and traditional media in combating fake news in the 2026 Osun State gubernatorial election.

The specific objectives are to

1. Identify the common types of fake news during elections in Osun State.
2. Examine the extent to which public relations strategies are used to combat fake news.
3. Examine the extent to which traditional media are used to combat fake news.
4. Compare the effectiveness of public relations and traditional media in combating fake news.
5. Recommend strategies for improving the fight against fake news in future elections.

Research Questions

1. What are the common types of fake news associated with elections in Osun State?
2. To what extent do public relations strategies combat fake news in the 2026 Osun election?
3. To what extent do traditional media combat fake news in the 2026 Osun election?
4. Which is more effective between public relations and traditional media in combating fake news?
5. What strategies can enhance the fight against fake news in the 2026 election?

2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the effectiveness of public relations and traditional media in combating fake news in the 2026 Osun state gubernatorial election.

Ho2: Public relations does not significantly influence public perception of electoral credibility in the 2026 Osun State gubernatorial election.

Significance of the Study

This study will be beneficial to:

1. **INEC Osun:** To design more effective communication strategies for the 2026 election.
2. **Media Houses:** To understand their role and improve fact-checking and public enlightenment Programs.
3. **Political Parties and PR Practitioners:** To adopt ethical PR strategies in countering misinformation.
4. **Academia:** To contribute to literature on political communication, PR and fake news in Nigeria.
5. **The General Public:** To become more media literate and resilient to fake news.

Scope of the Study

The STUDY is limited to Osun State Nigeria. It focuses on the 2026 gubernatorial election. The study will examine PR activities of INEC Osun and major Political Parties and the role of traditional media such as OSBC, NTA, Punch and Nigerian Tribune. The population will include registered voters, journalists and PR practitioners in Osun state.

Operational Definition of Terms:

1. **Public Relations:** A strategic management function that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and Publics through credible information dissemination.
2. **Traditional Media:** Conventional mass media channels including radio, television and newspapers that operate in Osun State.
3. **Fake News:** Fabricated information deliberately created to mislead the public about the 2026 Osun gubernatorial election.
4. **Combating Fake News:** The process of identifying, debunking and correcting false information to prevent its spread.
5. **Electoral Credibility:** The degree of public trust in the fairness, transparency and integrity of the electoral process.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three theories that explain how information influences the public and how organizations manage communication during crisis like fake news.

A. Agenda Setting Theory

Proposed by McCombs and Shaw, Agenda Setting Theory posits that the media does not tell people what to think, but what to think about. By selecting and emphasizing certain issues, both Traditional media and PR practitioners can set the public agenda and push fake news off the front burner. It also gives prominence to certain issues the media influences the public agenda.

Relevance to this Study:

During the 2026 Osun election, if INEC's Public Relations Unit and OSBC/ NTA consistently agenda-set with factual information and debunks, they can reduce the salience of fake news in voters' mind

Social Responsibility Theory of the Press

This theory holds that the press and other media have an obligation to be truthful, accurate, fair and to provide information that serves the public interest and emphasizes media accountability.

Relevance to this Study:

Traditional media houses in Osun state have a social responsibility to verify information before broadcast and to provide platforms for INEC to correct falsehoods. This theory justifies the role of OSBC, NTA, and Newspapers in combating fake news.

Two-Step Flow Theory

Developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld, this theory states that information flows from mass media to opinion leaders and then from opinion leaders and then from opinion leaders to the general public.

Relevance to this Study:

PR Practitioners often target opinion leaders, traditional rulers, Party PROs, and Journalists. These opinion leaders then Interpret and disseminate the correct information to grassroots communities in Osun, which is critical in a State where radio in Yoruba and word-of-mouth are Powerful.

Review of Empirical Studies

Several studies have examined the role of public relations and traditional media in fighting misinformation, especially in elections.

Studies on Public Relations and Fake news in Elections

Adebayo and Popoola examined INEC's PR strategies during the 2023 Nigerian general Elections. Using a survey and content analysis, they found that INEC's use of press releases, X fact-checking, and media briefings significantly reduced the Spread of fake news by 42%. However, they noted that PR responses were often "slow and reactive" rather than proactive. The study was National and did not compare PR with Traditional media [2023].

Ojo studied political parties' PR during the Ekiti 2022 governorship election. Findings showed that parties with active media monitoring teams were able to counter fake news within 2 hours. The study concluded that proactive PR increases public trust in electoral bodies.

Studies on Traditional Media and Fake News

Nwabueze and Okon assessed the role of radio in combating fake news during the 2019 elections in South-East Nigeria. 68% of respondents said they relied on radio jingles and phone-in programs in local languages to verify election news. Radio was the most trusted medium in rural areas.

Fatima studied TV and newspapers in the Kaduna 2023 elections. The study found that TV fact-check segments and newspaper editorials were effective in urban areas but had limited reach in rural areas. Only 28% of rural respondents read newspapers regularly. This shows the limitations of print/TV compared to radio.

Comparative Studies of Public Relations and Traditional media

Musa and Ibrahim conducted a comparative study in Kano during the 2023 elections using t-test, they found public relations was more effective in speed and targeted correction [mean= 3.52], while traditional media was more effective in reach and credibility [mean=3.47]. The difference was significant at $P<0.05$. They recommended that both should work together.

Adeyemi compared INEC public relations vs BCOS Radio/TV in Oyo State voter education. The study found that synergy was most effective. When public relations provided verified content and traditional media disseminated it, misinformation dropped by 55%. This supports an integrated model for South west Nigeria. [2023].

Studies on Fake News in Osun State Elections

Olanrewaju documented that during the 2022 Osun governorship election, fake news about "PVC Collection deadlines" and "military at polling Units" went viral on WhatsApp. The study noted that both INEC PR and OSBC were late in responding, which allowed misinformation to spread for 48 hours before a rebuttal. The study was descriptive and did not measure effectiveness. [2022].

Summary of Literature and Identified Gap

The reviewed studies show that both public relations and traditional media are important in combating fake news. PR is effective for speed, targeted messaging and direct engagement, while traditional media is effective for credibility, mass reach and trust especially in rural areas of Osun where Yoruba radio dominates.

However, most Studies are either National, focused on one channel or conducted outside Osun State. No known study has comparatively measured the effectiveness of PR and Traditional media specifically for the 2026 Osun state gubernatorial election.

This study therefore fills that gap by empirically comparing both channels among Osun Voters, journalists and public relations practitioners to determine which is more effective and how they can collaborate for the 2026 election.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design was chosen because It allows the researcher to collect data from a large population to describe opinions, attitudes and practices regarding PR and Traditional media in combating fake news.

Population of the Study

The population comprised registered voters, journalists, INEC officials and public relations officers of political parties in Osun State had 1,998,482 registered voters as of 2022. The population also includes 450 registered journalists and 150 public relations practitioners across major political parties.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Using the Taro Yamane formula with 5% margin of error;

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1998482}{1 + 1998482(0.05)^2} = 400$$

Sample Size = 400 respondents

Sampling Technique: Multi-stage sampling was used.

Stage 1: Osun State was stratified into the 3 Senatorial Districts: Osun Central, Osun East, and Osun West.

Stage 2: 2 Local Government Areas were randomly selected from each Senatorial District = 6 Local Government Areas.

Stage 3: Purposive sampling was used to select 50 registered voters, 10 journalists, 5 INEC officials and 2 PR officers from each Local Government Areas.

Instrument for Data Collection

The main instrument was a structured questionnaire titled "PRTM-FN Questionnaire".

It had 3 sections:

Section A: Demographics

Section B: 15 Items on a 4 Point Likert Scale: SA=4, A=3, D=2, SD=1 measuring PR and traditional media effectiveness.

Section C: Open-ended questions on strategies.

In-depth Interviews were also conducted with 6 INEC PROs and Media Heads.

Validity and Reliability of Instrument

The Instrument was validated by 2 lecturers in communication and media studies, University of Uyo. For reliability, a pilot test was conducted on 30 respondents in Osun State. Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of 0.84 was obtained, showing the instrument was reliable.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS v 26

Descriptive Statistics: frequency, percentage, mean. criterion mean = 2.50

Inferential Statistics: Independent t-test was used to test hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Data Presentation and Results

Response Rate

400 questionnaires were distributed and 372 were retrieved, representing a 93% response rate. This was considered adequate for analysis.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of respondents

S/N	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	201	54.0
		Female	171	46.0
		Total	372	100.0
2	Age	18-30 years	142	38.2
		31-45 years	130	34.9
		46 years and above	100	26.9
		Total	372	100.0
3	Occupation	Registered Voter	300	80.6
		Journalist	42	11.3

		INEC/PR Officer	30	8.1
		Total	372	100.0
4	Location	Osun Central	124	33.3
		Osun East	124	33.3
		Osun West	124	33.3
		Total	372	100.0

Answers to Research Questions

Decision Rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = Accepted Mean < 2.50 = Rejected.

4 Point Likert: SA=4, A=3, D=2 SD=1

Table 2: Common types of Fake news during elections in Osun State

S/N	Item	Mean	Std. Dev	Decision
1	False information about PVC collection dates	3.41	0.72	Accepted
2	Rumors of ballot box snatching and violence	3.38	0.69	Accepted
3	Fake endorsement of candidates by religious/traditional leaders	3.29	0.75	Accepted
4	False claims about INEC officials being partisan	3.22	0.81	Accepted
	Cluster Mean	3.33	0.74	Accepted

Table 3: Extent of use of Public Relations Strategies in combating fake news

S/N	Item	Mean	Std. Dev	Decision
1	INEC Press releases and official fact-checking statements	3.42	0.68	Accepted
2	Media briefings by Political Party PROs	3.35	0.70	Accepted
3	Use of Social media Pages for real-time debunking	3.33	0.73	Accepted
4	Stakeholders meetings with traditional rulers and CSOs	3.39	0.66	Accepted
	Cluster mean	3.37	0.69	Accepted

Decision Rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = Accepted

Table 4: Extent of use of Traditional Media in combating fake news

S/N	Item	Mean	Std. Dev	Decision
1	Radio jingles and Programs in Yoruba on OSBC	3.40	0.71	Accepted
2	TV Voter education Programs on NTA/OSBC TV	3.28	0.74	Accepted
3	Newspaper Editorials and Paid advertorials	3.10	0.80	Accepted
4	Phone-In Programs for clarification and debunking	3.23	0.77	Accepted
	Cluster mean	3.25	0.76	Accepted*

Decision Rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = Accepted

Table 5: Perceived Effectiveness of Public Relations Vs Traditional Media

S/N	Channel	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Rank
1	Public Relations	372	3.37	0.69	1st
2	Traditional media	372	3.25	0.76	2nd

Interpretation: Respondents rated public relations slightly higher in effectiveness due to speed and targeted messaging but both channels are perceived as effective.

Hypothesis 1

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the effectiveness of public relations and Traditional Media in combating fake news in the 2026 Osun State gubernatorial election.

Table 6: t-test Analysis of Effectiveness of Public Relations Vs Traditional media

S/N	Variable	N	Mean	Std.Dev	t-cal	df	P-Value	Decision
1	Public Relations	372	3.37	0.69	2.14	370	0.033	Rejected
2	Traditional media	372	3.25	0.76				

Result: Since P-Value $0.033 < 0.05$, H_0 is rejected. There is a significant difference in the effectiveness of Public Relations and Traditional media. PR is perceived as more effective.

Hypothesis 2

Ho2: Public Relations does not significantly influence public perception of electoral credibility in the 2026 Osun state gubernatorial election.

Table 7: t-test Analysis of Public Relations influence on Electoral Credibility

S/N	Variable	N	Mean	Stv. Dev	t-Cal	df	P-Value	Decision
1	Public Relations Influence	372	3.36	0.59	4.21	370	0.000	Rejected

Result: Since P-Value $0.000 < 0.05$, H_0 is Rejected. Public relations significantly influences public perception of electoral credibility.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this Study are discussed below based on the research questions and hypotheses.

1. Common Types of Fake News in Osun State Elections:

The study found that false information about PVC collection dates and rumors of ballot box snatching/violence are the most common types of fake news during elections in Osun State with cluster mean of 3.33. This aligns with Olanrewaju who reported that during the 2022 Osun governorship election, WhatsApp was flooded with false claims about voting procedures. The spread of such misinformation can cause voter apathy and panic if not quickly addressed.

2. Extent of use of Public Relations Strategies.

Findings revealed that public relations strategies are used to a high extent in combating fake news with cluster mean of 3.37. Items Such as INEC press releases, media briefings by Party PROs and real time debunking on social media were rated high. This supports Adebayo and Popoola, who found that INEC's public relations during 2023 elections reduced misinformation by 42%. The speed and targeted nature of PR makes it effective for Crisis management.

3. Extent of use of Traditional Media:

Traditional media was also found to be used to a high extent with cluster mean of 3.25. Radio jingles in Yoruba on OSBC, TV voter education, and phone-in programs were Key tools. This corroborates Nwabueze and Okon who noted that 68% of respondents in South-East Nigeria relied on radio to verify election information. In Osun State, where many rural voters depend on radio, traditional media remains critical for mass reach and credibility.

4. Comparative Effectiveness of Public Relations and Traditional media

The t-test result showed a significant difference in effectiveness with P-Value $0.033 < 0.05$. Public relations had a higher mean of 3.37 compared to Traditional media 3.25. This suggests that respondents perceived public relations as slightly more effective due to its speed and ability to directly engage the public online. However, the small margin indicates that both are important.

The finding is consistent with Musa and Ibrahim who found public relations to be better for speed while traditional media had better rural reach in Kano 2023.

5. Influence of Public Relations on Electoral Credibility.

The study also found that public relations significantly influence public perception of electoral credibility with P-Value 0.000. This implies that when INEC and political parties communicate transparently and promptly, public trust in the 2026 election process increases. This agrees with Grunig and Hunt's theory that effective public relations builds mutually beneficial relationships and trust.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this study concludes that both public relations and traditional media play vital roles in combating fake news in the 2026 Osun State gubernatorial election. However, public relations is perceived as slightly more effective because of its speed, directness, and ability to engage audiences on digital platforms.

Traditional media especially radio in local languages remains indispensable for reaching rural and non-internet users in Osun state. The most Common fake news revolves around PVC collection and election violence.

Therefore, to ensure a credible, peaceful and well-informed 2026 election, INEC, political parties and media houses must adopt an integrated communication strategy that leverages the speed of public relations and the wide reach and trust of traditional media.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Adopt an Integrated Communication Strategy:

INEC Osun and political parties should synchronize public relations messages with Traditional media content. PR should provide verified information quickly while OSBC, NTA and newspapers should amplify it to rural areas.

2. Establish a Rapid Response Public Relations Unit:

INEC and major parties should set up a 24/7 fact-checking and response team before and during the 2026 gubernatorial election to debunk fake news within 1 hour of it spreading.

3. Strengthen Local Language Broadcasting:

OSBC Radio and community radio stations should increase Yoruba-language programs dedicated to voter education and fake news debunking, especially in rural local government areas.

4. Media Literacy Campaigns:

Civil society organizations and INEC should organize town hall meetings and media literacy trainings to equip voters with skills to identify and ignore fake news.

5. Collaborations with Social Media Influencers and Traditional Rulers:

Public Relations Practitioners Should Partner with respected opinion Leaders, as Suggested by Two-Step flow Theory, to disseminate accurate information at the Grassroots.

6. Monitoring and Evaluating:

A post-election study should be conducted to assess which messages and channels were most effective, to improve future Elections.

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