PLAYING THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN AFRICAN GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, public relations (PR) has become a central tool in African politics. Politicians employ it to disseminate information and strategically shape public perception through promises, reforms, and policy agendas that are rarely fulfilled. Guided by the agenda-setting theory, this study examines the various PR strategies that politicians employ during election campaigns and governance. Since many African countries, such as Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, are developing nations, they face persistent challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure. These conditions fuel the public to demand change. The urge to bring developments that meet citizens' basic needs creates an opportunity for politicians to project visionary yet unrealistic pledges. Such promises include free education, universal healthcare, increased employment opportunities, and access to clean water. Using a combination of content analysis of social media communications, press briefings, campaign materials, media interviews, and political speeches alongside a comparative review of promised versus delivered policies, this research identifies a governance gap between political rhetoric and actual policy outcomes. Findings reveal frequent deployment of public relations tactics such as expansive manifesto packaging, blame deflection, selective data presentation, use of political allies, empathic gestures, tactical retreats, strategic media management, and tokenism. They further indicate that PR tactics are often tailored to demographic sensitivities. For instance, youth are targeted through digital platforms, rural populations through community rallies, and urban professionals through policy forums and televised debates. In addition, incorporating a comparison between African countries and developed nations helps in drawing the line between the use of PR and facts in governance. The paper further recommends the establishment of collaborative oversight mechanisms involving civil society, human rights bodies, and accountability institutions to assess both the credibility of political promises and the PR strategies used to sustain public trust. This will help not only in strengthening democratic accountability but also in fostering informed citizen engagement in the political landscape.

Keywords: Public relations, political communication, governance, African politics, manifestos, and agenda-setting theory.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) was traditionally associated with corporate and marketing functions [1]. Many organizations utilized it to influence public opinion, build trust, and maintain positive relationships with their audiences [1]. Based on these arguments, many scholars cite close ties between PR and marketing campaigns as they helped persuade consumers to purchase goods
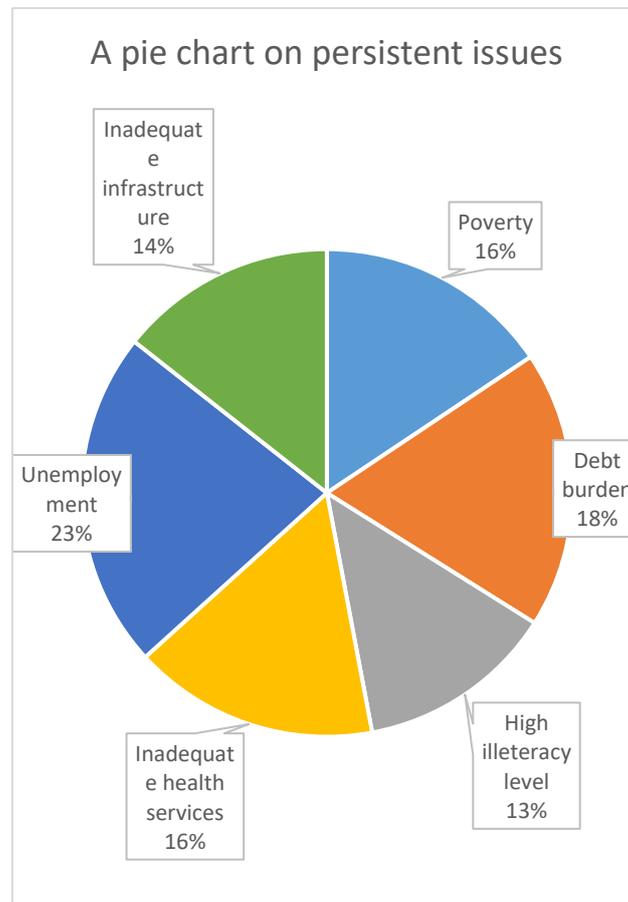
or services [1, 2]. In recent years, PR has evolved far beyond its commercial roots. Today, it plays a central role in sectors such as politics, banking, agriculture, and health, where it is not only a means of conveying information but also a powerful tool for shaping perceptions, managing crises, and framing public narratives [3].

African politics are characterized by the rise of digital media, intense political competition, and heightened citizen expectations. This makes PR a strategic instrument for political branding and image management [3]. Politicians increasingly employ it not just during election campaigns but throughout their tenure in office. This strategy aims to help them sustain public trust, control the flow of information, and manage their public image in the face of governance challenges [3]. Such mechanisms work effectively considering that leaders often maintain dedicated communication teams responsible for photography, video production, social media updates, press releases, poster design, and media interview preparation [4].

This trend is significant in African countries, which are classified as developing nations by global institutions such as the World Bank, United Nations, and IMF [2]. Persistent issues such as poverty, debt burdens, high illiteracy levels, inadequate healthcare services, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure are common in these African countries [3]. Statistics from the WHO, UNESCO, UN, and TRT Africa reveal that unemployment and limited access to modern healthcare have greatly affected many African countries. The statistics further showed that the illiteracy level has reduced. The pie chart below presents these statistics.

A pie chart on persistent issues among African countries.

Persistent issues	Global standing statistics (%)
Poverty	50
Debt burden	59
High illiteracy levels	42
Inadequate healthcare services	52
Unemployment	72
Inadequate infrastructure	46

A pie chart on persistent issues

- Inadequate infrastructure 14%
- Poverty 16%
- Debt burden 18%
- High illeteracy level 13%
- Inadequate health services 16%
- Unemployment 23%

The need to address persistent issues creates fertile ground for ambitious political promises, many of which remain unfulfilled [3]. PR strategies often present these promises as achievable realities, shaping public perception even without concrete delivery [2]. While existing research has examined political communication in developed democracies, limited attention has been paid to how PR strategies function in African political contexts, particularly the relationship between campaign promises and governance delivery. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the relationship between political messaging, demographic targeting, and governance outcomes in selected African nations. In addition, the study employs the 2016 U.S election to compare how PR tactics are employed between developed nations and African countries. Therefore, it is guided by two research questions: (1) What PR strategies do African politicians employ to maintain public support? (2) How do these strategies vary across demographic segments? (3) Do developed nations apply PR tactics in governance?

The research adopts a mixed-method approach, combining content analysis of political communication materials such as social media posts, manifestos, campaign posters, media interviews, and speeches alongside a comparative review of promised versus delivered policies. The analysis focuses on Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana as representative case studies within the African context. On the other hand, U.S was adopted as the representative of developed nations.

The study is guided by the Agenda-Setting Theory, which Dr. Maxwell McCombs and Dr. Donald Lewis Shaw developed [5]. The theory posits that the media does not tell people what

to think, but rather what to think about. Politicians use PR to direct public attention toward selected issues while diverting focus from governance shortcomings [6].

This research contributes to political communication literature by examining PR strategies in developing democracy contexts while advocating for the development of a collaborative framework that will enhance democratic accountability and citizen engagement.

This paper includes other sections, such as a literature review, methodology, and findings. The remaining sessions are discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Dr. Maxwell McCombs and Dr. Donald Lewis Shaw formulated the agenda-Setting Theory, the dominant theory of this mixed-methods study. The theory states that the media shape the public's perception through the information they disseminate during the news [5]. News reports make it in a certain way, implying that when a particular issue is given more importance and attention than others, the audience will perceive it to be important [5]. The media prioritizes which news comes first and next according to how people think and how much influence it will have on the audience.

McCombs and Shaw launched the concept of agenda-setting during the 1968 presidential election in Chapel Hill, North Carolina [6]. Shaw and McCombs found a correlation between issues covered by the media and what the public perceived as necessary [5, 6]. The theory insists that the media have the mandate to influence the public. McCombs and Shaw found that during the 1968 presidential election, the media covered issues that voters considered necessary [6]. The two discovered the relationship that the media has the power to impact what the public thinks. In 1972, McCombs and Shaw found a correlation between media coverage and the public's ranking of issues. They resolved that the media sets the agenda on issues they consider to influence public opinion.

In the 21st century, Agenda-Setting theory has been applied in various fields, such as communication, sociology, and political science [7]. Recent studies reveal that Agenda-Setting has been fully adapted in the political landscape. Since many politicians have hired a PR team to handle the communication, passing selected information has become simple. The teams are the agenda-setters who shape which issues will gain public prominence [7]. In many instances, the PR team maintains a good relationship with the media, paving the way for them to set media and politics agendas [6, 7]. A case study shows politicians use local media stations to communicate information differently. For instance, communications around infrastructure and development are packaged differently in Kenya and Nigeria to suit journalistic norms and audience expectations [5]. Research on political PR and image management highlights the deliberate use of selective disclosures, staged empathy, and surrogate messengers to sustain leaders' legitimacy during governance crises [3]. At the same time, studies of social-media use by African politicians document how digital platforms accelerate agenda-setting processes, enabling rapid amplification of preferred issues (especially among youth) while crowding out counter-narratives unless actively contested [7].

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study collected data using a comparative review and content analysis. Comparative review helped in analyzing promises made and comparing them with fulfilled ones. In the case of content analysis, the study has reviewed social media communications, press briefings, campaign materials, media interviews, and political speeches employed by politicians during the campaign period and when they are in office.

3.1 Findings

This study has relied on three research questions: (1) What PR strategies do African politicians employ to maintain public support? (2) How do these strategies vary across demographic segments? (3) Do developed nations apply PR tactics in governance? The study employed comparative review and content analysis to answer these research questions fully. The collected data reveals the frequent deployment of public relations tactics such as expansive manifesto packaging, blame deflection, selective data presentation, use of political allies, empathic gestures, tactical retreats, tokenism and strategic media management to maintain public trust. The findings further showed that PR tactics are often tailored to sustain and fit a certain demographic. Therefore, youth are targeted through digital platforms, rural populations through community rallies, and urban professionals through policy forums and televised debates. In addition, Donald Trump's 2016 campaign in the U.S. demonstrated that an unfiltered truth-telling style is one of the mechanisms used in developed nations instead of PR.

4.0 DISCUSSION

(i) PR strategies employed by politicians

1. Expansive manifesto packaging

During the campaign period, politicians create huge documents entailing the promises that they will fulfil once they have been elected into office. With the help of a consultation team, such politicians make pledges covering all sectors, including education, health, agriculture, mining, and housing. These documents play a huge role in helping citizens identify the most suitable candidate who will bring change to society.

Since 2022, Kenya has been run by the Kenya Kwanza administration, which President William Ruto leads. During their campaign period, their manifesto had 270 promises [9]. Such promises include reducing the cost of living in 100 days, focusing on post-COVID-19 economic recovery, setting up leather industries, implementing fully financed primary healthcare services, ending extrajudicial killing, and lowering the prices of farm inputs [9]. As of December 2024, only 25 promises were achieved, 89 were in progress, and 156 remain untouched. The figure below illustrates the 270 pledges that the Kenya Kwanza administration made.

A pie chart illustrating the 270 pledges made by the Kenya Kwanza administration

Policy implementation	Number of promises
Achieved	25
In progress	89

Not achieved	156

No of promises
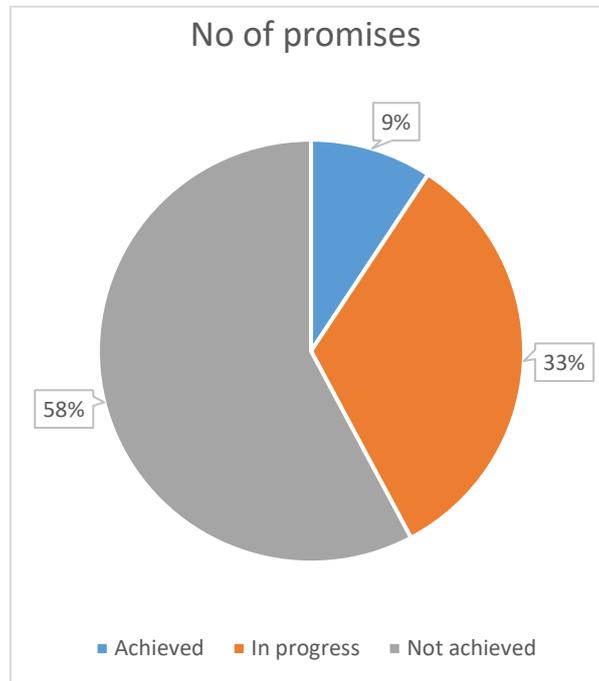
Some of the promises that have been achieved include digitizing government services, introducing subsidized fertilizers, and introducing a new universal health coverage system [9]. Of the 9 per cent promises achieved, some incorporate new terms not made in the manifesto. For instance, the government promised to introduce a fund for small enterprises with no interest. However, the Hustler fund was launched with an interest rate of 8% p.a [9]. In addition, the government promised to lower taxes, but instead, it has introduced new taxation policies. The new education funding model, affordable housing project, and universal health system have faced legal battles since their implementation [10]. On the other hand, constructing sports stadiums is one project in progress. However, the promise to end extrajudicial killing and abductions remains one of the many unachieved pledges [9]

2. Blame deflection

Politicians constantly make new pledges to their citizens. However, in some instances, such pledges are unrealistic, or they face several challenges. Such situations cause the government to start looking for external forces that it can blame for the failure.

President Cyril Ramaphosa proposed establishing a South African Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF) in South Africa [19]. The project, which was backed by the finance minister, Tito Mboweni, aimed to utilize R30 billion (2 billion US dollars) as the capital as of 2020 when the project was launched. The proposal indicated that the capital would be funded through mineral royalties, asset sales, and future surpluses [19]. Despite the visionary idea, the SWF remains unimplemented years later. The government has shifted the blame to macroeconomic instabilities, unreliable revenue streams, lack of consistent surpluses, service delivery needs,

and SOE reform needed [19]. The figure below illustrates the mention of blame in various political communication materials.

A bar graph of the number of mentions for the blame deflection

Blame deflection	Number of mentions in political communication materials
Macroeconomic instability	16
Lack of consistent surpluses	12
Unreliable revenue streams	14
Service delivery needs	4
SOE reform needed	2

A bar graph on blame deflection
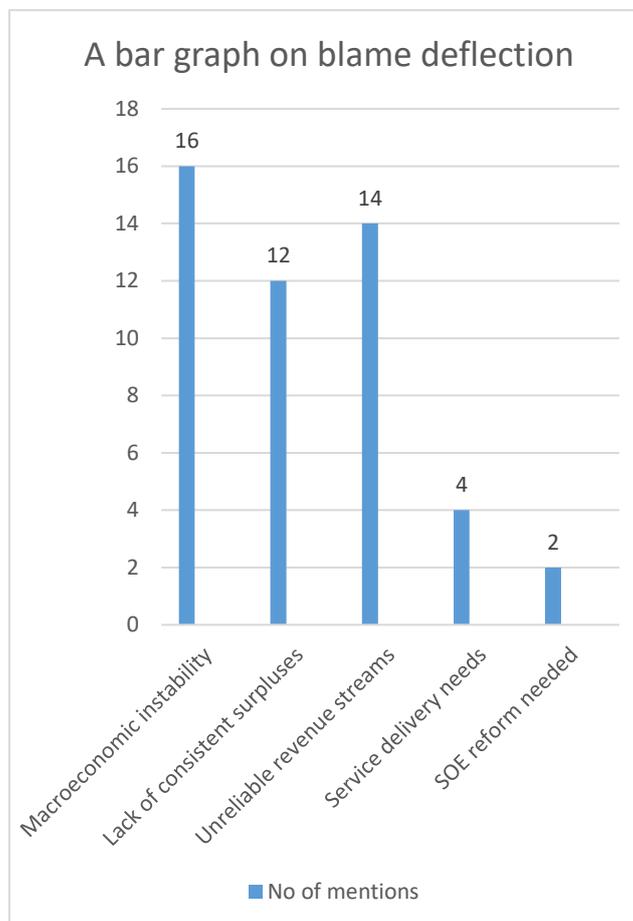
The situation in Kenya is not different. When President Ruto was conducting his campaign, he criticized the previous administration for increasing fuel prices [9]. Hence, he utilized the opportunity to pledge to lower fuel prices, which would lower the cost of living [9]. However, the promise was unrealistic. Once in office, fuel prices even went higher than before. The government shifted the blame to global markets, crude oil producers, and weak supply chain management [10]

3. Selective data presentation

Implementation of pledges faces several challenges that raise concerns among the public. However, instead of acknowledging such challenges, the government selects information to prove its policies are working. In Ghana, the government has already fulfilled its pledge on enrolling free senior high school education (SHS) [16]. Other projects that have been fulfilled include having 76 new and existing factories under the one district one factory initiative [14]. In addition, the government claims it has already fulfilled 80% of its pledges to the public. As a result, the government allies always praise themselves for these gains, while not emphasizing pending projects. The government has yet to implement its promise of one district, one hospital, and building a multipurpose dam in Pwalugu [14].

Many individuals have complained that the new universal health coverage (SHA) is ineffective in Kenya [10]. On the other hand, the government has rubbished the claims by stating that many Kenyans have embraced the program since more than 20 million people have already registered [10]. Based on such figures, the government keeps insisting that the health program works effectively. The figure below illustrates the number of mentions by government officials that SHA is working.

A pie chart to illustrate the number of mentions for universal health coverage.

Political communication materials	SHA is working	SHA is not working
Press briefings	18	0
Media interviews	12	0
Public addresses/ speeches	24	0
Social media post	32	0
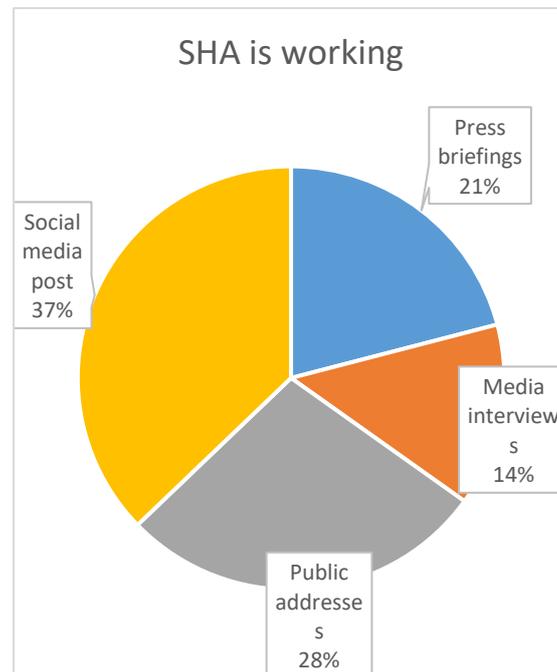
4. Use of political allies

This incorporates using leaders, analysts, stakeholders, and politicians who support the government to drive the narrative. Such leaders carefully pick certain information that they use to prove that the government is on the right track. The government further uses such allies to test a new initiative. If people welcome it, then the government launches it; if rejected, the government remains silent as if it were not involved.

In Nigeria, several governors and economists linked to the government appeared on media interviews to explain the need to abolish the fuel subsidy [11]. They cited that the subsidy benefited the rich more than the poor and was unsuitable. A few weeks later, the government abolished the policy. This happened in 2023 [11].

In addition, the administration of Nigeria has relied on pro-government commentators who keep highlighting infrastructure projects that the government has completed [12]. They put more emphasis on the Abuja- Kaduna- Kano highway rehabilitation while they avoid giving insights into abandoned rural roads [12]. In other instances, governors loyal to the government often launch incomplete/ petty projects to keep the public focused on the government being on the right track.

5. Emphatic gesture

This is a deliberate action that politicians and government officials employ to show compassion, understanding, and solidarity with citizens during challenging moments. Such actions involve visiting disaster or crisis zones, publicly consoling victims and their families, making symbolic sacrifices (salary cut), and issuing emotional speeches. Such actions aim to humanize political figures, soften public anger, and brand the image of politicians. The figure below illustrates the number of mentions of empathic gestures across the four countries.

A bar graph of the number of mentions for the empathic gestures

Empathic gesture	Number of mentions in political communication materials
Issuing emotional speeches	8
Publicly consoling victims and their families	12
Visiting disaster or crisis zones	10
Making symbolic sacrifices (salary cut)	6
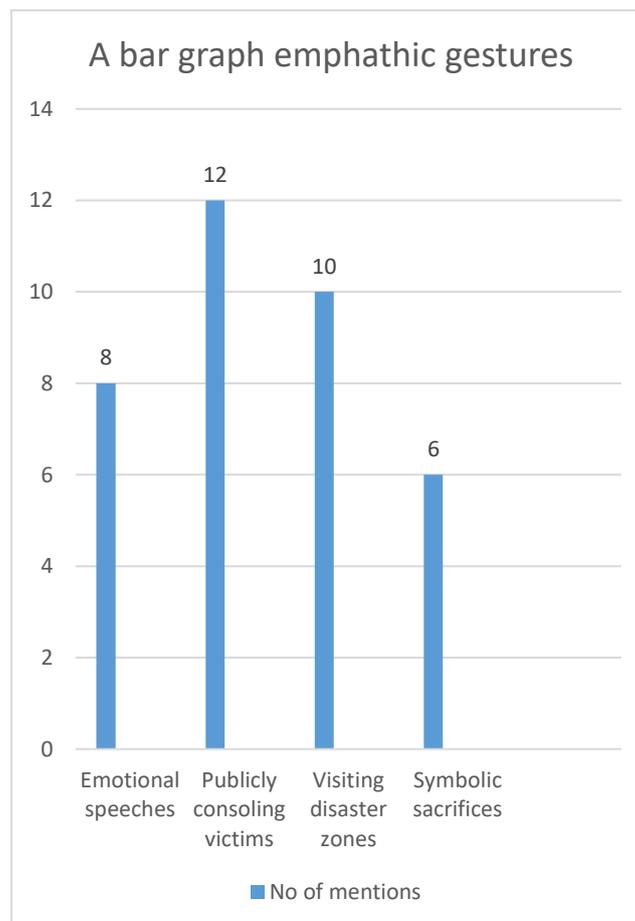
In 2023, South Africa faced its worst-ever rolling power cuts, with electricity outages lasting 289 days due to years of poor maintenance, corruption, and under-investment at Eskom [17]. President Cyril Ramaphosa responded with a mix of empathy and reassurance. He visited the

Eskom power plants and took a picture while working alongside the engineers [17]. Additionally, he publicly apologized for the inconvenience. He termed the situation personally distressing while acknowledging the negative impact on small businesses [17]. Furthermore, he met with community representatives and listened to their grievances. In his response, he said that the government was not indifferent to the hardship.

On the other hand, Ghana experienced a crisis of high cost of living in 2022 and 2023. The situation was caused by several factors, such as inflation, cedi depreciation, and the hiking of fuel prices [15]. To counter the situation, President Nana Akufo-Addo gave a national address in which he acknowledged the suffering of ordinary citizens. As a result, he proposed a 30% salary cut for himself and the ministers [15]. In addition, he visited small-scale traders and listened to their complaints about rising food prices.

6. Tactical retreats

It refers to a situation where a government and political leader backs down from a proposed policy, law, or initiative. Such occurrences often take place after a strong public opposition. The action from the political leaders is not necessarily to agree with critics, but to preserve political capital and avoid deeper unrest.

In Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill case, President William Ruto's administration initially pushed for several contentious tax measures, including higher bread VAT and a new packaging eco-tax. However, after weeks of public outrage, mass protests led by Gen Z activists, and heavy social media backlash, the government announced the withdrawal of the entire finance bill [8]. The government stated that the decision was made after listening to the people, hence understanding the need for protecting livelihoods [8]. However, this was a strategic PR move to diffuse tensions, restore public trust, and shift media focus away from the broader unpopularity of the bill.

7. Strategic media management

Politicians, with the help of their public relations team, are at the frontline in maintaining a good relationship with journalists and the media in general. Such relationships help them control how, when, and what information is communicated to the public. From broadcast, digital, and even print media, politicians apply the tactic in shaping perceptions and maintaining trust, even in the face of challenges or failures. The techniques employed in media management include timing releases, selective access to journalists, framing narratives, and flooding the media space. Through content analysis, the study identifies that framing narratives and timing releases were the most used tactics. The figure below illustrates the tactics in media management across all four countries.

A pie chart to illustrate the number of mentions for universal health coverage.

Media strategies	Number of mentions in political communication materials
Timing releases	39

Selective access to journalists	21
Framing narratives	47
Flooding the media space	18
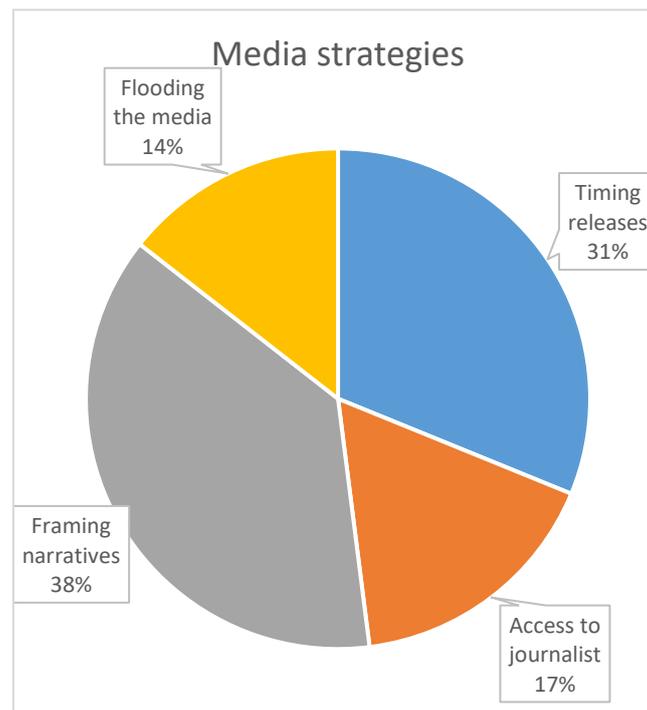
Timing releases involves sharing positive news to cover up adverse developments. Framing narratives incorporate a press briefing that only shares specific information with the public to shape the conversations for a duration of time. Flooding the media space involves having many government-friendly stories across various platforms. Selective access to journalists refers to identifying media personnel likely to present politician stories favorably.

Nigeria is a case study. During economic downturns, the presidency strategically uses the media to highlight infrastructure inaugurations and foreign investment deals [13]. As a result, Nigerian citizens start focusing on those issues instead of putting more emphasis on inflation and currency depreciation.

Similarly, in Kenya, Ruto's administration frequently pairs coverage of controversial policies like increased taxation with stories of new roads, digital hubs, or UHC registrations to keep the narrative weighted toward progress rather than discontent [9].

8. Tokenism

This is a strategy where governments use symbolic gestures or small incentives to impress citizens and create the perception of empowerment or progress. These tokens are often showcased as evidence of commitment, but in reality, they serve more as public relations tools

than genuine structural change. Such tokens include short-term loans, temporary subsidies, appointment of a few individuals from marginalized groups into leadership, and the launch of empowerment programs [20].

The bar graph below illustrates the number of mentions of the four types of tokenism.

A bar graph of the number of mentions for the types of tokenism

Tokenism	Number of mentions in political communication materials
Short-term loans	28
Appointment of a few individuals from marginalized groups into leadership	17
Launch of empowerment programs	31
Temporary subsidies	22
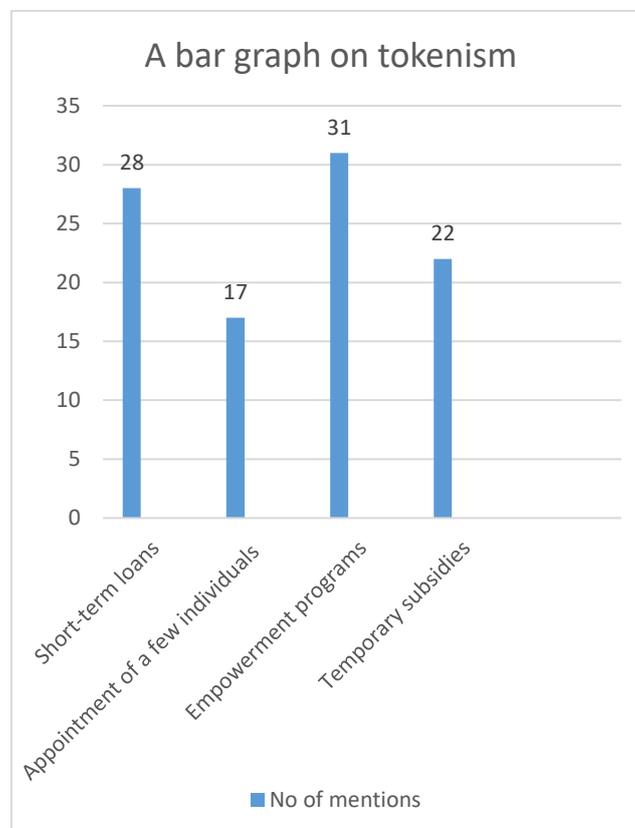
In Kenya, the government led by President Ruto himself has increasingly relied on token-based empowerment initiatives as a strategy to appeal to citizens [20]. In 2025, the president and his

close allies have spearheaded a series of empowerment drives across the country, particularly targeting youth and women's groups. During these highly publicized events, the government distributes assorted equipment and financial grants framed as tools of economic empowerment. These tokens include car wash machines, public address systems, motorcycles, cameras, salon kits, and other start-up items [20].

While these initiatives attract media attention and public praise in the short term, they often fail to address deeper systemic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

(ii) PR strategies employed on demographics

1. Youth

This study finds that political actors in the four case study countries strategically use digital platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube to engage the youth demographic. Many maintain personal accounts where they disseminate recorded videos, infographics, and posters designed to influence perceptions and drive online discourse [13]. Interactive functions such as live Q&A sessions, polls, and virtual town halls are leveraged to enhance participation. For instance, following the withdrawal of the 2024 Finance Bill, President William Ruto engaged directly with young citizens via X, using brief and targeted hashtags to frame the government's decision as responsive to public sentiment. Similarly, politicians frequently repurpose press briefing highlights into short-form videos tailored for youth audiences on social media [13].

2. Rural populations

Due to limited internet access and poor network coverage in many rural areas, political communication remains predominantly offline. Politicians frequently organize community rallies, barazas, and road tours to reach rural citizens directly [12]. In these settings, verbal pledges often address infrastructure, healthcare, and water access. These are the issues that align with rural priorities. For example, commitments include upgrading local clinics, improving feeder roads, or drilling boreholes. In Nigeria and Ghana, government officials and allied figures such as local chiefs, church leaders, and community elders are mobilized to deliver these messages [12]. This indirect communication approach leverages trusted local voices to legitimize government actions and promises.

3. Urban professionals

Political actors often prioritize formal, policy-focused engagements through established media channels for urban middle-class professionals. Tactics include televised debates, high-profile interviews, and expert-led policy forums. In South Africa, senior members of the African National Congress (ANC) regularly participate in roundtable discussions on economic reforms, which are broadcast on leading news networks [18]. These events allow leaders to present structured arguments, detailed policy proposals, and economic projections. The approach reinforces a narrative of technical competence and appeals to the professional class's preference for data-driven, analytical discourse.

(iii) Analysis of PR strategies in developed nations

In contrast to African governments, which often depend on polished PR tactics such as tokenism, expansive manifestos, and selective use of data to shape public perception, Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign in the United States marked a sharp departure. Rather than relying on carefully managed PR packaging, Trump adopted an unfiltered truth approach that marked a turning point of the modern political communication [21]. Unlike traditional politicians who filter their messages through PR teams, consultants, or scripted speeches, Trump embraced blunt, raw, and often controversial language. He deliberately projected himself as an outsider, unbound by political correctness or the staged rhetoric that many voters had grown disillusioned with [21].

The campaign period was characterized by strategic use of social media particularly Twitter [22]. By posting directly and frequently, he bypassed mainstream media and spoke to voters without intermediaries [22]. His unrefined tweets tackled issues such as immigration, trade, and corruption. One of the most iconic examples was his repeated promise to build a wall on the U.S. and Mexico border, which became a symbolic truth claim resonating strongly with voters worried about immigration and national security [22].

Trump also framed himself as a truth-teller standing against elites and institutions. He consistently accused the media of spreading fake news. He openly attacked Washington insiders for corruption, and portrayed globalization as a betrayal of American workers [21]. Even when fact-checkers challenged the accuracy of his statements, many supporters still viewed him as more truthful than his opponents because he voiced their anger and frustrations in a candid, unfiltered way.

Trump's unfiltered truth approach allowed him to cultivate trust among voters who felt ignored by the political establishment. His bluntness, perceived authenticity, and willingness to break communication norms became a PR strategy in themselves. This style disrupted traditional PR-driven politics, offering a sharp contrast to the image-based, token-driven approaches often employed in African contexts.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study has found various PR strategies that are prevalent across the four countries studied and deeply adaptive. These strategies enable political actors to respond to public pressure, manage crises, and frame political narratives in their favor. Strategic media use, particularly framing narratives and timing releases, emerged as dominant tools for controlling public discourse.

The findings reveal that youth engagement has shifted toward digital platforms to capitalize on social media's speed and reach. Rural communities remain predominantly engaged through physical gatherings and local intermediaries, while urban professionals are targeted via policy forums and high-credibility media platforms. This demographic segmentation not only maximizes political reach but also reinforces the strategic sophistication with which African politicians manage public perception.

The study reveals that PR in African politics operates as a system, blending narrative control, symbolic action, and audience targeting to sustain legitimacy and political capital.

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6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an urgent need to establish a collaborative oversight mechanism involving civil society, human rights bodies, and accountability institutions to assess the credibility of political promises and the PR strategies used to sustain public trust.

The electorate need to be careful to separate tokenisms and PR politics from real performance driven initiatives by politicians.

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