

UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION (UniMAC)
INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM

A STUDY OF THE RELEVANCE OF PR PRACTICE IN NON-
GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GHANA-A CASE STUDY OF
SELECTED NGOs IN ACCRA

DELADEM TANSON

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

DECEMBER 2025

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BY

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DECEMBER 2025

DECLARATIONS

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, Deladem Tanson, declare that this thesis, except quotations and references contained in published works, which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere. Therefore, I bear the responsibility for any shortcomings.



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SUPERVISORS' DECLARATION

I, the undersigned supervisor, declare that we supervised the preparation and presentation of this work in accordance with the guidelines for the supervision of PhD theses as laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC).

Dr. Mavis Essandoh



18/12/2025

Supervisor

Signature

Date

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, my loved ones, and my colleagues in the non-governmental organisation sector. Your resilience, perseverance, and shared commitment to meaningful work continue to inspire me. May we continue to strive forward with confidence, assured that our place and contribution will be recognised in due course.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in Ghana used public relations to support their work and maintain key relationships. The inquiry focused on three areas: how NGOs understood and applied public relations, how communication shaped engagement with donors, beneficiaries, and partners, and what challenges limited effective practice. A qualitative design was adopted, and data were gathered through interviews with eight officers (n = 8) responsible for communication or programme delivery. The findings showed that NGOs relied on a mix of interpersonal contact, community dialogue, media work, and digital messaging. Public relations served both strategic and operational functions, helping organisations explain their intentions, strengthen trust, and respond to stakeholder concerns. Engagement depended on transparency, presence, and cultural awareness. The study also revealed barriers such as limited expertise, weak structures, scarce resources, ethical concerns, and inconsistent planning. These constraints reduced message coherence and increased reputational risk. The study concluded that stronger structures, clearer roles, and ethical guidance were needed. Recommendations were proposed to support organisational practice, sector governance, and future research.

Keywords:

Public relations, NGOs, stakeholder engagement, communication practice, Ghana

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CON1 to CON8 – Contributor 1-8

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

ENGO – Environmental Non-Governmental Organization

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations

PR – Public Relations

RQ – Research Question

SEM – Structural Equation Modelling

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context of the Study

Non-governmental organisations make significant contributions to Ghana's social development agenda, intervening in areas such as health, education, human rights, and advocacy (Adu-Baffoe & Bonney, 2021). Their ability to secure funding, forge partnerships, and retain public trust is repeatedly identified as a cornerstone of effectiveness (Awuah-Werekoh et al., 2023; Armah & Adjei, 2022). These resources, however, pivot on the quality of relationships cultivated with diverse publics, relationships that are sustained primarily through communication efforts (Fuseini et al., 2022). Public relations therefore emerges as more than a promotional add-on; it is a strategic instrument for credibility building and confidence maintenance (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Osafo, 2023). Empirical accounts show that well-executed PR programmes attracts, donor support, facilitates informed media engagement, and mitigates reputational risk (Mensah, 2023; Nkrumah & Bekoe, 2023; Ofori-Boateng, 2021). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that within many Ghanaian NGOs, PR remains either marginalised or is treated as an afterthought in operational planning (Agyeiwaa, 2023; Tetteh, 2020).

The international literature reinforces the transformative potential of PR in the non-profit arena. Scholars argue that strategic communication fosters trust and sustains dialogue with key publics (Holladay & Tachkova, 2021; Kang & Yang, 2015), echoing Kent and Taylor's (2002) early emphasis on its relational value. Effective PR not only bolsters credibility but also underpins advocacy campaigns and facilitates long-term donor partnerships (Mato-Santiso et al., 2021). Media engagement and planned messaging are further credited with shaping public

understanding and mobilising support for organisational missions (Cox & Schwarze, 2022). When integrated into strategic planning, PR enables NGOs to anticipate risks, navigate crises, and consolidate organisational legitimacy (Krakowska & Zych, 2025).

Despite these benefits, recent assessments reveal that PR practice among Ghanaian NGOs is often unstructured, reactive, and delegated to personnel without formal training (Tetteh, 2023; Kaunga et al., 2022). Such fragmentation, characterised by inconsistent messaging and short-term outreach, constrains the sector's capacity to sustain visibility and stakeholder trust (Duong, 2017; Ziberi et al., 2024). In this context, PR is reduced to a functional task activated only in moments of need rather than embedded as a proactive core function, a tendency that weakens public goodwill and compromises organisational continuity (Zhiyuan et al., 2023). The present study therefore investigates how PR can be systematically repositioned within Ghanaian NGO operations, seeking to determine whether communication is truly strategic in practice or remains an undervalued support service.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In many operational settings, non-governmental organisations depend heavily on effective public engagement to sustain their missions, making communication not just a support function but a strategic imperative (Kumi, 2022). Yet, in the Ghanaian context, Tetteh (2020) draws attention to the fact that several NGOs lack dedicated public relations departments, which significantly diminishes the professionalism and coherence of their messaging efforts. As Grunig and Grunig (2008) explain, communication responsibilities are often assigned to programme or administrative staff who lack formal training in PR, resulting in inconsistencies and a lack of strategic focus. This casual approach to communication, as Anani-Bossman and Onomah (2023) observe, produces fragmented outreach that does not reflect a clear organisational vision. Ziberi et al. (2024) add that this absence of structured PR oversight

leaves NGOs unprepared to build enduring trust or respond effectively during moments of reputational threat or crisis, thereby weakening their relational capital with key stakeholders.

What makes this even more pressing is the scholarly neglect of the subject. Most PR studies in Ghana have focused on business or government sectors, creating a significant gap in how PR is understood and practised within the non-profit sphere. As highlighted by Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023, p. 1), the NGO context remains a “blind spot” in both academic and professional discussions about public relations in Ghana. This lack of attention leaves fundamental questions unanswered about how NGOs conceptualise, resource, and institutionalise communication efforts in ways that promote accountability, stakeholder loyalty, and long-term visibility. The present study responds directly to this gap, offering much-needed empirical insight into an area that remains marginal yet critical. In doing so, it aims to elevate the discourse around NGO communication and provide practical implications for both organisational practice and public relations scholarship.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

Non-governmental organisations rely heavily on public trust, visibility, and stakeholder support to achieve their goals. These outcomes depend on effective communication, yet many NGOs in Ghana treat public relations as a secondary function. In several cases, PR is reactive, informal, and not led by trained professionals. This limits the ability of NGOs to build lasting relationships with donors, communities, and the media.

While research on PR has grown in Ghana, most of it has focused on corporate or government sectors. The communication strategies of NGOs remain underexplored. As a result, there is limited understanding of how PR is practiced in these organisations or how it could be used more effectively. This study seeks to fill that gap.

It aims to explore how NGOs in Ghana use PR, what challenges they face, and what role it plays in engaging stakeholders. The study is important because it provides practical insights for communication officers, managers, and policy actors. It also adds to the academic conversation on public relations in the non-profit sector. By doing so, it offers both practical and scholarly value.

1.4 Research Objectives

Understanding how public relations contributes to the work of NGOs requires clear goals. These goals must reflect both the practical and strategic dimensions of PR. This section lays out the specific intentions that guide the entire study. The objectives below provide a clear direction for the inquiry.

1. To examine how NGOs in Ghana use public relations in their operations.
2. To assess the relevance of PR in stakeholder engagement among Ghanaian NGOs.
3. To identify challenges affecting the practice of PR in NGOs.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How do NGOs in Ghana apply public relations in their work?
2. In what ways does PR influence stakeholder engagement in these NGOs?
3. What are the key challenges NGOs face in using PR effectively?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant to communication, advocacy, and development practice because it highlights how public relations supports the missions of NGOs. It fills a scholarly gap by examining PR in a sector often overlooked in Ghanaian research and explains its role in building visibility, accountability, and trust. For NGO managers and communication officers,

the findings serve as a guide for incorporating PR into day-to-day operations, enabling them to design messages that enhance organisational presence and stakeholder engagement. Policy actors benefit from insights that promote accountability and the development of stronger communication frameworks. The research also provides practitioners with strategies for sustaining donor relationships and long-term partnerships. Additionally, PR professionals gain a deeper understanding of sector-specific demands, while future researchers are offered a platform to explore areas such as digital PR, advocacy communication, and partnerships. Altogether, the study strengthens academic knowledge, practical application, and policy relevance.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to a purposively selected group of NGOs operating within Accra. It concentrates on how these NGOs apply public relations in their activities, with attention to functions like stakeholder communication, advocacy initiatives, and media relations. The focus is on external communication practices that influence visibility, credibility, and engagement with donors, beneficiaries, and the wider public. While the research examines strategies that enhance relationships and public presence, it deliberately excludes internal organisational communication and donor funding mechanisms, as these areas fall beyond the central objectives of the study. The chosen scope allows for a detailed yet manageable inquiry into PR practices within an urban NGO context, offering insights that may inform broader applications in similar non-profit environments.

1.9 Organization of the Study

The structure of this study is designed to move the reader step by step through the research process. Chapter One opens the work by setting the foundation. It introduces the focus of the

study, outlines the rationale behind it, and presents the main questions that guide the investigation. This creates the context needed to appreciate what follows. In Chapter Two, the discussion shifts to relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. This chapter draws on previous studies and scholarly perspectives that help define the study's position within the field. Chapter Three then describes the methods used to carry out the research, paying attention to how data was gathered and analysed. Chapter Four presents the findings and discusses their implications in relation to the objectives. Finally, Chapter Five concludes the work with a summary of the main findings and offers conclusions and recommendations for practice and further inquiry.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has laid the foundation for investigating the relevance of public relations practice in NGOs in Ghana. It opened with an introduction to the study's context, followed by a detailed background that situates PR as a strategic communication tool. The problem statement established both a practical and scholarly gap in understanding how PR is practiced in the non-profit sector. Research objectives and questions were articulated to guide the inquiry, and the significance of the study was discussed in terms of its value to academics, practitioners, and policymakers. The scope and key definitions clarified the boundaries and concepts of the study, while the rationale justified its necessity. The next chapter reviews relevant literature and theoretical perspectives that provide the foundation for this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature related to the study. It begins with a discussion of theories that frame the analysis. Theories are used to explain how public relations is positioned within NGOs and why it is relevant to stakeholder engagement. The review then explores key concepts such as communication strategy, visibility, credibility, and stakeholder trust. These concepts are central to understanding PR practice in NGOs. The chapter also examines empirical studies, both in Ghana and elsewhere. This comparison highlights what is known and what remains unexplored in NGO communication practice. In doing so, the review identifies gaps that this study seeks to address. The aim is to link theory, concepts, and evidence in a way that prepares the ground for the methodology and later analysis.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Excellence Theory

The Excellence Theory was introduced through the collaborative work of James E. Grunig and colleagues in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the Excellence Study that formalized its principles (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002). Anchored in systems theory and informed by empirical investigations into public relations effectiveness, the theory was developed to address the need for organizations to adopt a more strategic approach to managing communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). It argued for public relations as a managerial function, not merely technical support. The assumptions of the framework center on the idea that organizations operate best when communication is two-way, symmetrical, and strategically aligned with management (Grunig et al., 2002). At its core, the theory emphasizes

openness, ethical dialogue, and relationship cultivation. Its scope is wide, proposing that public relations has the capacity to increase organizational effectiveness and foster mutual understanding between organizations and their stakeholders.

A closer analysis reveals that key concepts include two-way symmetrical communication, environmental scanning, and the integration of communication into strategic management. Grunig and Hunt (1984) highlighted the importance of balancing organizational and public interests, with dialogue rather than persuasion as the central mechanism. Public relations, under this view, serves as a boundary-spanning function that helps organizations adapt to external pressures and expectations. The theory seeks to institutionalize communication as an essential element of governance and organizational survival.

Among the strengths of the Excellence Theory is its evidence-based foundation. It offers empirical validation for why certain public relations practices yield stronger relationships and long-term legitimacy. Scholars have praised it for elevating the status of public relations from a tactical tool to a central management discipline (Verčič et al., 2015). Its emphasis on ethics and mutuality has also resonated in debates about corporate social responsibility and stakeholder trust.

Nevertheless, critics (Holtzhausen, 2012; Pal & Dutta, 2012) have questioned its universal applicability. Some argue that the model reflects Western democratic values and may not translate across different political, cultural, and organizational contexts. In practice, organizations often rely on asymmetrical tactics despite the theory's prescriptions. Others contend that the emphasis on ideal symmetry risks neglecting the pragmatic realities of power imbalances and conflicting interests (Laskin, 2012).

Even so, the framework retains significance because it highlights aspirational benchmarks for communication practice. It remains a standard against which both academics and practitioners

measure the maturity of organizational communication systems. By positioning public relations at the center of strategic decision-making, it underscores the potential of communication to improve organizational effectiveness while also serving broader societal goals.

2.2.2 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory was first advanced by R. Edward Freeman in his seminal work *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (1984). Developed in reaction to the shareholder-centric view of the firm, the theory redefined the purpose of business by asserting that organizations exist to create value not only for owners but for all parties affected by operations. The assumptions rest on the principle that diverse groups possess legitimate stakes in organizational activities. The theory's scope is extensive, extending from business ethics to corporate governance, with the central purpose of aligning organizational success with broader social and economic responsibilities.

Key concepts include the notion of stakeholders as groups or individuals who can affect or are affected by the organization's objectives, the interdependence between the firm and its environment, and the idea of balancing competing interests. Donaldson and Preston (1995) identified descriptive, instrumental, and normative dimensions of the framework. Descriptively, it explains how organizations operate in complex stakeholder environments. Instrumentally, it predicts outcomes of stakeholder management. Normatively, it offers a moral basis for why managers should attend to stakeholders beyond shareholders.

The strengths of Stakeholder Theory lie in its ethical orientation and flexibility. It has broadened understanding of corporate responsibility by embedding organizations within a web of relationships. Scholars such as Freeman, Harrison, and Wicks (2007) argue that attention to

stakeholder needs fosters trust, resilience, and long-term sustainability. The framework has been widely applied in corporate social responsibility research, sustainability reporting, and strategic management.

Critics, however, point to challenges in operationalization. Balancing diverse and sometimes conflicting stakeholder demands can prove difficult in practice. Jensen (2002) criticized the model for lacking clear metrics of performance, suggesting it risks diluting managerial accountability. Others argue that excessive inclusivity may undermine focus, creating confusion about whose interests should take precedence (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997).

Despite these concerns, the theory remains influential because it provides a conceptual basis for rethinking the relationship between business and society. Its integration into debates on governance, ethics, and sustainability underscores its continuing relevance. By challenging narrow economic conceptions of organizational purpose, it has encouraged a more responsible, inclusive, and context-sensitive approach to management and communication.

2.2.3 Relevance of Theories to the Study

Excellence Theory

Excellence Theory provides a valuable framework for analysing how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Ghana conceptualise and implement public relations within their operational structures. Rooted in systems theory and grounded in studies of public relations effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), the theory emphasises the strategic integration of communication into overall organisational management. It advances the idea that public relations should not be confined to publicity or media relations but should function as a critical component of decision-making and organisational strategy. In the context of this study,

Excellence Theory aligns with the objective of determining whether NGOs in Accra position public relations as a strategic management function or treat it as a subsidiary activity.

Moreover, the theory's focus on two-way symmetrical communication underscores the importance of dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual understanding in sustaining productive relationships between organisations and their publics. This principle is particularly pertinent to NGOs, which depend heavily on maintaining trust and collaboration with donors, beneficiaries, and partner institutions. Excellence Theory also illuminates the challenges NGOs encounter when communication functions are undervalued or managed by untrained personnel. By emphasising the link between effective communication and organisational performance, the theory provides a useful analytical lens for examining how strategic public relations can enhance NGO accountability, visibility, and stakeholder trust.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory complements this inquiry by providing a relational framework for understanding the diverse constituencies that shape NGO operations. Originating from the work of Freeman (1984), the theory posits that organisational success depends on recognising and balancing the interests of all stakeholders who affect or are affected by the organisation's activities. Within the context of Ghanaian NGOs, this includes donors, beneficiaries, community members, government agencies, and the media. The theory's focus on stakeholder salience and relationship management directly corresponds to the study's objective of evaluating the relevance of public relations in fostering effective stakeholder engagement.

Stakeholder Theory further aids in analysing the communication challenges NGOs face in navigating conflicting expectations and limited resources. It highlights how inconsistent or poorly managed communication can erode trust and legitimacy, thereby constraining the organisation's capacity to achieve its mission. By framing communication as a means of

managing interdependence among multiple actors, the theory reinforces the centrality of public relations in sustaining cooperation and credibility. Consequently, Stakeholder Theory offers a valuable interpretive framework for understanding how NGOs negotiate relationships that underpin their survival and societal value.

2.3 Conceptual Review

2.3.1 Public Relations in NGOs

Public Relations is broadly understood as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (Thomas & Duffett, 2025). Within NGOs, it fits as a framework for enhancing visibility, legitimacy, and support. Indeed, scholars describe it as a deliberate effort to manage dialogue and strengthen trust among donors, beneficiaries, and governments (Duffett & Thomas, 2024). Furthermore, PR in NGOs embodies practices of communication management that align with mission fulfillment and accountability (Morgan et al., 2024). Consequently, the scope extends beyond publicity to encompass advocacy, transparency, and organizational learning (Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024).

As NGOs face resource dependency and rising scrutiny, PR strategies are employed to safeguard credibility and sustain relationships (Iannaccone, 2021). Thus, NGO communicators increasingly use digital platforms to amplify causes, mobilize support, and engage stakeholders (Kim, 2025). Moreover, they navigate disinformation and shifting generational preferences to retain relevance (Gherguț-Babii et al., 2025). Alongside, NGOs strategically frame CSR debates, resist dominant narratives, and foster cross-sector networks to reinforce institutional positions (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2025; Yang, 2025). Hence, PR functions as both advocacy and resistance.

Equally, NGOs design targeted strategies to attract emerging donors and younger supporters, adapting messages to changing expectations (Parker et al., 2024). As social media campaigns evolve, PR practices are evaluated for their ability to translate engagement into tangible outcomes (Mao, 2025). In addition, research shows that publics themselves use NGO platforms to participate actively in issue debates, expanding the dialogic scope of PR (Ihm, 2022). Therefore, NGOs continually build trust through transparent interactions and co-production of solutions (Krogh & Lo, 2024). Likewise, they innovate in public service delivery and policy advocacy (Gesierich et al., 2024), while broadening communication dimensions to deepen public engagement (Gallegos, 2025). Collectively, these developments reveal that PR in NGOs has evolved from peripheral publicity to a central, strategic force shaping legitimacy, advocacy, and societal change.

2.3.2 PR Strategies and Tools in NGOs

PR strategies and tools in NGOs are deliberate approaches that structure communication and ensure long-term visibility. Consequently, they extend well beyond publicity to include advocacy campaigns, resource mobilization, and relationship management, positioning communication at the very core of legitimacy and mission fulfillment (Tetteh, 2020). Traditional practices such as media relations, community events, and awareness campaigns continue to be crucial in amplifying messages and fostering grassroots involvement (Brobbe & Narh, 2024). Nevertheless, the contemporary environment demands greater reliance on digital storytelling, which generates emotional connections that heighten engagement. Mao and Nishide (2025) affirm that narrative design secures stronger involvement, while Xu et al. (2025) demonstrate that online initiatives sustain donor loyalty and foster deeper bonds. Moreover, donor recognition has become a significant strategy, consolidating long-term support, even as it risks raising ethical concerns when overemphasized (Luo & Gao, 2023).

Similarly, Sander et al. (2024) reveal that digital matching platforms enhance connections between NGOs and benefactors by offering more transparent pathways of engagement. In addition, Hesse et al. (2025) indicate that data-driven methods refine relationship management and tailor communication strategies to meet diverse audience expectations. Consequently, NGOs integrate traditional outreach, digital engagement, and analytical innovation to strengthen their credibility and broaden their influence across sectors.

This means that PR strategies and tools in NGOs illustrate an evolving blend of continuity and innovation. While conventional methods remain vital, new technologies and analytical instruments reinforce organizational legitimacy and resilience. Therefore, these strategies do more than sustain daily communication; they establish PR as a driver of sustainability, credibility, and broader mission success.

2.3.3 Challenges and Ethical Issues in PR Practice in NGOs

NGO PR practice is characterized by persistent challenges that continually test organizational credibility and legitimacy. Therefore, accountability is central, with NGOs frequently under pressure to adopt frameworks aligned with human rights principles and transparency requirements (Garciandia, 2023). Papadopoulos (2025) emphasizes that such demands grow increasingly complex when extended across international contexts, as accountability must cross cultural and legal boundaries. In addition, crisis communication poses added difficulties, since ineffective responses to crises can erode trust and damage reputations (Azevedo et al., 2025).

Ethical dilemmas further complicate practice. Jedicke et al. (2025) illustrate that scandals often test an organization's ability to maintain transparency, while Ashby-King et al. (2025) highlight tensions between authentic advocacy and strategic persuasion, questioning whether

NGOs risk compromising missions in pursuit of influence. Furthermore, Trussel and Roundy (2025) demonstrate that the readability of nonprofit reports shapes public perceptions of accountability. Nevertheless, Reid and Ringel (2025) caution that selective disclosure may distort stakeholder understanding and obscure important truths.

Moreover, fundraising pressures generate further vulnerabilities. Elvira-Lorilla (2024) reveals that donor expectations sometimes clash with ethical standards, forcing NGOs to negotiate competing interests. Eze and Zacky-Eze (2025) add that disinformation continues to undermine credibility, pushing NGOs to protect integrity and resist misinformation campaigns. These challenges reveal that NGO PR is not a straightforward task but rather an ongoing negotiation between strategic necessity and ethical responsibility.

2.3.4 Impact and Outcomes of PR in NGOs

The significance of PR in NGOs becomes visible through its measurable impact on legitimacy, resource mobilization, and advocacy outcomes. Hurst et al. (2025) indicate that participation in voluntary initiatives enhances moral credibility, thereby reinforcing legitimacy and strengthening the social license to operate. Consequently, legitimacy serves as a foundation upon which organizations can function more effectively and gain trust. Resource mobilization also emerges as a key outcome, as Iefimova and Pashchenko (2025) affirm that sustained engagement on social media platforms enhances donor contributions and long-term involvement. Similarly, Fazio et al. (2023) demonstrate that campaigns encourage prosocial behavior, broadening the spectrum of public support.

In addition, strong and durable stakeholder ties represent another tangible outcome. Sander and Zabel (2024) reveal that matching platforms deepen donor commitments, extending relationships and fostering mutual trust. Beyond resources, advocacy results are equally

critical. PR enables NGOs to assert themselves as credible participants in global governance processes, reinforcing legitimacy at international levels (Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2025b). Fernandes et al. (2025) argue that integrated marketing communication elevates perceptions of NGO value and influences stakeholder trust and engagement.

Furthermore, Diep and Mai (2025) illustrate that nonprofit communities foster belonging and solidarity, generating loyalty that sustains advocacy and mission alignment. Therefore, the impact of NGO PR transcends basic publicity, expanding organizational legitimacy, resource flows, and advocacy influence. These outcomes demonstrate that PR not only supports daily activities but also transforms NGO practice into a driver of long-term societal change.

2.3.5 The Future of PR in NGO Practice

The future of NGO PR will be shaped by a dynamic balance between digital innovation, ethical responsibility, and global interdependence. Sandberg et al. (2025) note that artificial intelligence significantly enhances efficiency, yet simultaneously introduces concerns about privacy, fairness, and organizational accountability. Similarly, Juip et al. (2025) argue that participatory innovations such as digital mapping generate new opportunities for stakeholder co-creation and involvement, reshaping the way NGOs connect with audiences. Consequently, NGOs must integrate these technologies while maintaining ethical oversight to remain credible and relevant.

Global crises further complicate future directions. Sakellari (2024) illustrates that climate-change-induced migration forces NGOs to reconsider advocacy frames and adapt communication strategies to shifting policy contexts. Özçetin and Emre (2024) show that national discourses and political climates heavily influence how NGO strategies evolve, demanding flexibility and adaptability. Moreover, legitimacy concerns reveal that NGOs are

becoming increasingly intertwined with governance systems at national and international levels (Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2025a). Erman and Furendal (2025) reinforce this by demonstrating how NGOs contribute democratic value as non-state actors, thereby expanding their communicative authority.

Looking ahead, professional leadership will play a decisive role in navigating these environments. Pinto and Bhadra (2025) identify pressing challenges in managing AI-driven communication landscapes, while Page et al. (2025) emphasize the critical role of intergroup communication in building and sustaining trust. Finally, Ricalde and de Luna (2024) confirm that storytelling will remain indispensable, offering a humanizing element to global debates on complex issues such as migration. Therefore, the trajectory of NGO PR points toward a practice that must balance innovation with ethics, ensuring continued relevance, legitimacy, and influence in an increasingly interconnected world.

2.4 Empirical Review

Research on NGO communication has increasingly sought to capture the practical realities of public relations across diverse contexts. In Ghana, Kumi and Copestake (2022) explored the relationship between grant-using national NGOs and international donors using a qualitative case study approach that combined semi-structured interviews with document analysis. Their findings revealed that while formal procedural rules and professional norms are critical in curbing rent-seeking and corruption, informal networks such as kinship ties, friendships, and past collaborations also play a crucial role in strengthening donor–NGO relations. These informal connections foster trust, improve accountability, and enhance project implementation. At the same time, Kumi and Copestake (2022) cautioned that reliance on informal networks can undermine NGO sustainability when they conflict with formal structures. The study concluded that informality serves as both an enabling and constraining force within NGO–donor dynamics, depending on how it is managed. Thus, the study demonstrated both the

enabling and limiting roles of informality within NGO–donor relations. This evidence is valuable because it underscores the need for structured communication frameworks that institutionalise trust and accountability, an area central to public relations practice.

In a related Ghanaian context, Anani-Bossman (2021) investigated the contribution of public relations to corporate reputation through a mixed-method approach that included surveys and in-depth interviews with communication officers and management personnel. The study found that reputation is a vital but intangible asset that PR actively sustains through community engagement, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and interpersonal communication. The author concluded that PR in Ghana is not a mere publicity function but is strategically aligned with organisational objectives, suggesting that reputation management must be an intentional and continuous process. Importantly, Anani-Bossman (2021) reinforced the argument that in developing contexts, public relations can serve as a strategic driver of legitimacy and stakeholder trust. This insight provides a conceptual bridge for understanding how NGOs could adopt similar strategic alignment in their communication efforts.

Building on local evidence, Dumitrica (2021) examined NGO use of social media platforms through an ecosystem approach. Employing content analysis and qualitative interviews with communication practitioners from Dutch NGOs, the research highlighted that NGOs do not adopt digital tools in isolation but integrate them into wider communication plans. The study found that social media complements rather than replaces traditional PR, thereby sustaining long-term engagement with diverse publics. This finding illustrates that digitalisation reshapes but does not displace existing communication practices. It also suggests that Ghanaian NGOs, which are increasingly embracing social media, can integrate these tools strategically to improve visibility and trust while retaining traditional community engagement approaches.

Similarly, Cox and Schwarze (2022) assessed environmental NGOs and climate activists' use of media to shape outcomes and visibility. They used a qualitative multi-case study design that involved textual analysis of media outputs and interviews with campaign coordinators. Their findings revealed that ENGOs rely on both mainstream and digital media to cultivate audiences, disseminate frames, and respond to counter-communication. Cox and Schwarze (2022) further emphasized the strategic dilemmas activists face in balancing media exposure with credibility. They concluded that excessive dependence on media visibility may erode authenticity, thereby suggesting that NGOs must strike a balance between advocacy ambition and trustworthiness. Their work underscores the significance of aligning media strategies with organisational goals in complex advocacy environments. This aligns with the current study's focus on how Ghanaian NGOs balance visibility with credibility through PR strategies.

Crisis communication also features in the empirical landscape. Azevedo et al. (2025) systematically reviewed nonprofit crisis communication and identified four critical themes: crisis sensemaking, leadership, structure, and communication tools. Through a systematic literature review and thematic synthesis, they found that nonprofits tend to adapt to contextual pressures by using transparent messaging and leadership-driven communication to maintain reputation. Moreover, Azevedo et al. (2025) argued that longitudinal studies are needed to track how nonprofits sustain crisis communication over time. Their conclusion pointed to a methodological gap, noting that while existing studies provide cross-sectional insights, few explore how organisations institutionalise crisis communication practices. This observation is relevant to Ghanaian NGOs, which often face crises relating to funding, accountability, or misinformation, yet lack consistent communication protocols.

Also, Jedicke et al. (2025) addressed the underexplored question of how scandals influence volunteer behaviour through a quantitative structural equation modelling (SEM) approach involving data from 600 nonprofit volunteers across Europe. They revealed that moral

reasoning frameworks shape whether volunteers continue or withdraw support after nonprofit scandals. Specifically, the study found that moral coupling (linking moral and organisational judgments) encouraged continued support, whereas moral decoupling (separating the two) led to withdrawal. Jedicke et al. (2025) therefore expanded understanding of stakeholder responses, demonstrating that volunteer reactions differ from donor reactions, which have been more frequently studied. This insight moves the discussion forward by highlighting that NGO credibility is closely tied to ethical perception an important concern for PR practice in Ghana.

In all, these studies demonstrate both the breadth and the gaps in empirical work. While Ghanaian research such as that of Kumi and Copestake (2022) and Anani-Bossman (2021) sheds light on donor relations and reputation management, there remains little on how NGOs operationalise PR strategically in stakeholder engagement. Internationally, studies such as those of Dumitrica (2021), Cox and Schwarze (2022), Azevedo et al. (2025), and Jedicke et al. (2025) reveal that social media, advocacy, crisis management, and scandals shape NGO communication in complex ways. However, these insights have not yet been tested in the Ghanaian context. This gap highlights the need for context-specific empirical work that integrates global lessons with local realities to understand how NGOs in Ghana can employ PR as a strategic tool for legitimacy, visibility, and sustainability.

2.5 Research Gap

Existing literature (Anani-Bossman, 2021; Kumi and Copestake, 2022) has provided valuable insights into NGO communication, yet notable limitations remain. Scholars such as Kumi and Copestake (2022) and Anani-Bossman (2021) have examined aspects of NGO–donor relations and reputation management, but their scope remains limited in addressing public relations as a strategic managerial tool. Much of the scholarship has concentrated on corporate or governmental public relations, as noted by Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023), leaving NGOs underexplored in both Ghanaian and broader African contexts. Studies in other regions

highlight strategies such as digital storytelling, stakeholder dialogue, and advocacy campaigns (Dumitrica, 2021; Cox & Schwarze, 2022), but their transferability to Ghana remains unclear. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how local NGOs operationalise public relations within unique cultural, economic, and regulatory environments, a concern raised by Agyeiwaa (2023).

Furthermore, empirical work on NGO communication in Ghana has not sufficiently examined the strategic role of public relations in building legitimacy, accountability, and donor trust. Most available research highlights general communication patterns rather than specific frameworks that guide PR in practice. This creates uncertainty about whether NGOs in Accra treat PR as a managerial function or as a peripheral task. In addition, challenges such as misinformation, fundraising pressures, and ethical dilemmas have received little attention in the Ghanaian context, despite their prominence in international research (Eze & Zacky-Eze, 2025; Elvira-Lorilla et al., 2024; Jedicke et al., 2025).

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing empirical evidence on how NGOs in Ghana employ PR to engage stakeholders, enhance visibility, and navigate ethical challenges. By situating findings within the Excellence and Stakeholder theories, the research offers a dual perspective that explains both internal positioning and external relationships. In so doing, the study contributes new knowledge on NGO communication in Ghana and expands the global conversation on the evolving role of PR in nonprofit practice.

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has reviewed theories, concepts, and studies related to PR in NGOs. It showed how the Excellence Theory, and Stakeholder Theory provide useful lenses for examining NGO communication. The conceptual review clarified themes such as engagement, reputation, and visibility. Empirical studies revealed patterns but also showed limited work on Ghanaian

NGOs. The chapter concluded that PR in NGOs is often underexplored, especially in the local context. This gap justifies the current study and its focus on stakeholder engagement and communication practices in Accra-based NGOs. The next chapter presents the methodology, explaining how data will be collected and analysed to answer the research questions.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explains the methodological framework guiding the study. It outlines the research design, approach, study area, sampling strategy, data collection, analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. The methodology is designed to capture rich, context-based insights into how NGOs conceptualise, implement, and evaluate PR in stakeholder engagement, visibility, and legitimacy building. The approach aligns with the study's objectives.

3.2 Overview of Research Methodology

Research methodology begins with the philosophical worldview that underpins an inquiry. Paradigms such as constructivism, postpositivism, and pragmatism shape how researchers view reality, knowledge, and evidence (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). These paradigms inform the assumptions that guide methodological choices, since each worldview supports particular forms of questioning and interpretation. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that methodological design flows from these underlying beliefs, while Denzin and Lincoln (2018) describe paradigms as the philosophical anchor that directs how researchers engage with the social world.

Once the paradigm is established, methodology provides the structured pathway for designing, executing, and evaluating research. It influences the selection of strategies, procedures, and analytical techniques that align with the broader worldview. Qualitative methodology privileges meaning, interpretation, and context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), whereas quantitative methodology emphasises measurement, regularity, and structured comparison (Bryman, 2016; Trochim et al., 2016). Mixed methods combine these strengths to address complex phenomena (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

Additional commentators highlight how rigorous methodology supports coherence and credibility throughout the research process (Flick, 2018; Silverman, 2021). Consequently, methodology functions as the intellectual foundation that ensures internal consistency and methodological integrity across all forms of inquiry (Yin, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

3.3 Methods used by previous researchers on the phenomenon under study

Previous studies on NGO communication and public relations have relied largely on qualitative approaches, reflecting the need to capture lived experiences, organisational processes, and the contextual dynamics that shape communication practice. In the Ghanaian context, Kumi and Copestake (2022) used a qualitative case study supported by semi-structured interviews and document analysis to explore donor–NGO relationships. Their work demonstrated that in-depth qualitative engagement uncovers the informal and formal communication patterns that influence trust and accountability. Similarly, Anani-Bossman (2021) adopted a mixed-methods design that combined surveys with interviews to examine PR roles in Ghanaian organisations, showing that qualitative insights were essential for interpreting how practitioners understand and apply communication strategies. Beyond Ghana, Dumitrica (2021) employed content analysis and interviews to examine NGO use of social media, confirming the value of qualitative techniques for understanding strategic communication decisions. Cox and Schwarze (2022) also used a qualitative multi-case design involving textual analysis of media outputs and interviews with campaign coordinators to investigate how environmental NGOs manage visibility and advocacy. Studies on crisis communication and ethical issues have followed similar patterns; for example, Azevedo et al. (2025) conducted a systematic qualitative review to map nonprofit crisis communication practices, while Jedicke et al. (2025) used structured modelling but relied on qualitative interpretation to explain how volunteers respond to NGO scandals. In all, these studies show that qualitative methodologies are well established in this

field. They support deep examination of processes, relationships, and communication behaviours, confirming that a qualitative design is valid and appropriate for the present study.

3.4 Methodologies for present study and its justification

The present study adopts a qualitative methodology because it allows for close engagement with the real-life experiences of NGOs and their communication practices. Within this approach, a case study design is used to investigate the phenomenon in depth. Yin (2018) explains that case studies are suited to situations where the boundaries between a phenomenon and its context are not clear, which matches the study's interest in how PR operates within everyday NGO work in Accra. This design offers room to examine how communication strategies are structured, managed, and applied across organisations.

Stake (1995) supports this view, noting that case studies help researchers explore the links between communication, organisational processes, and stakeholder engagement. The design also suits questions that seek to understand “how” and “why” PR assumes a strategic role. To strengthen the inquiry, a multiple-case approach is adopted. Yin (2014) argues that comparing cases improves validity by revealing similarities and differences across settings. This approach highlights shared challenges and distinct communication strategies among NGOs. Flyvbjerg (2006) adds that case-based insights, when drawn from well-chosen contexts, can support broader learning. Through this methodological choice, the study secures a practical and analytical foundation for understanding PR practice in Ghanaian NGOs.

3.5 Population

The population refers to the full group of units or individuals from whom a sample is drawn. Babbie (2020) describes it as the entire set of elements relevant to a study, while Neuman (2014) explains that it defines the boundary within which a researcher identifies potential participants. For this study, the population comprises all registered NGOs operating within the

Accra Metropolis. These organisations vary in size, mission, and operational focus, but all function within the broader non-profit environment where communication and stakeholder engagement are central to legitimacy and visibility. This population offers a suitable foundation from which a more focused target group is identified for qualitative inquiry.

3.6 Data collection tool and methods used

The study relies on primary and secondary data sources to strengthen validity through triangulation. The primary method of data collection is the semi-structured interview. This format allows participants to express their perspectives freely while maintaining alignment with the study objectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview guide contains open-ended questions designed to explore how NGOs conceptualise PR, manage stakeholder communication, and navigate challenges such as credibility, visibility, and resource constraints.

Interviews are expected to last between 45 and 60 minutes, conducted in-person at the participants' offices or mutually agreed neutral settings to foster rapport and comfort. Each interview is audio-recorded with consent to ensure accuracy, supplemented by detailed field notes capturing tone, emphasis, and non-verbal expressions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Where clarifications are needed, follow-up communication is made via phone or email.

In addition, document analysis complements the interviews. Institutional reports, communication strategies, donor engagement plans, newsletters, and annual reports are reviewed to provide contextual understanding of PR practices. As Bowen (2009) explains, document analysis enhances reliability and supplies factual records that corroborate or challenge interview data. Combining interviews with document review strengthens credibility and offers a comprehensive picture of how PR functions are embedded within NGO operations.

3.6.1 Data Analysis

Data analysis follows reflexive thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2019). The approach is suited to identifying patterned meaning across qualitative materials and to linking those patterns to the study's theoretical framing and research questions. Analysis began with immersion in the dataset. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to build familiarity, attend to context, and record early analytic impressions through memo writing. Initial coding then proceeded systematically across each transcript. Segments of text that spoke to the purposes of public relations, modes of stakeholder engagement, organisational positioning of communication, and challenges to credibility and visibility were labelled with succinct codes. Coding combined inductive attention to participants' language with deductive attention to constructs drawn from Excellence Theory and Stakeholder Theory. A provisional codebook was maintained and iteratively refined to preserve definitional clarity and boundary rules.

Codes were subsequently collated into candidate themes that captured coherent patterns of meaning cutting across cases. At this stage, coded extracts were gathered under thematic headings to examine internal convergence and to surface possible subthemes. A review phase followed, in which themes were checked against the coded dataset and then against the full transcripts to ensure representational adequacy, distinctiveness, and analytic value. Themes that overlapped were merged; themes lacking sufficient evidentiary support were revised or set aside. Each theme was then defined and named. Definitions specified the central organising idea, the scope and limits of the theme, and its analytic relevance to the objectives of the study. Names were crafted to be concise and theoretically meaningful.

Reporting integrated refined themes with illustrative quotations and documentary evidence, thereby demonstrating the chain of inference from data to interpretation. Throughout, the analysis retained an iterative movement between data and theory, allowing inductive insights to inform conceptual understanding while testing those insights against propositions derived

from the literature. Microsoft Excel supported the workflow by housing the coding matrix, enabling code frequency checks, facilitating cross-case comparisons, and maintaining an audit trail of codebook revisions and thematic decisions. Trustworthiness was strengthened through transparent documentation of analytic steps, reflexive memos on positionality and decision points, triangulation of interviews with organisational documents, and peer debriefing on the coherence of the thematic structure (Miles et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). The result is a rigorous, transparent, and theoretically anchored account of how NGOs in Accra organise and experience public relations practice.

3.7 Sample and sampling technique

Sampling requires the careful selection of individuals who can provide information that aligns with the study's aims. This study applies a non-probability purposive sampling technique, which is appropriate for qualitative inquiry because it prioritises insight over representativeness (Neuman, 2014). A criterion-based approach guides the selection of organisations rather than individual staff, beginning with the decision to include NGOs that maintain active communication, public relations, or stakeholder engagement functions. These organisations qualify because they implement activities related to visibility, outreach, or reputation building, which positions them to contribute meaningfully to the study's aims (Etikan et al., 2016).

As the criteria are applied, attention turns to organisations that do not fit this scope. NGOs without identifiable communication structures or those whose operations do not involve deliberate engagement with publics are excluded, since they cannot offer the depth of information needed for analysing PR practice. This boundary helps narrow the field to NGOs whose work aligns with communication-driven mandates.

With these parameters in place, the selection process moves toward actual sampling. Ten (10) NGOs that met the inclusion criteria were chosen because their communication portfolios

reflect varied missions, sizes, and operational models. This number is appropriate for qualitative research, as it supports detailed exploration and enables saturation when no new patterns emerge (Guest et al., 2020). The focus on organisational variation aligns with the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018), who emphasise diversity in case selection for stronger transferability. It also reflects Patton's (2015) view that information-rich cases provide deeper understanding and more reliable insights. Finally, Yin (2018) affirms that case selection in qualitative studies must be purposeful and connected to the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, the goal remains to gather rich, context-based evidence rather than seek numerical generalisation.

3.8 Advantage of the research method

Qualitative inquiry offers strong capacity for exploring experiences, perspectives, and socially constructed meanings in natural settings. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasise its value in revealing contextual depth, while Patton (2015) highlights its strength in capturing the richness of lived experience. This contrasts with Creswell and Poth (2018), who focus on flexible designs that help researchers trace patterns and processes within natural settings. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) frame qualitative inquiry as an interpretive act grounded in understanding social meaning, showing their interest in philosophical underpinnings. Braun and Clarke (2022) draw attention to structured thematic processes that bring clarity to complex datasets, whereas Silverman (2021) stresses disciplined interpretation to maintain credible insight. These authors collectively agree on the importance of depth and interpretive understanding, yet they differ in emphasis: some centre on context and lived experience, and others foreground analytic structure, procedural clarity, or interpretive positioning.

3.9 Disadvantages of the research method

Qualitative research comes with some recognised constraints, though these do not diminish its value. It typically requires considerable time and effort, and it relies on the researcher's

interpretive judgement, which may influence how data are gathered and understood, as noted by Schutt (2021). Flick (2018) explains that its interpretive foundations can make full transparency difficult to sustain throughout a project. Unlike quantitative designs, qualitative studies often involve smaller samples and do not seek statistical generalisation. Bryman (2016) observes that this narrower scope limits claims to wider applicability, while Trochim et al. (2016) point out that quantitative approaches benefit from controlled measurement and replicability. Scholars also acknowledge that working with extensive narrative material demands disciplined analysis, with Tracy (2020) describing the challenge of maintaining precision across iterative interpretation, and Braun and Clarke (2022) highlighting the substantial work involved in coding and theme development. Collectively, these reflections illustrate differences in emphasis between traditions, with qualitative researchers prioritising depth and meaning while quantitative-oriented writers stress structure and repeatability.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework guiding the investigation of PR practice in NGOs within Accra. It adopts a qualitative, supported by purposive sampling of ten experienced communication practitioners. Data are gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, with thematic analysis used to interpret emerging patterns. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional approval, ensure that the study is conducted with integrity. Collectively, this methodology enables a grounded, context-specific understanding of how NGOs employ PR to enhance legitimacy, visibility, and stakeholder trust.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, organised around the three research questions that guided the inquiry. The analysis draws on the accounts offered by the participants and interprets these accounts within the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. The discussion integrates interpretation, theory, and literature within each theme rather than in a separate section.

To protect the identities of the participants and their organisations, the study employs pseudonyms. The participants are identified as CON1 to CON8 (Contributor 1-8), and their organisations are not named. This approach supports confidentiality and ensures that no participant or institution can be traced through the descriptions provided. The use of coded identifiers also allows the analysis to focus on patterns rather than individual identities.

4.1.1 Profile of Participating NGOs

The participating NGOs operate in areas such as health, education, advocacy, youth development, and community welfare. They vary in size, with some running small teams of fewer than ten staff members and others maintaining larger structures with defined administrative units. Communication arrangements also differ across the organisations. A few have designated communication officers, while others assign communication tasks to administrative or programme staff. Only a minority maintain formal PR functions, and most rely on ad hoc practices shaped by immediate operational demands. This diversity provides a broad context for examining how PR is understood and applied across different organisational settings.

4.2 Thematic Development and Overview

The themes presented in this chapter were developed through a reflexive thematic analysis process that involved repeated reading, coding, and comparison of the interview data. Codes were first generated from meaningful segments of the participants' accounts and were then grouped into broader patterns that aligned with the study's research questions. These patterns formed three major themes that reflect how NGOs apply public relations, how PR supports stakeholder engagement, and the challenges that shape communication practice. Subthemes capture specific elements within each theme and offer a closer view of how participants experience and interpret their communication roles. The themes are therefore both data driven and guided by the objectives of the study, providing a structured path for the analysis that follows.

4.3 Theme One: Application of Public Relations in NGO Operations

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do NGOs in Ghana apply public relations in their work?

4.3.1 Conceptualisation of PR within NGO Settings

The findings showed that participants described public relations along a broad continuum, ranging from media-focused activity to relationship management and mission communication. Some explained PR as the process through which NGOs translated mandates into meaningful interaction with donors, communities, regulators, and partners, aligning with Thomas and Duffett (2025) and Hallahan et al. (2007). Others framed it mainly as publicity, echoing concerns that NGO communication was often reduced to promotion (Morgan et al., 2025). Many linked PR to legitimacy and trust, describing it as the organisation's "public face" that justified its presence and reassured donors of responsible stewardship, consistent with work positioning communication as central to credibility (Fuseini et al., 2022).

As CON4 put it, “PR helped us explain why our organisation deserved to be in certain communities.” Some participants advanced a more relational view, stressing listening, continuous engagement, and the need to work with stakeholders who could either sustain or obstruct programmes. This perspective reflected Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and research portraying NGO communication as relational labour that supported donor loyalty, volunteer commitment, and beneficiary participation (Iannaccone, 2021; Sander & Zabel, 2024).

In one extended account, CON6 offered a perspective that captured this relational emphasis:

In our organisation, we thought about PR as the way we stayed in constant contact with the people who mattered to our work. That meant donors, but also the families and communities who lived with the consequences of our projects. For us, PR was the continuous relationship work that made it possible for people to question us, challenge us, and still trust that we were acting in their interest. (CON6, Interview, December, 2025)

This position reflected the ethical and dialogic orientation described by Kent and Taylor (2002) and Kang and Yang (2015), who argued that meaningful communication required reciprocity and responsiveness. It also sat comfortably with Servaes (2008), who treated communication for development as participatory rather than one-directional.

However, the findings also revealed less developed conceptualisations. A number of participants described PR as event management, media liaison, or content production with limited reference to relationship building or organisational strategy. These accounts resembled observations in Ghanaian and international scholarship that NGO PR was frequently handled by staff without formal preparation, leading to instrumental and short-term interpretations of communication (Tetteh, 2020; Kaunga et al., 2022; Tetteh, 2023; Zhiyuan et al., 2023). As CON2 put it, “PR here meant writing reports, drafting social media posts, and organising press briefings when something major happened”. Such descriptions sat in tension with Excellence Theory, which proposed a managerial understanding of PR anchored in systems thinking and environmental scanning (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002).

As CON3 further explained, the emphasis in practice often fell on visibility rather than structured relationship management:

Most of our colleagues believed PR was about showing the good work we were doing. So, the conversation usually focused on how many stories we got in the media or how many people reacted to a campaign. We did not always step back to ask whether we had clear communication goals or whether our engagement was building durable trust. (CON3, Interview, December, 2025)

This focus on outputs mirrored concerns raised by Anani-Bossman and Onomah (2023), who argued that evaluation of PR in Ghana often focused on visible artefacts rather than strategic contribution. It also reflected Duong's (2017) depiction of NGOs that concentrated on campaign visibility without fully integrating communication into institutional planning.

Yet the data did not simply replicate a deficit story. Other participants described PR as a space for advocacy and agenda setting. They portrayed communication as a way to contest harmful policies, draw attention to marginalised experiences, and influence public debate, which echoed Cox and Schwarze's (2022) analysis of environmental NGOs and Pal and Dutta's (2012) discussion of communication as activism. CON5 emphasised that "our communication was part of how we resisted narratives that blamed poor communities for structural problems". This orientation mirrored the view that NGO PR could function as both advocacy and resistance (Yang, 2025; Gutiérrez-García et al., 2025; Sakellari, 2024).

CON8 captured this advocacy dimension in a detailed reflection:

We did not see PR as just telling people that we had done projects. We saw it as a way to challenge the stories that kept communities powerless. So we used our communication to present evidence, to tell different kinds of stories, and to push back when officials misrepresented what was happening on the ground. (CON8, Interview, December, 2025)

This understanding mirrored arguments that NGO communication could reshape public discourse and contribute to social change (Servaes, 2008; Dumitrica, 2021; Gallegos, 2025). It suggested that some participating organisations conceptualised PR in ways that extended beyond service promotion to include advocacy and public reasoning.

The findings indicated that conceptualisations of PR in the participating NGOs moved along a continuum. At one end, PR appeared as a technical label for media, events, and visibility outputs. At the other end, it was described as relationship-centred, ethically grounded, and bound up with advocacy. Excellence Theory provided a useful reference point for interpreting this range. Where participants described PR as central to organisational purpose and environmental responsiveness, their accounts echoed the theory's claim that communication should sit within strategic management. Where participants reduced PR to episodic publicity, their views contradicted that theoretical expectation and reflected the structural and capacity constraints documented in NGO communication scholarship (Kumi & Copestake, 2022; Agyeiwaa, 2023; Eze & Zacky-Eze, 2025). Stakeholder Theory also remained relevant because participants repeatedly presented PR as the work of keeping multiple groups engaged, heard, and informed.

4.3.2 PR as Strategic or Technical Practice

The findings showed that participants differed on whether PR functioned as a strategic or technical activity. In some organisations, communication was positioned at the planning table, shaping programme framing, risk anticipation, and reputation protection, consistent with arguments that PR enhances organisational effectiveness by integrating stakeholder perspectives into decision processes (Grunig et al., 2002; Verčič et al., 2015). This view also aligned with Anani-Bossman's (2022) claim that PR in Ghana can operate as a managerial resource rather than mere publicity. In other cases, PR appeared as a downstream task, activated only after decisions had been finalised, leaving practitioners to promote choices they had not influenced. This pattern echoed concerns that NGO communication is often treated as operational rather than strategic (Tetteh, 2020; Kaunga et al., 2022) and reflected Kumi's

(2022) observation that donor pressures can push organisations toward short-term, compliance-driven messaging rather than long-term engagement.

CON1 provided a detailed description of this more limited positioning:

In our context, major decisions about programmes and budgets were made by the senior management team and in some cases by the board. Communication staff were informed after the decisions had been taken. Our job was to prepare materials, talk to journalists if needed, and update our platforms so that people would know what had been decided. (CON1, Interview, December, 2025)

This account was consistent with reports that many NGOs allocated communication responsibilities to technical staff who lacked influence in strategic forums (Kaunga et al., 2022; Agyeiwaa, 2023). It stood in contrast with Excellence Theory's preference for PR participation in management decision structures (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002).

By contrast, some participants narrated experiences in which communication functioned as part of strategic deliberation. They described situations where communication officers contributed to risk assessments, stakeholder mapping exercises, and the design of advocacy strategies. These descriptions mirrored Servaes's (2008) and Cox and Schwarze's (2022) insistence that communication strategy shaped not only how messages were transmitted but how issues were framed and negotiated.

As CON4 recounted, communication could sometimes play a central role in organisational planning:

Before we launched new programmes, we held sessions where communication staff were invited to comment on the potential reactions from different groups. We discussed how communities might interpret our actions and how donors might question our choices. That process changed some of the decisions we made because we realised that the way we communicated would affect whether people trusted the programme at all. (CON4, Interview, December, 2025)

This experience was consistent with Fernandes et al. (2025), who showed that integrated communication influenced commitment and engagement among internal and external stakeholders. It also reflected Hesse's (2025) claim that data-informed understanding of supporters could shape organisational choices.

The findings revealed additional complexity when participants reflected on how resource constraints shaped the strategic or technical character of PR. Several participants suggested that even when managers valued communication, financial and staffing limitations restricted what could be implemented. This observation mirrored Kumi and Copestake's (2022) and Elvira-Lorilla et al.'s (2024) discussions of resource pressures in NGO fund-raising and communication. CON7 observed that "we wanted PR to shape strategy, but with one person handling communication for the whole organisation, we spent much of the time on immediate tasks".

CON3 elaborated on this tension:

The management team understood that communication was important, especially when we worked in politically sensitive communities. However, the reality was that we had only one officer, sometimes supported by interns. As a result, we spent a lot of energy on mandatory reports and donor requirements. We had less time to participate in long planning meetings, even when we were invited. (CON3, Interview, December, 2025)

This situation reflected the structural challenges reported in nonprofit communication literature, where limited human and financial capacity constrained the realisation of strategic ideals (Azevedo et al., 2025; Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2025).

At the same time, some participants suggested that strategic practice did not depend solely on resources but also on organisational philosophy. A few participants indicated that leadership attitudes determined whether communication perspectives were welcomed in decision spaces. This observation mirrored Stakeholder Theory's concern with managerial recognition of multiple interests (Freeman et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 1997). As CON2 put it, "when leaders believed that stakeholders had to be heard, they made sure communication staff were part of the conversation".

CON6 articulated this leadership dimension at length:

In our case, the executive director repeatedly argued that communication was not just a support service. She wanted us at the table when the organisation discussed new projects or partnerships. She said that if we did not think through how messages would travel and how

different groups would respond, we might cancel the gains we had made in terms of trust.
(CON6, Interview, December, 2025)

This description reflected Anani-Bossman's (2021) and Hurst et al.'s (2025) emphasis on leadership in sustaining reputation and legitimacy, suggesting that in some settings practice moved closer to the expectations of Excellence Theory despite capacity limits. The findings indicated that PR practice existed on a spectrum between strategic and technical activity. In some NGOs, communication shaped decisions and engagement strategies in ways aligned with Excellence Theory's managerial emphasis. In others, it remained operational, focused on reporting, publicity, and donor compliance. Stakeholder Theory helped explain these contrasts, as participants frequently discussed the effects of excluding or integrating stakeholder perspectives. Where communication staff were sidelined, the data showed missed chances to anticipate reactions, while their involvement in planning strengthened expectation management and trust (Diep & Mai, 2025; Fernandes et al., 2025; Iefimova & Pashchenko, 2025).

4.3.3 Tools and Methods NGOs Use to Execute PR Functions

The findings showed that NGOs relied on a wide mix of tools and channels to carry out PR functions. Participants described using digital platforms, interpersonal engagement, and traditional media to reach varied stakeholder groups. Social media supported visibility among urban audiences and international donors, aligning with research on NGO use of digital platforms for fund-raising, engagement, and advocacy (Mao, 2025; Morgan et al., 2025). At the same time, participants stressed the importance of face-to-face meetings, community durbars, and radio when engaging rural communities or groups with limited connectivity, consistent with Brobbey and Narh (2024) and Gallegos (2025). As CON5 explained, "we could not depend on a single channel because our stakeholders lived in very different media worlds." This pattern reflected evidence that NGOs coordinated multiple channels to sustain

relationships across geographic and socio-economic contexts (Sander & Zabel, 2024; Krogh & Lo, 2024).

CON7 provided a detailed description of how interpersonal methods complemented digital tools:

The social media work helped us to show donors and partners that activities were taking place and that funds were being used as promised. However, when it came to building trust in communities, we depended heavily on meetings, focus groups, and house-to-house visits. People wanted to see us present and to ask questions in person. Without those interactions, the online messages would have felt distant and impersonal. (CON7, Interview, December, 2025)

This account reflected arguments that digital communication in NGOs needed to be grounded in lived relationships rather than treated as a stand-alone solution (Dumitrica, 2021; Kim, 2025; Gherguț-Babii et al., 2025). It also resonated with Diep and Mai's (2025) emphasis on belonging and connection in nonprofit communities.

The data further indicated that NGOs used communication tools for specific purposes. Social media posts and web updates were reportedly targeted at donors, partners, and urban supporters, while community meetings and local radio were used to address beneficiaries and traditional authorities. This differentiation mirrored the strategic segmentation recommended in studies of nonprofit communication and marketing (Fazio et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2024; Fernandes et al., 2025). CON1 noted that "Facebook and X were effective for young supporters, but chiefs and elders followed radio discussions more closely".

CON3 elaborated on how reporting tools served both accountability and relationship functions:

Our donor reports were formal requirements, but we treated them as communication instruments as well. We tried to write in ways that explained the context, not just the numbers. The aim was to help donors understand what communities were experiencing, so that the relationship did not become a mechanical exchange of funds and receipts. (CON3, Interview, December, 2025)

This approach echoed Trussel and Roundy's (2025) discussion of how linguistic practices shaped perceptions of accountability, and Reid and Ringel's (2025) analysis of transparency documents as strategic communication.

Nevertheless, the findings suggested that the selection and use of tools were constrained by resources, skills, and infrastructure. Some participants reported difficulties in maintaining regular digital content due to staff shortages or limited expertise, which mirrored the capacity challenges identified by Moreno-Cabanillas et al. (2024) and Pinto and Bhadra (2024). Others mentioned inconsistent internet access in rural project sites, limiting real-time updates. As CON8 observed, “we sometimes drafted content that could not be posted on time because internet service at the field site was unreliable”.

CON2 offered a reflection that captured both the promise and the limits of digital tools:

Digital platforms opened doors for us. We were able to reach potential supporters in other countries and to demonstrate our work with images and short videos. However, digital work also demanded constant attention, design skills, and sometimes paid promotion. With a small team, we struggled to keep the pages active without neglecting community-based engagement. (CON2, Interview, December, 2025)

This tension reflected Sandberg et al.’s (2025) observations about the demands of technology-rich communication environments for nonprofits, and Hesse’s (2025) discussion of the effort required to transform casual supporters into committed donors.

The findings also indicated that storytelling functioned as a central method across both digital and face-to-face communication. Participants described using human-interest narratives, testimonies from beneficiaries, and visual evidence to demonstrate impact. This practice echoed research on digital storytelling and NGO communication that emphasised empathy, narrative framing, and emotional engagement (Ricalde & de Luna, 2024; Mao & Nishide, 2025; Fazio et al., 2023). CON4 remarked that “stories helped us make policy issues concrete for the public”.

As CON6 explained in greater detail, storytelling was carefully managed to protect dignity and privacy:

We used real stories to show what our programmes were changing, but we were also careful not to expose people in ways that made them feel used. Before sharing any story, we discussed consent, possible risks, and whether the person was comfortable being visible. That

meant we sometimes decided not to use powerful stories because the ethical cost would have been too high. (CON6, Interview, December, 2025)

This account resonated with Ashby-King et al. (2025) and Jedicke et al. (2025), who examined ethical strain in nonprofit communication and the impact of perceived moral failure on stakeholder support. The findings showed that NGOs treated PR as a blend of channel coordination, ethical storytelling, and relationship maintenance under limited resources. While these practices reflected broader scholarship, they also revealed challenges specific to Ghanaian contexts. Excellence Theory partly explained instances where organisations used scanning and stakeholder analysis to guide channel and message choices, but Stakeholder Theory offered stronger interpretive value because participants framed their tools and methods as direct responses to the expectations of distinct groups. Communication practices were therefore not neutral techniques; they were strategies for sustaining trust with donors, communities, regulators, and partners whose needs had to be balanced for NGO work to remain credible and effective.

4.4 Theme Two: Role of PR in Stakeholder Engagement

Research Question 2 (RQ2): In what ways does PR influence stakeholder engagement in these NGOs?

4.4.1 Relationship-building with Donors, Beneficiaries, and Partners

The findings showed that relationship-building functioned as a deliberate, ongoing process through which NGOs cultivated trust, cooperation, and legitimacy with donors, beneficiaries, and partner institutions. The data described communication as the bridge through which expectations were clarified, commitments honoured, and concerns addressed, echoing work that positioned relational engagement as central to NGO effectiveness in credibility-dependent environments (Fuseini et al., 2022; Mato Santiso et al., 2021; Sander & Zabel, 2024). The data emphasised that donors expected clarity, responsiveness, and transparency, valuing frequent

updates, contextual explanation, and evidence of responsible stewardship. As CON5 noted, “donors needed reassurance that resources were used responsibly and that we were attentive to emerging challenges,” reflecting analyses that identified transparency as a condition for sustaining confidence (Reid & Ringel, 2025; Anderson, 2025). The data also suggested that beneficiaries judged NGOs by their willingness to listen, adapt, and remain present through visits and participatory dialogue, aligning with arguments on participatory communication and trust-building (Servaes, 2008; Ihm, 2022; Gallegos, 2025). As CON1 explained, “beneficiaries trusted us more when they realised we took their concerns seriously and were willing to adjust activities when necessary,” echoing dialogic principles of mutuality and openness (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The findings further indicated that NGOs invested heavily in relationships with partner institutions, including government agencies, local leaders, and other NGOs, viewing these ties as essential for access, legitimacy, and coordinated implementation. This experience aligned with scholarship on cross-sector collaboration (Krogh & Lo, 2024; Iannaccone, 2021). However, the data also cautioned that weak or delayed communication strained partnerships, as CON7 noted: “partners grew anxious when updates were delayed, so maintaining regular contact prevented unnecessary misunderstandings.”

A number of the data elaborated on the depth of these interactions through detailed reflections:

We devoted considerable time to explaining our aims to communities and partners because clarity prevented tension. If people misunderstood our intentions, even a helpful programme could be resisted. Relationship-building meant showing up repeatedly, answering difficult questions, and accepting criticism when necessary. These discussions often reshaped how we implemented our work, and although they slowed the pace, they strengthened acceptance and led to more sustainable outcomes. (CON3, Interview, December, 2025)

This account reflected the argument by Servaes (2008) that participatory dialogue improved programme relevance, and echoed Hurst et al. (2025), who noted that trust depended on perceived sincerity and openness.

Further illustrating this perspective, CON6 described the patience required in relational work:

Some relationships took months to stabilise. Donors, for instance, wanted data, financial clarity, and regular updates. Communities, on the other hand, wanted assurances that we respected their customs and priorities. Partners needed us to honour deadlines and communicate setbacks. Balancing these expectations required deliberate effort, constant communication, and an acceptance that misunderstandings would arise from time to time. (CON6, Interview, December, 2025)

Such reflections aligned with Diep and Mai (2025) and Fernandes et al. (2025), who argued that relational communication required steady labour, negotiation, and adaptation. The findings further suggested that stakeholders judged organisational commitment through relational gestures rather than digital messages alone. The data highlighted in-person meetings, joint planning, and responsiveness to concerns as powerful signals of sincerity; as CON8 noted, “relationships were built on presence,” with communities reading frequent visits as signs of respect. This pattern mirrored analyses showing that physical visibility remained central to trust-building (Gallegos, 2025; Brobbey & Narh, 2024). Across the dataset, Stakeholder Theory offered the most compelling explanation for relationship-building, as the emphasis on donor confidence, beneficiary respect, and partner collaboration reflected its core claim that organisational effectiveness rests on attending to the needs of diverse groups, with Excellence Theory offering supplementary but less comprehensive insight.

4.4.2 Media Relations and Community Engagement

The findings showed that media relations served as a core mechanism through which NGOs pursued visibility, shaped public understanding, and advanced advocacy aims. The data described active engagement with journalists and editors, noting that rapport increased the likelihood of accurate coverage, echoing Cox and Schwarze’s (2022) view that NGOs relied on media amplification to influence public narratives. Several of the data stressed that timely information, expert commentary, and professionalism enhanced credibility, consistent with Nkrumah and Bekoe’s (2023) observations from Ghanaian organisations. At the same time, the data highlighted challenges such as competitive news cycles, editorial bias, and risks of

misinterpretation, reflecting concerns outlined by Brobbey and Narh (2024). Some the data reported using mitigation strategies, including clarifying sensitive points and maintaining relationships with trusted journalists. As CON4 explained, “working with the media required a strong sense of clarity, otherwise the work could be misrepresented in ways that caused damage,” aligning with Anderson’s (2025) argument that NGOs must navigate media power through deliberate communication planning.

In elaborating on the complexity of media relations, CON2 gave an extended account:

We learned that building relationships with journalists was not enough. We also had to understand what stories mattered to them, how tight their deadlines were, and how our messages might be reframed once they reached the newsroom. There were moments when coverage helped us significantly, and there were times when the tone of the reporting created confusion in the communities. We adapted by preparing clearer briefs, checking facts repeatedly, and offering follow-up explanations when necessary. (CON2, Interview, December, 2025)

This reflection mirrored insights from Morgan et al. (2025) and Thomas and Duffett (2025), who highlighted the need for NGOs to approach media relations as a strategic negotiation rather than a transactional exchange.

In addition to media relations, community engagement emerged as a communication practice that the data described with deep conviction. The findings suggested that community engagement created trust, clarified expectations, and surfaced concerns that shaped programme implementation. Participants described using community durbars, radio discussions, house-to-house visits, and participatory meetings to interact with beneficiaries. These practices reflected Servaes’s (2008) advocacy for culturally grounded communication, as well as Gallegos’s (2025) and Ihm’s (2022) analyses of relational proximity.

Several the data stressed that communities evaluated an NGO’s credibility through physical presence. CON1 remarked that “communities judged commitment based on how often we showed up”. This view echoed the work of Parker et al. (2024) and Fernandes et al. (2025),

who noted that in-person engagement fostered relational depth that digital messaging alone could not achieve.

To illustrate the value placed on community engagement, CON8 provided a detailed explanation:

When we visited communities, people felt free to express frustrations, question our choices, and make suggestions. These discussions shaped our understanding of local priorities. We discovered cultural issues, political tensions, and historical grievances that did not appear in donor reports. Without these meetings, we would have implemented projects in ways that ignored important realities on the ground. (CON8, Interview, December, 2025)

This reflection aligned with scholarship emphasising the contextual nature of NGO work (Servaes, 2008; Dumitrica, 2021) and echoed Krogh and Lo's (2024) argument that engagement reduced misconceptions and strengthened acceptance. The data indicated that community engagement helped prevent resistance by clarifying intentions and explaining processes, with participants recalling moments of tension that required follow-up meetings, consistent with Gutiérrez García et al. (2025) on communication's role in resolving conflict. The data also stressed that engagement was resource intensive, requiring travel, time, and cultural sensitivity; as one participant noted, "engagement demanded patience and humility," reflecting Ashby King et al.'s (2025) view of the emotional and logistical demands of ethical communication. In all, the findings showed that media relations and community engagement operated as complementary strategies: media relations expanded visibility, while engagement deepened relationships and sharpened programme relevance. Excellence Theory helped explain the strategic planning behind these practices, but Stakeholder Theory offered the strongest interpretive lens, as the data consistently framed communication as a response to the expectations and interests of multiple groups.

4.5 Theme Three: Challenges in Practising Public Relations within NGOs

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What are the key challenges NGOs face in using PR effectively?

4.5.1 Limited Expertise and Absence of Formal PR Structures

The data showed that many NGOs operated without formal public relations structures, leaving communication dependent on improvised processes, individual initiative, or administrative convenience. This shaped how communication was understood, executed, and assessed, as responsibilities were often assigned to programme staff or interns without specialised training, reflecting concerns raised by Tetteh (2020) and Kaunga et al. (2022) about limited expertise. Communication work was frequently reactive, with individuals managing reporting, media interaction, documentation, and digital content without guidelines; as CON2 noted, “communication became an additional task rather than a designated role.” This pattern echoed arguments that NGO communication becomes fragmented when structure is absent (Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024). The data further suggested that limited expertise affected message consistency, audience segmentation, and content quality. Campaigns were often developed without reference to overarching strategy, and although some organisations attempted to introduce guidelines, these efforts remained inconsistent and dependent on individual commitment rather than institutional support, mirroring Agyeiwaa’s (2023) observation that ad hoc communication weakened credibility and stakeholder engagement.

A number of contributors described the challenges created by the absence of communication structures in considerable detail:

When communication was not formalised, everything depended on who was available and what they personally understood about public relations. Some colleagues were confident with media work, while others preferred writing or community meetings. Without trained officers, the organisation relied on improvisation. This caused delays, misunderstandings, and missed opportunities, especially when we needed to respond quickly to donor requests or public concerns. The absence of structure meant that knowledge was scattered and institutional memory was weak. (CON4, Interview, December, 2025)

This extended reflection echoed research by Azevedo et al. (2025) and Fernandes et al. (2025), who emphasised the need for communication systems that ensured continuity and clarity. It also mirrored Grunig et al. (2002), who argued that effective PR required both expertise and structural integration within management processes.

Additional contributors explained that the absence of PR structures disadvantaged NGOs during crises. They described moments when rumours spread, when communities misinterpreted programmes, or when donors requested urgent clarification. Without designated officers, responses were delayed or fragmented. CON1 stated that “we sometimes lost control of the story because no one knew who was supposed to speak”. This difficulty reflected Cox and Schwarze’s (2022) analysis of the limitations of reactive communication.

The data also suggested that organisations with formal structures performed better. Where communication teams existed, contributors described clearer workflows, better documentation, and stronger relationships with stakeholders. These insights echoed Freeman’s (1984) emphasis on recognising stakeholder concerns early, as well as Verčič et al. (2015), who argued that communication needed managerial recognition to function strategically. Despite these positive cases, most organisations represented in the data lacked the capacity to institutionalise communication fully.

4.5.2 Resource and Capacity Constraints

The data showed that limited financial, human, and technological resources significantly shaped communication practice. Contributors consistently described communication as underfunded, understaffed, and dependent on irregular budget allocations, echoing Kumi and Copestake (2022) and Pinto and Bhadra (2024). Many noted that communication budgets were minimal or absent, making it difficult to produce quality materials, maintain digital platforms,

or seek professional support; as CON7 explained, “communication had no dedicated budget, so we worked with whatever tools were available.” This pattern aligned with Morgan et al. (2025). Human resource shortages were equally prominent, with many organisations relying on a single communication officer supported by interns or volunteers. Officers juggled multiple responsibilities, limiting responsiveness, content depth, and strategic planning, reflecting Diep and Mai’s (2025) observations on the labour-intensive nature of nonprofit communication. Technological challenges further constrained practice, as unstable internet connections, outdated devices, and limited software affected digital content production and dissemination. CON3 noted that “we could not post updates from the field because the internet was inconsistent,” illustrating infrastructural barriers consistent with Sandberg et al. (2025) and Gherguț-Babii et al. (2025).

A detailed account provided deeper insights into the material constraints faced by organisations:

We wanted to sustain digital engagement, but the resources were simply not there. Most of our equipment was outdated. Our officers used personal phones and laptops to document activities. Sometimes, these devices malfunctioned at critical moments. Even when we drafted content, posting it depended on whether the field site had network coverage. Funders expected real-time updates, but our capacity could not match these expectations. This gap created tension and made us feel as if we were always behind schedule. (CON6, Interview, December, 2025)

This extended description echoed Hesse’s (2025) analysis of the effort required to sustain donor engagement and reflected Fernandes et al. (2025), who argued that communication demanded reliable and well-resourced systems.

Furthermore, resource constraints affected the ability to conduct research, monitor public sentiment, or evaluate communication impact. The data showed that organisations rarely conducted audience analyses due to limited resources. This limitation contradicted Excellence Theory’s emphasis on environmental scanning (Grunig et al., 2002) and reflected a broader

pattern documented by Trussel and Roundy (2025) regarding the limited evaluative capacity of many nonprofits.

Some contributors described creative responses to resource scarcity. They noted the use of free online tools, volunteer networks, and partnerships with media houses. While these innovations demonstrated resilience, they were insufficient substitutes for sustained investment. CON5 explained that “partnerships helped, but they could not replace the need for proper funding”.

4.5.3 Ethical Concerns and Reputational Vulnerabilities

Ethical concerns emerged prominently across the data, particularly in relation to consent, privacy, representation, and donor expectations. Contributors described communication as a practice that required sensitivity, especially when engaging vulnerable populations. These concerns reflected the scholarship of Ashby-King et al. (2025), Jedicke et al. (2025), and Gutiérrez-García et al. (2025), who discussed the ethical tensions inherent in nonprofit storytelling and public representation.

One of the most common ethical dilemmas involved the use of beneficiary images and stories for communication purposes. Contributors described situations in which communities felt uncomfortable with photography or public exposure. CON1 explained that “some beneficiaries worried about how their images would be used,” highlighting the emotional labour required to maintain trust. This reflected Mao and Nishide’s (2025) analysis of visual representation and the risks of misinterpretation.

A longer reflection provided further insight into these ethical tensions:

We wanted to show impact through stories and images, but we also recognised that people had the right to control their own narratives. Some beneficiaries agreed initially but later felt uneasy when their stories circulated widely. We had to hold long conversations to rebuild trust. Sometimes, we withdrew content completely. Donors wanted compelling evidence, but we prioritised dignity and consent. This created difficult decisions, especially when funding depended on visibility. (CON8, Interview, December, 2025)

This account mirrored Jedicke et al. (2025), who described the reputational risks that emerged when communication practices violated community expectations.

The data also demonstrated how ethical tensions surfaced in donor communication. Contributors described pressure to present success and minimise challenges, sometimes creating tension between honesty and perceived donor expectations. This difficulty reflected Anderson's (2025) findings on transparency and Hurst et al.'s (2025) analysis of how NGOs negotiated moral expectations.

Another contributor articulated this dilemma in significant detail:

We wanted to be transparent, but we knew that donors sometimes responded negatively to difficulties. If we reported challenges openly, we risked losing funding. If we presented an overly positive picture, we created unrealistic expectations. Finding the balance required constant negotiation. We often debated internally about how much detail to share and how to present setbacks without appearing incompetent. (CON4, Interview, December, 2025)

This reflection resonated with Trussel and Roundy (2025) and Gherguț-Babii et al. (2025), who documented the communicative labour required to manage reputational risk.

Reputational vulnerabilities also emerged in connection with misinformation, community mistrust, and political interpretations of NGO activity. The data suggested that organisations operated in environments where rumours circulated easily. CON7 noted that “misinformation spread quickly, especially in tense communities”. This experience reflected Kaunga et al. (2022) and Cox and Schwarze (2022), who discussed the fragility of public trust.

Furthermore, ethical concerns intersected with structural challenges. Limited expertise and fragmented planning made it difficult for organisations to standardise ethical procedures. Consent processes varied, documentation quality fluctuated, and decision-making lacked consistency. These challenges contradicted Excellence Theory's emphasis on professionalism and strategic integration.

4.5.4 Communication Inconsistencies and Fragmented Planning

The data showed that inconsistencies in communication and fragmented planning were persistent challenges across the participating NGOs. Contributors described communication as irregular, reactive, and shaped by short-term demands rather than coordinated strategies, reflecting analyses by Anani-Bossman and Onomah (2023) and Tetteh (2020). A common concern was the absence of structured calendars or guidelines, with several noting that updates occurred mainly in response to donor requests or urgent events; as CON3 explained, “we communicated only when something urgent happened.” This pattern aligned with Anderson (2025), who linked weak planning to reduced message quality. The data also indicated that fragmented planning produced contradictory information, as different officers sometimes shared conflicting details about programmes or timelines. This inconsistency created confusion among donors and beneficiaries and echoed Morgan et al.’s (2025) concerns about reputational risk. As CON5 stated, “mixed messages made communities question our reliability,” underscoring the relational consequences of uncoordinated communication.

An extended narrative illustrated these challenges in depth:

We wanted to maintain a consistent story about our work, but our internal systems did not support that goal. Different departments used different information sources, and updates were not shared promptly. When donors asked questions, we sometimes provided figures that differed slightly. Even minor discrepancies created serious concerns. Once, a community confronted us because a radio interview mentioned activities that had not yet begun. This was not intentional. It was simply the result of poor coordination. We realised then that fragmented planning was more damaging than we had assumed. (CON6, Interview, December, 2025)

This reflection echoed Fernandes et al. (2025) and Hesse (2025), who argued that message integrity depended on organisational coherence and timely information flows.

Contributors further described internal communication gaps that prevented effective coordination. Programme teams, administrative units, and communication officers often operated independently, leading to delays in information sharing. This issue reflected Krogh

and Lo's (2024) discussion of cross-departmental fragmentation in mission-driven organisations. CON8 explained that "information moved slowly, and by the time it reached communication officers, it was already outdated," capturing a common frustration.

Some organisations attempted to address these challenges through internal meetings or shared digital folders. However, the data suggested that these efforts were inconsistent and often depended on individual commitment rather than organisational systems. This observation mirrored Verčič et al.'s (2015) argument that communication effectiveness required structural integration rather than ad hoc interventions.

Contributors also noted that fragmented planning affected advocacy work. Without coordinated messaging, NGOs struggled to influence public discourse or respond promptly to emerging issues. CON1 remarked that "advocacy required consistent messages, but internal delays made quick action difficult". This difficulty reflected Cox and Schwarze's (2022) emphasis on timing and coherence in public communication.

The data further indicated that fragmented planning intensified reputational risk. When messages were inconsistent or delayed, stakeholders questioned the organisation's competence. This insight echoed Gutiérrez-García et al.'s (2025) and Ashby-King et al.'s (2025) analyses of how communication failures created reputational vulnerabilities.

A final extended account captured the weight of these challenges:

We recognised that our communication problems were not merely technical. They reflected deeper organisational gaps. When planning was fragmented, even the best communication ideas could not be implemented properly. We lost opportunities to influence policy because our materials were not prepared on time. We faced difficult questions from donors when our updates contained small errors. These were avoidable mistakes, but without clear systems, they kept recurring. The experience taught us that communication needed structure, authority, and dedicated attention, not occasional effort. (CON4, Interview, December, 2025)

The data demonstrated that communication inconsistencies and fragmented planning weakened NGO credibility, complicated stakeholder relationships, and limited strategic potential. Excellence Theory offered an interpretive lens for these findings, as it highlighted the need for

systematic communication management, environmental scanning, and integration with organisational decision-making (Grunig et al., 2002). Stakeholder Theory further explained how fragmented communication undermined the organisation's ability to understand and address the expectations of different groups. The combined insights suggested that without coherent planning and structured communication systems, NGOs struggled to maintain trust, demonstrate accountability, and operate effectively within complex stakeholder environments.

4.6 Discussion of Findings

4.6.1 Summary of Findings Addressing Research Objective One

The findings demonstrated that NGOs applied public relations through a mixture of relationship-focused practices, visibility-oriented tasks, and advocacy-driven communication. While some of the data described PR as a managerial function that contributed to organisational planning and stakeholder interpretation, others reflected more operational uses centred on publicity, reporting, and content dissemination. Communication was used to translate organisational missions into accessible messages, maintain legitimacy, and ensure that stakeholders understood the rationale behind programmes. The practices described drew on both interpersonal and digital methods, showing that NGOs navigated diverse communication environments that demanded adaptation and contextual sensitivity. Taken together, the findings illustrated that PR application within NGOs oscillated between strategic engagement and technical execution, depending on expertise, organisational philosophy, and available resources.

4.6.2 Summary of Findings Addressing Research Objective Two

The findings indicated that PR shaped stakeholder engagement by enabling continuous interaction, clarifying expectations, and nurturing trust across donor, beneficiary, and partner groups. Communication practices helped NGOs sustain transparency, manage concerns, and strengthen collaborative relationships. The data showed that stakeholders interpreted organisational commitment through responsiveness, clarity, and presence, with community engagement proving central for cultural connection and programme acceptance. Donor relationships benefited from consistent updates, contextual explanations, and evidence of responsible stewardship, while partnerships depended on reliability, shared understanding, and timely communication. PR therefore acted as the medium through which NGOs navigated diverse interests, managed expectations, and secured the relational foundations necessary for effective programme implementation.

4.6.3 Summary of Findings Addressing Research Objective Three

The findings revealed several challenges that constrained PR practice within NGOs, including limited expertise, inadequate resources, ethical dilemmas, and fragmented planning systems. The data showed that many organisations operated without formal communication structures, resulting in improvised approaches that weakened message coherence, delayed responses, and reduced strategic potential. Resource constraints (financial, human, and technological) restricted the ability to sustain communication outputs or engage stakeholders consistently. Ethical tensions emerged in decisions involving consent, representation, transparency, and reputational risk, especially under donor pressure or in sensitive community settings. Planning inconsistencies further compounded these issues, creating communication gaps that affected credibility and strained stakeholder relationships. Collectively, these challenges suggested that

PR functions within NGOs remained vulnerable to structural and contextual limitations that restricted their effectiveness.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and discussed the findings of the study by examining how NGOs applied PR, how communication shaped stakeholder engagement, and the challenges that affected PR practice. The themes reflected a communication environment characterised by commitment to stakeholder relationships, reliance on hybrid communication methods, and significant structural and resource limitations. The insights revealed both the potential and the fragility of PR within NGO settings, highlighting the need for strengthened structures, sustained investment, and ethically grounded approaches. These findings provide the basis for the conclusions and recommendations outlined in Chapter Five, where the implications for policy, practice, and future research are considered.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter brought together the core insights of the study and considered their implications for communication scholarship, NGO practice, and governance structures within Ghana's civil society landscape. Moving from empirical analysis to conceptual interpretation, and finally to action-oriented guidance, the chapter revisited the aim and objectives of the study, synthesised the findings across the three research questions, and reflected on what these insights suggested for strengthening public relations practice within NGOs. The chapter then offered recommendations for organisational leaders, funding bodies, communication practitioners, and regulatory partners who shape the operational environment of NGOs. Finally, it outlined directions for future research capable of extending the present analysis and supporting sustained improvement in NGO communication systems.

5.2 Summary of major Findings

The study set out to examine how NGOs in Ghana applied public relations, how these practices shaped their relationships with key stakeholders, and what challenges constrained effective communication. The first objective explored the conceptualisation and practice of PR within NGOs. The second objective examined how PR contributed to engagement with donors, beneficiaries, and partner institutions. The third objective analysed the structural, ethical, and procedural limitations that weakened communication outcomes.

Findings relating to the first objective demonstrated that NGOs adopted hybrid forms of public relations shaped by organisational philosophy, available expertise, and contextual realities. PR was understood simultaneously as relationship-building, information dissemination, advocacy work, and programmatic support. Some organisations viewed communication as a strategic

management function, while others treated it as a set of technical tasks required for visibility, reporting, and donor relations. This dual orientation meant that NGOs often occupied an intermediate position on the continuum between strategic communication and administrative practice, drawing on interpersonal engagement, media interaction, and digital messaging to sustain legitimacy and explain their missions.

The second objective revealed that PR served as a vital mechanism through which NGOs cultivated trust, managed expectations, and clarified organisational intentions for donors, beneficiaries, and partners. The findings demonstrated that transparent communication strengthened donor confidence, participatory dialogue deepened community trust, and consistent engagement improved institutional collaboration. Community presence, responsiveness to concerns, and cultural sensitivity proved central to sustaining credibility, while media relations helped to amplify advocacy priorities and broaden visibility. PR therefore operated as both a relational and interpretive practice, enabling NGOs to negotiate meaning with diverse groups whose interests and expectations shaped programme implementation.

With respect to the third objective, the findings showed that NGO communication was constrained by limited expertise, inadequate resourcing, ethical dilemmas, and fragmented planning processes. Many organisations lacked formal PR structures, resulting in inconsistent messages, improvised procedures, and vulnerability to reputational risk. Financial and technological limitations reduced capacity to sustain digital communication, while ethical concerns emerged in relation to representation, consent, transparency, and donor pressure. Fragmented planning further weakened message coherence and complicated stakeholder engagement. These structural and contextual challenges indicated that PR functions within NGOs remained fragile, often dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional systems.

Collectively, the findings established that public relations within NGOs operated as a complex, relational, and resource-dependent practice shaped by stakeholder expectations, organisational capacity, and local communication cultures. NGOs relied heavily on communication for legitimacy and programme success, yet their ability to institutionalise PR meaningfully remained constrained by structural limitations.

5.3 Recommendations

The findings indicated that NGOs needed to formalise PR as an organisational function through clear structures, designated roles, and operational systems. Communication responsibilities should be assigned to trained officers with defined mandates, supported by documented guidelines for message development, media interaction, crisis response, and internal coordination. Organisations should invest in periodic training to strengthen competencies in strategic planning, digital communication, and ethical storytelling. The findings also suggested that NGOs needed to institutionalise stakeholder engagement practices, including routine updates for donors, structured community consultations, and coordinated partnership communication. Ethical procedures, such as consent protocols and representation guidelines, should be standardised to ensure responsible communication and protect vulnerable groups.

5.4 Policy and Practice

At sector level, umbrella bodies, civil society networks, and regulatory partners should develop professional guidelines for NGO communication, focusing on ethical representation, transparency standards, and data protection. Training institutions and capacity-building organisations should integrate NGO communication management into their curricula, emphasising stakeholder engagement, ethical communication, and strategic planning. Donor agencies should incorporate communication capacity-building into funding frameworks and support NGOs in acquiring appropriate technological tools. National communication and

governance institutions should collaborate with NGOs to strengthen media relations, reduce misinformation, and improve public understanding of NGO work.

5.4.1 Areas for Further Research

Future research could examine beneficiary perspectives directly to complement the NGO-centred view of this study and provide deeper insight into how communities interpret communication practices. Comparative studies across different NGO sectors (such as health, education, or environmental advocacy) would help clarify whether patterns observed here are widespread or sector-specific. Longitudinal studies could trace communication practices over extended periods to capture how relationships evolve across cycles of funding, crisis, and programme change. Finally, research on the influence of digital platforms and national policy on NGO communication would provide a broader structural understanding of the opportunities and constraints shaping PR practice within Ghana's development landscape.

5.5 Conclusion

The study revealed that public relations in NGOs extended beyond message dissemination and visibility work; it functioned as a central mechanism through which relationships, legitimacy, and organisational continuity were negotiated. Communication helped NGOs translate technical programmes into socially intelligible actions, reassure donors, stabilise partnerships, and maintain community trust. The findings demonstrated that PR was embedded within everyday organisational routines and carried significant implications for how beneficiaries interpreted the intentions and credibility of NGOs.

At the same time, the findings underscored the limited control that NGOs possessed over their communication environments. Organisational intent was shaped by resource scarcity, infrastructural constraints, and the interpretive agency of stakeholders. Donors, communities, and partners each influenced communication outcomes, interpreting messages through cultural

norms, institutional expectations, and lived experience. Ethical concerns and reputational vulnerabilities created further pressures, revealing that communication decisions carried moral significance and required continuous judgement. For these reasons, PR practice in NGOs emerged as a form of ongoing negotiation rather than a straightforward application of technique.

The findings therefore positioned public relations within NGOs as a field defined by both promise and precarity. Communication offered possibilities for meaningful collaboration and social impact, yet its effectiveness depended on institutional commitment, professional expertise, and ethical sensitivity. Stability grew where communication was treated as relational work grounded in respect, transparency, and shared understanding. Fragility appeared where communication was improvised, extractive, or insufficiently planned. What emerged was an understanding of PR as a practice that required deliberate attention, structural investment, and sensitivity to cultural and organisational realities.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview guide is intended to support discussion about public relations practices within NGOs. Follow-up prompts may be used to help you expand on key points. Participation is voluntary, and you may skip any question or withdraw at any time. Your identity will be protected, and all information will remain confidential. Taking part indicates that you understand the purpose of the study and have provided informed consent.

Information about the Organization

- Can you briefly describe your current role in the organisation and how long you have been working here?
- What does a typical workday look like in your position?
- How would you describe the mission of your organisation and its key areas of work?
- In your opinion, how important is communication in achieving your organisation's mission?

Section A: The use of PR by NGOs in Their Operations

- How would you define public relations in the context of your organisation's work?
- What specific PR activities or strategies does your organisation employ to communicate with the public or promote its programmes?
- Who is primarily responsible for designing and executing PR or communication activities in your organisation?
- How do you use traditional media, digital media, or social media platforms in your communication efforts?
- In what ways does PR contribute to enhancing your organisation's visibility and public image?

Section B: The relevance of PR in stakeholder engagement among NGOs

- How does your organisation build and maintain relationships with key stakeholders such as donors, beneficiaries, and the media?

- In what ways does public relations help sustain stakeholder trust and long-term collaboration?
- How are PR strategies used to promote transparency and accountability in your organisation's operations?
- Can you share an example where effective communication improved stakeholder relations or project outcomes?

Section C: Challenges affecting the practice of PR in NGOs

- What are the main difficulties your organisation faces in practising public relations effectively?
- How do limited financial resources, technical capacity, or staffing constraints affect your PR activities?
- Do you encounter issues of misinformation, ethical dilemmas, or donor influence in your communication work?
- What steps does your organisation take to address or overcome these challenges?
- What kind of institutional or professional support do you think would improve PR practice in the NGO sector?
- From your experience, what recommendations would you make to strengthen PR practice among NGOs in Ghana?
- Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered but is important to understanding PR in your organisation?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR VIEWS AND TIME