



**AN EXPLORATION OF PR STRATEGIES FOR CHANGING PUBLIC
PERCEPTION ABOUT THE GHANA NATIONAL FIRE SERVICE**

BY

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MASPRM24069

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA,
ARTS AND COMMUNICATION (UniMAC-IJ) IN PARTIAL
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF MA
IN STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT.**

DECEMBER 2025

DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that, no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

JOANAKU ADJAI MASPPH124069  12/12/2025

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CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This Dissertation/Thesis has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Dissertation/Thesis laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication, UniMAC.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my father, Mr. Augustine Yawo Adjei whose words of wisdom continue to spur onto greatness. Those words are still alive in me even after all these years that you've been gone.

I dedicate this work to my dear mother, Madam Monica Gabianu whose sacrifices, love and guidance I cannot quantify.

I also dedicate this work to my boss and work colleagues whose understanding, support and encouragement has brought us thus far.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am forever grateful to God Almighty for His grace, strength, guidance, providence and sustenance throughout this journey.

I remain extremely grateful to my lecturer, Dr. Rebecca Nanaa Baah - Ofori, for her invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and superior lecturing prowess throughout the journey of this thesis.

I am indebted to my family, especially my husband Mr. Benjamin Dzamesi, for his steadfast love, patience and support, my Uncle Mr. Simon Mork, and my sisters, Akorfa, Dela, and Mawunya, as well as my nieces for their love, prayers, and encouragement.

Also, to my friends and colleagues who supported and encouraged me through this demanding journey, I am grateful for your kindness and motivation.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the public relations strategies adaptable or improvable to bring a positive transformation in the public perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). It relies on established public relations theories and case studies from comparable institutions worldwide to offer insight into successful methods transferable to the Ghanaian setting. Despite the potential benefits of strategic PR, many fire departments struggle to implement effective communication plans due to resource constraints, lack of expertise, or the absence of a dedicated PR strategy. This communication gap leaves fire services vulnerable to public criticism and limits their ability to fully engage with the communities they serve. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of strategic public relations in influencing public perception of fire services. It seeks to identify best practices, explore existing challenges, and propose effective communication strategies that can strengthen community trust, improve public awareness, and enhance the overall reputation of fire services. Understanding how strategic PR can shape public opinion is crucial for ensuring that fire services receive the support and recognition necessary to carry out their mission effectively. The thesis unearthed the hidden experiences of stakeholders to create an understanding of the how the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) can surmount the effect of negative perception in order to improve upon its service delivery. Overall, the study aims to empower the Ghana National Fire Services (GNFS) with the knowledge and tools needed to build stronger community relationships, improve public understanding, and enhance their overall effectiveness in safeguarding lives and property.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an introduction to the dissertation. It provides the basis for exploration into the effectiveness of strategic public relations on public perception regarding the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). The chapter also prepares the ground and lays the foundation for understanding how the Ghana National Fire Service (GFS) can surmount the effects of negative perception in order to improve upon its image through service delivery. The chapter includes the background, problem statement, research objectives, research questions, significance of the study, scope of the study and structure of dissertation.

1.1 Background of the study

Public Relations and Public Perception

Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G. M. (2006), argue that Public Relations is concerned with building relationships and creating goodwill for an organisation. This relationship is built through a two-way flow of information between an organisation and its publics.

Publics is defined by (Newsom 1999) as people who are tied together, however loosely by some common bond of interest or concern and which have consequences for an organisation. The practice of public relations requires sending specific messages to targeted individuals or group of people who are part of an organisations publics instead of seeing everybody as one. According to Cutlip, Center, & Broom (2006), if one takes the general public as one's target public, it will result in missing not only opportunities but also the position to one's company's image among certain targeted constituent groups. This is because, different sections of the public react differently to the same message. Therefore, same message should

be designed in different ways to suit different public interests.

On the other hand, according to Doorley & Garcia (2015), having accurate information of public perception of an organisation plays an important role in creating consistency in its image. This can be made possible through the power of public relations where an organisation interacts with its various publics with the aim of knowing what the perception is about this organisation by its stakeholders. Smith (2021) posits that what people think about an organisation is key to managing its Public Relations.

1.1.1 Public Relations and Trust

Public Relations (PR) has been an important instrument in crafting the image and reputation of organizations worldwide and in the public sector, PR initiatives have imperative functions in establishing trust and strengthening relationships between institutions and their publics.

1.1.2 History of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) was established in 1963 by act 219 which was amended in 1997 by Act 537 as a unified body of various firefighting institutions in Ghana. The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is tasked primarily with the functions of fighting fires, rescuing individuals and properties, and educating the public on fire prevention. Other functions of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) include carrying out safety inspections and audits as well as testing and approval of all firefighting equipment imported into the country by fire safety service providers and dealers in this equipment. The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is also the first responders in road traffic collision in Ghana where they rescue accident victims and, in some cases, administer first where necessary before their onward transportation to the hospital for further medical care.

1.1.3. Public perception and the work of Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)

Public perception remains a key factor in building trust, reputation, and influence for an organization. The attitude and behaviour of an organisation's customers or client is shaped by their mind set and ultimately beliefs accumulated over a period of time. Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), an organisation that has the mandate of providing crucial and timely fire safety and other emergency services to the public cannot function optimally without public trust and confidence. The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), which was founded to conduct fire prevention, protection, rescue, and emergency response services has experienced several public perception issues in the past which include but not limited to delayed response, arriving to scenes without water, underperformance and poor public interaction.

In Ghana, negative attitudes towards the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) have weakened its potential for effectiveness and efficiency in generating public trust, securing community cooperation, public and corporate support and enhancing collaboration during emergencies. Having a strong reputation directly imparts positively on the fortunes and goal of an organisation as investors are willing to invest more into companies with higher reputation (Doorley, J., & Garcia, H. F. 2015). Given that emergencies typically demand rapid and concerted responses, lack of confidence on the part the public can effectively impede the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) from performing its mandate. It is therefore critical to discern and enhance the public image of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) through proper public relations mechanisms.

1.1.4. Safety compliance and Misconceptions

One of the major mandates of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is to heighten and sustain awareness about the dangers of fire outbreaks and how to prevent them from ravaging

homes, institutions and industry. This responsibility is geared towards safeguarding lives, property and investments as stipulated by Act 537 of 1997 and subsequently by Legislative Instrument 1724. This function positions the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) as one of the most essential public service providers in the country whose functions have a huge impact on attracting investors and keeping them in the country as well as protecting public and private investments. Achieving the mandate contained in Act 537 and LI 1724 depends heavily on participation acceptance by the public by way of acting upon the safety messages from the various communication campaigns being carried out by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is acceptance and participation the business of fire safety by individuals, groups and organisation across the country.

According to a study carried out by Kwaku A. (2021) on Sekondi-Takoradi Residents' Perception of Fire-fighting Operations by Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), some of the age long misconceptions held by members of the public about the operations of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) include refusal to pick up emergency lines, deliberate late responses to fire and other emergency scenes, reporting to emergency scenes without water, charging fees for services provided and biases in salvaging property during firefighting operations. In spite of the many frantic efforts the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) has put in place to dispel these misconceptions, its persistence continues to serve as a barrier between an imperative objective of the Service which is to prevent fires to their barest minimum and the current situation - increase numbers fire outbreaks numbers being recorded and late call up to fire and other emergency scenes in the country. To further compound this phenomenon is also the seemingly lack of interest in fire safety issues and the due to the ignorance of the real effects of fire outbreaks as well as the general low levels of education in the country. As a result of this, the perception one individual or a group of people is easily

bought into by others without subjecting it to proper scrutiny and fact checking. This exposes a clear communication gap which can be interpreted as lack of trust which poses an impediment in the successful attainment of one of the core mandates of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) which is saving lives and property.

This study explores the public the current public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) can be improved through the interaction with public relation practitioners of Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), personnel of the Service as well as members of the public whose opinions will inform the right public relations strategies necessary for an improved image and reputation of the Service.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The effectiveness of fire services relies not only on their operational efficiency but also on public perception and trust. The reputation of an organization is an important consideration for its stakeholders, (Doorley, J., & Garcia, H. F. 2015). Despite their critical role in community safety, fire services often struggle with misperceptions related to their responsiveness, resource allocation, and overall impact. Negative or inaccurate public opinions can lead to reduced community cooperation, decreased funding, and lower morale within the service. Strategic public relations (PR) can serve as a vital tool to bridge the gap between public understanding and the realities of fire service operations. This is upheld by Doorley, J., & Garcia, H. F. (2015) saying that employees, customers and shareholders have the power to affect an organization in different ways. Despite the poor perception held by the public against the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) as highlighted in a news report on citinewsroom.com on March 25th, 2025 where Rev. John Ntim Fordjour, MP for Assin South stated “One of the agencies that have been unfairly treated by the public and often misperceived as incompetent, ineffective and unwilling to help is the Fire Service. These firefighters have been unjustly criticized” no study has explored how effectively the service is

using strategic public relations in to change this narrative. Also, there has been no study to investigate what the public thinks about the effectiveness of the PR strategies currently being deployed by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to change perception. Additionally, no study exists to investigate the challenges being encountered the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to use strategic Public Relations to improve negative perception.

By addressing these gaps, the study aims to contribute to the broader field of public sector communication and provide the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) with practical insights for enhancing their public image and community relationships while highlighting the challenges faced in implementing strategic PR to deal the situation in the quest to safeguard lives and property

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objective:

1. To explore PR strategies employed by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)
2. To investigate public perceptions about the effectiveness of PR strategies currently employed by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)
3. To identify challenges preventing the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) from implementing effective strategic PR initiatives

1.4 Research Questions

1. What public Relations Strategies are currently being employed by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)
2. How effective are the Public Relations Strategies being deployed by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS).
3. What are the challenges faced by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in

4. deploying public relations strategy.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value for the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), policymakers, communication professionals, and the broader community by highlighting the critical role of strategic public relations (PR) in shaping public perception and enhancing community trust.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the operations of security services in general and the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in particular highlighting the effect of public perception on the success or otherwise to their goals and objectives.

The research has also brought to the fore the need for the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to strengthen community engagement, awareness creation and education aimed at drawing the public to closer to its operations as recommended by the research. This will ensure a better understanding and a possible correction of existing misconceptions which could well be just perceptions while making sure that new ones are not formed.

The study has offered an opportunity for the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to improve upon its reputation and public image through the many vital recommendations made by the research. These recommendations when implemented will propel the reputation of the emergency providing Service – the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) unto greater pedestals and many inches closer to the achievement of its mandate.

Finally, this study provides policy makers on the funding decisions they make concerning the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) regards to public awareness campaigns functioning of the Ghana National Fire Service and its operations. This research will fill existing gaps in literature regarding the role of strategic PR in fire safety services, providing a foundation for

future studies and expanding academic discussions on public sector communication strategies.

Overall, the study aims to empower the Ghana National Fire Services (GNFS) with the knowledge and tools needed to build stronger community relationships, improve public understanding, and enhance their overall effectiveness in safeguarding lives and property.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The research focuses on how public relations can be used as a strategic tool to affect the image of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in a positive manner. The study highlights how negative public perceptions hamper the public safety education and awareness creation functions and the general operation of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) through misconceptions and most importantly the role of public relations strategy in reversing this trend thereby causing a positive change and attitude among its publics. This study further probes into the challenges encountered by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) which are brought about by public perceptions and suggests means by which they can be curtailed.

The period of the study is 2024 to 2025 owing to the emergence of a number of related incidences that have been associated with the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). The period will therefore afford an opportunity for the findings of this research to be squarely and appropriately situated within the confines and objective of this research.

The qualitative method presents this study with ample prospect to explore existing records on the importance of how public relations strategies can affect change particularly in the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) while exploring the lived experiences and opinions of both the public and the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) on public perception regarding the operations of the organization. Furthermore, the qualitative method guarantees the

exploration of diverse views leading to variety of suggestions and solutions on the how public relations strategy can be harnessed in the interest of change in public perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS),

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), a public safety organization remains a good choice for this research. The operations of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) hinges greatly on trust and positive image. Lack of trust by the public in the ability of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to respond and deal effectively with emergency situations will gravely have a toll on its successful operations. For these and other reasons to be uncovered by this research, the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is being used as an organization of study for this research.

1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organised as follows: Chapter One, presents the research topic, outlines the problem statement, and defines the scope and significance of the study, focusing on the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) as a case study. Chapter Two highlights an exhaustive review of existing studies with regards to strategic public relations and perception, bringing to light key relevant theories, models, and empirical studies pertinent to public service organizations. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, including the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. Chapter Four gives the findings of the study, analysing data collected from proponents of this study which include personnel of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) particularly in communication, supported by the views of members of the general public. Chapter Five provided a discourse of the implications of the findings, drawing possible conclusions whiles proposing important recommendations to correct misconceptions associated with the work of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS).

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Chapter two dives into available relevant knowledge in the quest to investigate the how public relations strategies can affect the public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). Literature is drawn from both local and foreign sources to capture enough insight on the topic under study.

2.1 How does Strategic PR by Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) affect public perception?

Integrating communication and public relations (PR) into firefighting preparedness requires strategic messaging, engaging the community and building trust (Schultz et al., 2021; Bull et al., 2021; Yamamoto, 2023). Wray, Ricardo & Rivers (2023) studied the critical role of communication in emergency response emphasizing the importance of trust in fostering effective communication strategies. While findings from studies by Schultz, Miller, Greiner & Kooistra (2021) also agrees that effective communication and PR are a critical strategy in risk management assistance, in order to enhance decision making and preparedness for emergency situations. Schultz et al. (2021) investigated the effectiveness of risk management strategies in wildfire decision-making, focusing on the U.S. Forest Service's approach. The findings revealed that effective risk communication improved decision-making clarity and transparency, enabling better communication and collaboration among teams.

Effective PR strategies include public education campaigns about fire risks, early warning systems, and preparedness drills that involve community members (Kuday, Özcan, Çalışkan & Kınık, 2023; Agus Salim, Salleh, Jaafar, Sulieman, Ulang & Ebekoziem, 2023).

Transparent and consistent communication is essential to manage public expectations and foster collaboration between fire service organizations and local stakeholders. Leveraging social media, public service announcements, and partnerships with community organizations enhances outreach and ensures diverse populations are informed and involved (Haupt, 2021; Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013).

FlowMSP, Inc. (2022) explores the improvement of fire department public relations through pre-incident planning and suggests that departments can improve their public relations by engaging with the community through consistent pre-incident planning and emphasizes the importance of visibility, communication, and trust-building activities. Grunig, & Hunt, (1984) through the Excellence Theory also lends its support for the study by suggesting that organizations should focus on two-way symmetrical communication, meaning they should actively listen and engage with their audience rather than just sending out messages.

This approach helps build trust, credibility, and mutual understanding between organizations and the public.

Alexander, (2023) explores the power of public relation in shaping public opinion by managing perceptions, reinforcing the role of PR in media relations, crisis management, reputation building, and community engagement. In spite of this positive relationship between PR strategy and public perception, McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972) in the Situational Theory cautions that organizations should tailor their crisis communication strategies to suit the severity of the crisis, how serious the issue is, whether the organization is to blame, the best way to protect reputation and public trust. This assertion is further highlighted by Benoit, W. L. (1995) in the Image Restoration Theory which provides strategies to effectively deal with negative perception of fire service organizations by the public.

2.2 Strategic PR Initiatives Used by Emergency Response Organisations Globally, in Africa and in Ghana

Emergency response organizations globally depend heavily on Strategic public relations initiatives in communicating messages from the organization to their publics. In advocating for emergency preparedness, a major mandate of the emergency response organization in equipping strategic communication is ensuring awareness and compliance. This is because, preparedness is conceptualized as both knowledge and behaviors that aim to reduce risk of injury and damage and build capacity to cope with the disruptions caused by the event according to (Paton, 2003). In the specific case of the practice of the Strategic Public Relations in Africa, cultural dynamics plays a crucial role in emergency response and recovery efforts as highlighted by (Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience, 2018). Preparedness is described as the knowledge and capacities developed by governments, response and recovery organizations, communities, and individuals to effectively anticipate, respond to and recover from the impacts of likely, imminent or current disasters. Additionally, emergency response organizations also use strategic PR communication to defend their operational strategies during emergencies and disasters in order to prevent reputational damage that may arise from accusations of underperformance. Emergency preparedness agencies may disseminate messages that bolster their capacities (Johnston, Taylor, & Ryan, 2020). In Ghana, emergency response organizations particularly the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) employs the strategic Public Relations to educate the public on good fire safety practice as well as clarify allegations and misconceptions among its publics. Effective communication with the public can improve safety through education and raising awareness (Wells, Kitzler II, & Kimberly, 2025). The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in recent times has embraced the power of social media as a strategic public relations

measure to reach portion of its target audience which mainly include the youth. This has brought the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) a step closer to achieving its strategic public relations goals.

2.3 Perceptions of PR Strategies of Fire Departments and Emergency Relief Services

The attitude of target audiences of public relations strategies is as good as its success. The risk perception attitude of the public, informs how seriously a message is taken and acted upon. Risk perception is defined by (Rehani [2015](#), p. 8) as the subjective judgment that people make about the characteristics and severity of risk in reference to disasters. This subjective judgement also affects an individual's perception about public relations strategies of an emergency response organization.

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is one such emergency organization whose operations is heavily dependent on what its publics think. Getting the public to act favourably upon its fire safety messages is imperative to achieving the goal of reducing fire outbreaks. This is evident in the consistent call from the management of the Service urging the public to embrace fire safety. One of such calls was contained in a news report carried by Asaase Radio in which “The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) urged the public to adhere strictly to fire safety tips”.

2.4 Challenges and Limitations Faced by Fire Services in Implementing Strategic PR Initiatives and Changing Public Perception.

The study by Omaki et al. (2022) highlights several PR challenges faced by Fire Departments in promoting smoke alarm programs including limited reach of communication strategies, community engagement barriers, resource constraints and adapting strategies to local context. This seems to be the case with the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) who continues to call

on the government in the last ten years for logistical support and retooling during interviews with the media following major fire outbreaks. These challenges are reiterated by Randall (2025) who argued that Fire Services struggled to communicate effectively about the limitations of their resources and the unpredictable nature of wildfire behaviour, which led to misunderstandings among the public. In Ghana, Fire Service communication is highly regulated as per LI 1725, which guides personnel in respect of disseminating information to the media. This turns to put a heavy strain on the PR practitioners and information flow to the public. Krogh and Lo (2023) further emphasized the difficulty in maintaining public trust when response times and outcomes do not meet expectations during large-scale emergencies.

According to Fearn-Banks (2007), communication is the most crucial part of any communication function in the media relations department. This is due to the fact that media serves as both constituency and a channel through which investors, employees, and clients receive information about an image of an organization, even though the risk of information overload prevalent response can contribute to a communication crisis characterized by discord between public expectations and reality (Oktariani & Wuryanta, 2020).

2.5 Current Public Perception of Fire Services

Public opinion regarding emergency services and fire services is relatively unexplored, and even the most recent relevant studies are more than a decade old. Yamamoto (2023) highlighted that most research is focused on assessing the operational efficiency of fire services. Even though these studies have demonstrated the importance of operational practices of emergency services, especially the firefighters (Nudzor, 2023), Agus Salim, Salleh, Sulieman, Ulang and Ebekozen (2023) also highlighted that public opinion about emergency services such as Fire Services is important because it influences the attitudes of individuals toward such services and personnel in these services.

Most research that studies emergency medical services such as fire services are focused on improving operational practices rather than public perception, but this small body of research finds ‘trust’ in the recent theme (Yamamoto, 2023). This is further substantiated by Bull et al.’s (2021) study measuring medical care providers traits, which found the public on average conveyed more trust in the advice of firefighters than their own general practitioners. Outside the notion of trustworthiness, literature does not provide a complete picture of how public perceives firefighters, nor does it illustrate what the public knows about their day-to-day operations.

Another reason that warrants further investigation in this area is that most current studies, are based in developed countries, show that generally, public perception of fire services is predominantly positive. For example, De Wit and Helsloot (2021) explored public perception of various aspects of fire services in the Netherlands, focusing on prioritization of fire service duties, response times, opinions on fire stations, and the relationship between fire safety and road safety. The findings revealed that citizens prioritize rapid turnout during fire emergencies, largely due to the importance of preventing injuries and fatalities. More importantly, the study highlighted that respondent placed high value on fire services, due to factors such as saving lives and quick response times. In some cases, respondents indicated that they are willing to pay for these services.

2.6 Expectations of the Public that Shape Public Perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)

(Deng et al., 2001) asserts that, the fire-fighting service provided by the public fire department has a very close connection with peoples' lives and property. However, due to a variety of situations and the different perspectives of the victims and the fire department, people often have varied perspectives about the results of the fire-fighting.

(Deng et al., 2001) again proposes the use the Delphi method of quality management to

reduce the differences in opinions about the quality of the fire-fighting service between the victims and the firefighters and increase the management efficiency formulating a conceptual framework to serve as a measure of quality for the service provided by fire-fighting institutions.

According to the Delphi method (Deng et al., 2001), there are six main dimensional factors in the conceptual framework of fire-fighting service quality for a fire department, including the quick response in the fire-fighting process, understanding the fire ground situations, controlling the fire-fighting resources, dealing with the operations properly, and reducing the damage and casualties of the fire at the same time. With the building of this conceptual framework, the members of the fire departments can enhance the quality of the management of the fire-fighting service and, at the same time, the public will be satisfied with the better protection provided by the fire departments.

2.7 Importance of Public Relations to Organizations

Even in the wake of extraordinary development in academic programmes, most public relations practitioners continue to trail at the technical of the structure of organizations Grunig (1990). Public Relations practitioners perform typical journalistic tasks which include informing the public about decisions of an organization by issuing press releases, speeches and newsletters, Grunig (1990). This highlights the lack of importance and low level of recognitions attached to the work of public relations and the underutilization of their expertise. According to Grunig (1990) communicating to publics only about the outcomes of engagement as done by public relation practitioners in most organization amounts to results in one way communication which leaves a gap in the communication process since stakeholder feedback remains absent. This tends to put a strain on the perception on an organization's perception.

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is an organization that provides safety related

services to the public. The services which include firefighting, safety education and awareness creation updates of safety issue warnings and update on on-going safety incidents and this requires day to day interaction with stakeholders and the public. It can therefore be concluded that the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) needs a robust public relations apparatus to champion the communication needs of the organization.

2.8.0 Theoretical Framework

2.8.1 Excellence Theory in Public Relations

The **Excellence Theory**, advanced by **Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (1992)**, is one of the most influential frameworks in public relations scholarship. It identified four models of public relations including the **press agency/publicity model**, the **public information model**, the **two-way asymmetrical model**, and the **two-way symmetrical model**. However, the theory emphasizes **two-way symmetrical communication** as the most effective and ethical model of public relations practice. It moves beyond one-way communication or persuasion, advocating for **dialogue, active listening, feedback, and mutual understanding** between organizations and their publics. Two-way communication further emphasizes negotiation, collaboration, and adaptation rather than manipulation or persuasion.

According to the theory, **excellent organizations** are those that use communication strategically to build beneficial long-term relationships with their stakeholders. This involves not only disseminating information but also engaging in meaningful interactions that consider the interests, concerns, and expectations of the public. The ultimate goal is to achieve **mutual benefit** where both the organization and its publics feel heard, respected, and valued.

The theory also underscores the need for **strategic management of communication**,

suggesting that PR should not merely serve as a publicity function but as a vital part of organizational decision-making. Effective PR departments, therefore, should have a seat at the management table and participate in shaping organizational policies, especially those that affect the public.

2.8.2 Relevance of the Theory

For Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), this theory suggests that communication should not only focus on pushing out fire safety messages but also on creating spaces where citizens can voice concerns, provide feedback, and even co-create safety solutions. This two-way engagement not only improves public perception but also strengthens the Service's ability to fulfil its mission, as communities feel a shared responsibility for fire safety.

Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of **symmetry and ethics** in communication—essential qualities for a service-oriented agency such as the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). By adopting a two-way symmetrical approach, the Service can strengthen its relationship with citizens, improve compliance with fire safety regulations, and ultimately enhance its corporate image and service delivery. This involves listening to community concerns, incorporating public feedback into safety campaigns, and using social media platforms to foster dialogue rather than simply to broadcast messages.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm

This study sits within the **interpretivist paradigm**, which focuses on how people make sense of their experiences and the world around them. Because the research is about public relations strategies and how they can shift public perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), it is ideal to use a perspective that values people's stories, emotions, and viewpoints. Public perception is not something that can be measured only with numbers; it is shaped by lived experiences such as how a family feels after waiting for help during a fire, or how a community views the Service after a successful rescue.

3.2 Research Approach

The research approach used for this study is the qualitative research approach. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration into the strategic public relations strategy to change public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). The qualitative method presents the opportunity to interrogate the impact of public relations strategy on public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) from the point of review of existing qualitative content and data as well as delving into the lived experience of both public relations practitioners in the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) and members of the public in order to gain an all-round appreciation and understanding of the role of strategic public relations for change in perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS).

3.3 Research Design

The best design for this study is the case study design. A case study design is useful in

bringing out the sentiments and lived experiences of the public about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) what sort of perception they formed out of their experiences. Additionally, the case study approach opens up the research to diverse views from public relations practitioners on how the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) has fared in using communication to tackle public perception and the way forward for a change in perception using strategic public relations. Additionally, this study puts the issues issue of strategic public relations and change perception into proper perspective hence the choice of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) as a public service delivery organisation.

3.4 Population and Sampling Strategy

A population for a research study can be defined as the total collection of elements, persons or objects about which a researcher wishes to make an inference on (Shah, 2023; Raymon & Darsaut, 2025). The research participants can include the whole target population (Shah, 2023); - census – however, most studies include a selection of a sample, which represents a subset of the target population. For the population and sampling strategy, the researcher interviewed four (4) public relations practitioners in the Public Relations Department of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) who have been actively involved in managing the communication of the service both internally and externally and nine (9) Fire Officers, selected evenly across the Operations, Administration and Fire Safety Department at the National Headquarters of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). This is targeted at scrutinizing the issue of PR strategy and public perception in relation to the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) from an all-round angle. The Ghana National Fire Service Headquarters has a total population of Six Hundred and Twenty-Eight (628) personnel according to figures from the Records and Statistic Department of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) who serve in operations and administration capacities. Additionally, the researcher also

interviewed market dwellers at the Makola Market in Accra, who have constantly experienced fire outbreaks over the years. The Makola Market is one of the largest markets in Ghana with a population of about 25,000 traders and hawkers with 10,000 daily visitors according to data, gathered from the managers of the market. Data from this selected population will provide the needed insight, understanding and dynamics into the impact of strategic public relations on public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). The study will also analyse content of Ghana National Fire Service engagement with the public on Facebook during the Kumasi Adum fire outbreak from the 21st to 24th of March, 2024. This is to allow the balance of people's sentiments of social media as well as data gathered through semi structured interviews to ascertain how public relation strategy can change public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS).

3.5 Research Instrumentation/Data Collection Technique

This study employed semi structured interview guide to elicit responses from participants on the perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) and how to improve it. This will help bring out the real issues from fire officers and the public to reflect what this study seeks to uncover. Additionally, the study will also make use of qualitative content analyses to review existing records and content about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), public expectations and the management of this expectation through strategic public relations.

Semi structured interview guide was used to collect information on lived experiences and views from the public. Using the semi structured interview enriched the data collected by allowing participants to freely express themselves on related topics other than keeping strictly to only to only predetermined questions. To complement the interview data, the study conducted a **qualitative content analysis** of posts from the official Ghana National Fire

Service (GNFS) Facebook page. The analysis focused on identifying dominant communication themes, tone, and strategies used in online public engagement. The qualitative content analyses created a balance between the live interview and already documented comments. The qualitative data also offered the opportunity and the benefit of tracking the change and fluctuations in perception over time and seasons in order to make proper meaning of data collected.

3.6 Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to analyse the interview data systematically. This style is most suitable for qualitative research as it focuses on classifying and interpreting patterns or themes within the data which help get understanding of participants' experiences and viewpoints (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis process commenced with transcriptions. Then to acquaintance with the data, where the interview transcripts were recurrently examining to ensure a thorough grasp of the content and context. This detailed examination of the data ensures that the researcher wholly conversant with the material, vital for correct and meaningful analysis.

Once familiarization was done, generating initial codes become the next step. Coding is a critical aspect of the analysis process that ensures specific data segments are identified and categorised based on their significance and implications on the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This study developed initial codes by methodically sorting out important extracts from the transcripts connected to an exploration into using strategic public relations strategy to change public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). The coding process helped to compress the vast data gathered from the research in volumes that can be easily managed to reflect the objectives of the research.

Proceeding from the coding process, came the grouping of the data into themes. Themes are

designs or a collection of codes that brings out important aspects of the data about the study questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This stage reviews and organizes the initial codes into comprehensible categories representing repetitive topics and insights.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

It is important to ensure adherence to ethical considerations for research studies in order not to violate any personal or institutional recommendations or rules (Hasan et al., 2021), and to ensure the credibility of the study. Firstly, consent and permission were sought from the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) and subsequently consent from the individual participating officers before including them as participants of the study. With reference to voluntary participation as highlighted by Hasan et al. (2021), the respondents were allowed to take part in the study out of their own free will, hence no participant was forced to provide information that they were not willing to. The participants were also informed that they could discontinue the interviewing process at will and at any time. The study also ensured participant anonymity and data collected from the interview was secured from the reach of any unauthorised hands. The interview was conducted in a conducive atmosphere ensuring the highest level of respect for all participants.

CHAPETER FOUR:

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Chapter four presents the findings of the research work on how strategic public relations can change public perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). The study was conducted with Officers of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) at the National Headquarters and traders at the Makola Market. The findings were based on the objectives of the study which include the current public relations strategy being used by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), the channels through which the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) implements strategic public relations and the challenges associated with the practice of strategic public relations.

4.1 Current Public Relations Strategy used by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) has disclosed that it currently employs proactive dissemination of information and public engagement during emergency operations as its communication strategy with its stakeholders.

4.1.1 Proactive Engagement with Stakeholders

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in recent times has tried to outwit negative information by putting out timely information about its operations to the public. This becomes a credible source of accurate information to journalists for the benefit of the public.

“We do not want the public to speculate on incidents or crises so we periodically or quickly come to inform the public about any current development or any incident and we tell our side of the story. We don’t allow the journalist or eye witnesses to tell the story”. (Source: Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025). This allows the Service to own the

narrative in order to minimize inaccuracies that may occur from other versions which may not necessarily reflect the facts. Participant 2 agrees by saying that *“We are trying to move away from the reactive kind of service delivery to proactive delivery by way of being ensuring that we are professional and transparent, taking advantage of clear communication, building trust within the public space”*. (Source: Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025).

Putting timely and verifiable information breeds trust and dependability which are very important elements employed in the practice of strategic public relations.

4.1.2 Involvement of the Public during Emergency Operations

The communication apparatus of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) puts out posts about live events on social media platforms to create awareness about the incident and to gauge the mood and thought of the public. According to Participant No 1 *“As it happens, what we have done, what we are doing, we tell the public and invite them into the conversation”* (Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025) This allows the Service to engage, clear doubts and assure the public of prompt action and control during emergency situations. This measure also allows for misconceptions to be cleared or corrected.

“Letting the public in on the live operations also breeds confidence and highlights the professionalism and selflessness displayed by firefighters” (Participant 3, personal communication, October 31, 2025) *“As the fight fires, perform rescue, do extrication, preserve live and safeguard the environment, we project their heroism, efficiency, and professionalism it changes perceptions and helps build confidence in the GNFS brand”* (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025).

4.1.3 Channels through which Information is Disseminated

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) disseminates information and engages its publics through a number of channels. These channels have been strategically selected to suit its wide net of stakeholders and target audience. Currently, social media, traditional media and one-on-one engagement are its preferred channels of engagement.

4.2.0 Communication Channels used by Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) for strategic Public Relations

Owing to the large number of stakeholders served by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) and their varied demographics, communication channels for the practice of strategic communication is considered very important to the Service.

4.2.1 Using Social Media Strategically as a Channel

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) uses social media as one of the vehicles to communicate strategically with its publics. *“We use social media platforms especially Facebook, that is what we are most active on and we have a lot of followership there” (Participant 3, personal communication, October 31, 2025)* The participant by this statement seeks to highlight the role of social media in its current public relation communication strategy. *“The Service is also making use of the new media, so we are heavily represented on all the social media platforms” (Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025)* This reinforces the point made by participant 3 about the productive use social media by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) for strategic communication purposes. For participant 2, the choice of channel for communication depends on the audience that ought to be reached *“Mostly, we use social media to change the perception and the narrative that people have or knew about the Service”.* (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025).

Counting the successes of the use of social media including timely dissemination of information, participant 2 *“What we have succeeded in using social media to do is helping to timely disseminate information on the various emergencies that we attend which makes information flow better than it was before through the power of social media and also, we are bringing them real time footages of the incidents that we attend. Our platforms therefore serve as a credible news source for the media and other stakeholders”* (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025).

4.2.2 Use of traditional Media

Traditional media prior to the emergence of social media served as the main means of communicating with the public. *“We haven’t abandoned the main stream media, we still make use of traditional media including TV radio and print”* (Participant 3, personal communication, October 31, 2025). Traditional media according to this participant is used to complement the gains being made from social media for total benefits. Print media in particular is scanned regularly to identify issues of interest to the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) for prompt and strategic actions to be taken.

4.2.3 The Role of Fire Service TV

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) owns the “Fire Service TV” an addition to efforts by the Service to give the public consistent and credible information on fire prevention and general safety. *“On our TV station, we have educational contents which we show on daily bases, so if you tune in to Fire Service TV every day, you are definitely going to be educated with respect to fire safety”* (Participant 3, personal communication, October 31, 2025) shared. These contents have also been found to go a long way to create the needed

understanding and clarity on some misconceptions about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS).

4.2.4 One-on-One Communication Approach

It was gathered that, one-on-one communication is used mostly during fire safety education drive exercises. These exercises are usually carried out in public places of assembly such as churches, schools and markets. This approach is used to achieve individual interest and involvement during sensitization campaigns leading to change in attitudes as well as offer tailor made service to suit individual fire safety needs which may not be necessarily catered for during mass communications fire safety education exercises such as that which is done on traditional media. As highlighted by participant 2 “*we want to change attitudes and help the ordinary Ghanaian acquire the needed skills and knowledge as far as safety is concerned for them to be able to prevent fire and other life-threatening incidents*” (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025).

4.3.0 Public Perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)

Public perception as expressed by the participants of this study come as per the individual experiences with the various services offered by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to the public in fulfilment of its mandate of preserving lives and property. This ranges from perception on public engagement, public education, operational performance and the attitude of the public on safety messages.

4.3.1 Perception on Public Engagement

The researcher’s interaction with the traders at the Makola market revealed their realities about the public engagements had with the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in relation to how to prevent fire outbreaks in the markets. Participant 4 revealed that, fire officers do not

organize fire safety education for the traders in Makola, it was further alleged that, fire officers have not lived up to the expectation. *“As for fire officers they don’t have any good reputation in this market” (Participant 4, personal communication, October 31, 2025)* However, in sharp contrast of this, participant No.5, 6 and 7 disagreed with this assertion. As per their narrated experiences, fire officers who are currently stationed at the market organize daily education and sanitization for the traders. *“The fire officers explain the causes of fire outbreaks to us and what we can do to prevent them” (Participant 6, personal communication, October 31, 2025).* *“They are doing what the can, some of us are recalcitrant“ (Participant 5, personal communication, October 31, 2025).* participant 7 said in also agreement *“ They educate us much about fire and how to prevent fire” (Participant 7, personal communication, October 31, 2025)* It was further revealed that, the officers also give public announcement by close of each day, prompting traders to properly switch off all electrical gargets and dispose of all open sources of fire before leaving the market. This according to these participants has prevented fire outbreaks in the market in the last two months. Public engagements and education in public places of assembly, is embarked on by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in all its administrative regions to create a safety informed society. *“Public sensitization is part of our routine, we do that through public institutions like the schools, we go to lorry parks, the worship centers so as to change attitudes. We want to help the ordinary Ghanaian to gain the necessary skills and knowledge to able to prevent fire and other life-threatening incidents’ (Participant 3, personal communication, October 31, 2025).*

4.3.2 Perception on the operational performance of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is mostly viewed through the lenses of its

operational performances including firefighting and rescue duties other than any other activity it performs. Given that, these activities are most practical ways by which the public encounters the Service, the various experiences by the public through these encounters become very critical in forming perceptions, image and reputation. Participant 6 said “*The reputation of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is good but our only problem with them is their response to fire scenes. Sometimes, by the time they respond to our distress calls the harm has already been done. Even though they're very close by they don't respond on time when they are called and sometimes, they respond without water*” (Participant 6, personal communication, October 31, 2025) Similar sentiment were also expressed by participants 4, 5 and 7. This lends credence to the importance the public places on the benefits they derive from the services rendered by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). Even though there was a positive consensus about all the other functions offered by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), true life experiences, lack of understanding of firefighting operations and the agelong unresolved misconceptions continue to dominate the narrative of the nature of perception the public keeps about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS).

4.3.3 Attitude of the Public to Safety Messages

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) continues to drum home the importance of unified efforts from the public and the service as the way to go in achieving fire prevention. “*Fire prevention is a shared responsibility between the public and the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)*”. (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025). In spite of this fact, fire officers continue to complain about the lack of interest and action from the public during fire safety sensitization exercises. ‘The safety department complains especially when it comes to the markets. But that is where we record most of the major fires. A large number of

Ghanaians are not doing what they are supposed to do when it comes to fire safety “(Participant 1, personal communication, October 31,2025). To further buttress the attitudinal difficulties a participant stated that “market activities will be paused to allow for a fire safety education that has been prearranged with market executives but no, it doesn’t happen like that most often” (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025). Similarly, according to participant 9, the public sometimes feel like our services are not needed. (Participant 9, personal communication, October 31, 2025). While most of the earlier comments pointed to lack of interest on the part of the public as reason for their negative attitude towards fire safety information and messages, participant 3 blames it on the lack of proper community entry procedures. “For you to get the support of the public, it will sometimes depend on your approach. In community entry you need to seek their consent and support, appropriate timing in order to get their buy in.” (Participant 3, personal communication, October 31, 2025). While the nonchalant attitude identified by participants regarding fire safety education this in itself may not affect public perception, it passes as a reason for frequent fire out breaks which gives rise to misconceptions.

4.4.0 Challenges encountered by GNFS in Practicing Strategic Public Relations

The public relations apparatus of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is the sole entity entrusted with the management of its image and reputation. This function is performed in tandem with other departments of the Service who invariably plays roles including operations, fire safety and administrations. As a paramilitary organization, the public relation departments rely on the Chief Fire Officer and the entire management team of the Service for direction and resource to deliver on its job. “I can say on authority that if we are well equipped with respect to PR tools e will do more to improve the image of the service. (Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025) This comes with a number of

challenges which hinder the smooth practice of public relations geared toward an improvement in perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). “*PR cannot happen without the support of management*”. (Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025) These include Inadequate operational logistics, limited management support, Bureaucracy (chain of command) and Misinformation in Rumour Management. “At the moment, we are faced with a whole lot of challenges and we are not even able to run live programmes on our Tv station because of equipment that are not functioning properly” (Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025)

4.4.1 Bureaucracy (Chain of Command)

Bureaucracy by way of lengthy reporting and instruction procedures have been fingered as some of the main challenges that impede the smooth practice of strategic public relations in the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). “*Sometimes you have to confirm what you will say from management*” (Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025) This statement points to the command-and-control regime that sometimes frustrates timely information flow to necessary stakeholders. This culminates in allowing inaccurate and half-truth to thrive ahead of information from the Service. “Sometimes, you will be amazed about what the public have to say about us and these people have already drawn their conclusions” (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025). This is reported as one of the sources of misconceptions that has plagued the service for many years.

4.4.2 Inadequate Management Support

“Sometimes the unwillingness of management to support the work of the PR department makes it difficult for us to achieve our goal because PR cannot happen without management blessing” (Participant, personal communication, October 31, 2025). This was a disclosure by

participant 1 and supported by participant 2 explaining that, the current improvement in strategic public relations activities which has contributed to the improvement in the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) brand can be partly traced to the support extended to the department by management. It then stands to reason that with more support to the public relations department, the service will benefit even more especially in the area of improved public perception and a more appealing brand.

4.4.3 Lack of Operational Equipment

It has been identified through this research that, the operational performance of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) has a positive relationship on how it looks in the eye of the public. Participant No.4 explained that, the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) does have a good reputation because of their underperformance each time they were called for emergencies. “They will even mind you when you call them during a fire incident even if they come the keep roaming everywhere for water” (*Participant 4 personal communication, October 31, 2025*) For fire officers interviewed, lack of logistics continues to humper the effectiveness of the operations of fire fighters. As long as this inadequacy continues, the performance of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) will continue to be called to question and as such its reputation. “Logistics is a factor, but the public doesn’t know, we that are in it know that we are constraint once you wear the uniform you must perform” (*Participant 9 personal communication, October 31, 2025*)

4.4.4 Misinformation in Rumour Management

Misinformation has been found to be one of the challenges confronting the efforts of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to duly and adequately bring the public along with its operations. Participant 2 admitted that “*Social media presents us with a two-edged sword*

situation because even though it is working for us, it in a way working against us as well” (Participant 2, personal communication, October 31, 2025) It came to light through this research that a chunk of this misinformation is carried out on the various social media platforms which offers a quick and easy information sharing opportunities to subscribers. Participant No.1 said *“If there are hundred people with phones at an incident scene and they decide to film and post; each will tell the story from different angles which may not even necessarily be the reality. (Participant 1, personal communication, October 31, 2025).*

4.5.0 Content Analysis of sentiments expressed by the public on GNFS official facebook page during the Adum PZ Fire from 21 to 24 March 2025

4.5.1 Background

In the early hours of Friday, 21st March 2025, a devastating fire broke out at Adum PZ, one of the most patronized commercial centres in Kumasi’s central business district. The fire, which purportedly broke out around 6:00 a.m. and swept through a four-storey building which houses shops trading in mobile phones, electrical goods, and clothing. Observers present described how thick smoke and flames engulfed the building and, in the process, destroyed property worth several millions of cedis. Firefighters from the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) responded swiftly to salvage the situation, but their efforts were hampered by lack of enough access to the fire scene as a result of congestion, and the highly combustible materials in the affected area. After two days of intense and consistent firefighting, the flames were finally subdued and completely extinguished.

Some of the traders, and firefighters sustained **minor injuries** and suffered **severe economic losses** as a result of the fire outbreak but the most devastating and traumatic effect was traders

watching helplessly as their investments were consumed by the inferno. The **Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)** subsequently launched an investigation into the possible cause of the firebreak, even though preliminary findings point to electrical fault.

During and after the fire outbreak, the **Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS)** actively engaged the public through the traditional media and its official communication channels, especially on **Facebook (@GNFS official)**. From **21st to 24th March 2025**, the Service released several updates, press statements, and situation reports intended to inform and reassure the public. These posts generated hundreds of **public reactions and comments**, reflecting how citizens perceived the Service's response, effectiveness, and communication approach.

This section of the study therefore presents a **content analysis of Facebook comments** related to the Ghana National Fire Service's communication on the Adum PZ fire. The analysis seeks to explore how the public **responded, engaged, and expressed sentiment** toward the Service's updates, and what these interactions reveal about the **effectiveness, tone, and reception** of GNFS's PR crisis communication strategy during the period under review.

4.5.2 Content Categories

No	Phase	Date	Type of Message	Main Message	Example Phrases	Communication Objective
1.	Outbreak Notification	21 st March 2025	Immediate situational report	Information of fire outbreak at Adum PZ; emergency call received at 6:05 a.m.	“HAPPENING NOW”: “Fire has engulfed the upper floor of a four-storey commercial building.	To inform the public promptly, establish transparency, and demonstrate GNFS’s preparedness and presence.
2.	Operational Update	22nd March 2025	Progress report	Fire confined; firefighting teams still at work to fully to completely extinguished the fire.	“Fire under control.”	To reassure the public of progress, maintain transparency, and build confidence in GNFS’s response efforts.
3.	Final Results	23 rd to 24 th March 2025	Confirmation and appreciation message	Fire completely extinguished; gratitude expressed to firefighters and the public for their cooperation.	Fire finally extinguished, thanks to the relentless efforts of our gallant firefighters.” “We appreciate the support of the public and allied agencies.”	To announce successful containment, highlight institutional competence, and boost staff morale.
4.	Media Engagements	22 nd to 24 th March 2025	Media interviews and briefings	PROs of GNFS grant interviews to media houses (e.g., JoyNews, Citi TV, Asaase Radio) to clarify facts, address rumours, and reinforce official information	We had challenges accessing the scene due to congestion, but the situation is under control.” “Investigations are ongoing to determine the cause.”	To manage the public narrative through the media, correct misinformation, and enhance public trust in the GNFS’s communication credibility.

4.5.3 Public Engagement Metrics (Qualitative Overview)

	Indicator	Observation	Interpretation	Sample Quotes	Narration
1.	Comments & Reactions	Early posts attracted high engagement (concern, praise, criticism).	Indicates strong public interest and trust-seeking behaviour.	<p>“This is serious, GNFS please act fast.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Well done firefighters, God bless you.” • “Why is the fire still burning after all these hours?” 	High comment volume showed strong public attention and reliance on GNFS for authoritative updates. The mixed tone reflected both appreciation and frustration showing that the public trusts GNFS to inform them, but also holds high expectations during emergencies.
2.	Sharing Frequency	Happening Now” updates widely shared by local media and citizen pages.	The GNFS’s Facebook served as a primary crisis source .	<p>“Please share, people need to avoid the area.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Let’s spread this so traders are aware.” 	Frequent sharing showed that the GNFS Facebook page acted as a central crisis information source . This amplified the Service’s reach and helped manage public movement and awareness during the fire.
3.	. Tone of Comments	Mixed feelings expressed; sympathy for victims, praise for firefighters, some accusations of delay	Reflects apparent credibility gap between public expectations and operational realities reinforcement of some negative perceptions.	<p>Sorry to all affected traders.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Our firefighters are trying — difficult location.” • “You should have gotten there earlier!” 	The mix of empathy, praise, and criticism showed a credibility gap between public expectations and the operational challenges of firefighting. Negative comments were driven mostly by emotional stress and misinformation, while positive ones reflected trust and recognition of effort.

4.5.4 Communication Strength

Timely initial communication.

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) announced to the public as soon as it arrived at the fire scene and promised to give updates.

4.5.5 Use of Visuals to Communicate Efforts

Initial Pictures and videos were put out for the public to understand and appreciate what efforts are being made to deal with the situation.

Sequential Updates provided Narrative Coherence

Periodic updates regarding progress in firefighting was put to ensure transparency and reassurance.

Photo evidence from Facebook capturing the information was shared including update by the Ghana National Fire Service along with the accompanying timelines have been attached below.

4.5.6 Evidence of Update from the Ghana National Fire Service

Update 1



Update 2



Update 3



Update 4



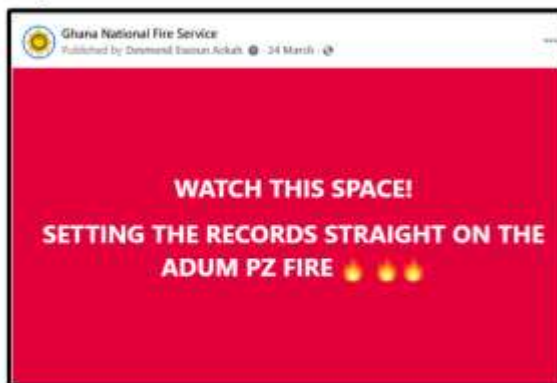
Update 5



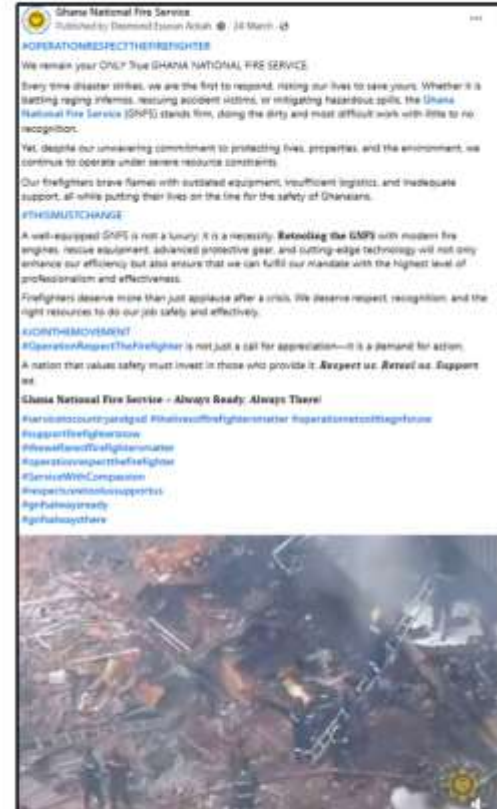
Update 6



Update 8



Update 7



4.5.7 Communication Gaps

Limited two-way Engagement

According to the content analyses, there was not enough engagement with the public and communication also was largely one sided. Against the practice of effective communication, the update flowed from the Ghana National Fire Service to the public with less attempt to receive feedback and address concerns being raised by the public.

Also, minimal empathy was shown on victim losses. This can be seen in the tone of the Facebook messages and updates which largely focused on bringing the public up to speed with the progress of the Ghana National Fire Service with regard to said fire outbreak. These messages gave little concern to the victims beyond the operational firefighting updates.

4.6 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research objectives, the literature reviewed, and the theoretical framework guiding the study. The discussion explains how the strategic public relations (PR) practices of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) shape public perception, the effectiveness of the communication channels used, public attitudes toward GNFS operations, and the challenges affecting PR practice within the Service. The discussion is guided by how existing studies discussed in this research as well as the theoretical framework that underpins the align or otherwise with the findings of this research. It will also bring the fore the implications of these discussions and recommendations.

Strategic Public Relations Practices and Public Perception of GNFS

Findings from the study show that the Ghana National Fire Service has increasingly adopted proactive communication strategies as part of its public relations practice. Officers interviewed highlighted deliberate efforts to share timely, accurate, and verified information during emergencies to reduce speculation and prevent the spread of misinformation. This finding supports existing literature by Schultz et al. (2021) and Wray, Ricardo and Rivers (2023), who argue that early and transparent communication helps build public trust and improves perceptions of emergency response institutions.

The proactive dissemination of information by GNFS reflects key elements of both the public information and two-way symmetrical models outlined under the Excellence Theory. By providing regular updates and clarifications during emergencies, the Service does not only inform the public but also reassures them, helping to manage expectations and reduce uncertainty. This supports Alexander's (2023) view that public relations plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion during crises through credibility and openness.

However, the findings also show that communication alone cannot fully determine public perception. Participants, especially traders, assessed GNFS largely based on operational performance, such as response time and availability of resources. This observation confirms Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory, which emphasizes that communication efforts must be matched with actual performance in order to sustain or improve organizational image.

Public Engagement and Two-Way Communication in GNFS Operations

The study further revealed that GNFS increasingly engages the public during emergency

operations, particularly through live updates on social media. Participants explained that these updates help to “bring the public along,” correct misconceptions, and highlight the professionalism of firefighters. This finding aligns with Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) assertion that effective public relations should be based on dialogue rather than one-way information flow.

From the perspective of the Excellence Theory, the use of interactive platforms suggests that GNFS has begun to adopt aspects of two-way symmetrical communication. The Service monitors public reactions, responds to questions, and corrects false information. The content analysis of Facebook comments during the Adum PZ fire further shows that many members of the public relied on GNFS’s official page for accurate information, indicating a degree of trust in the Service’s communication.

Despite these efforts, the interaction observed was largely reactive. While GNFS responded to comments and concerns, there was little evidence of formal structures for integrating public feedback into decision-making or policy development. This supports Grunig’s (1990) argument that public sector organizations often operate PR at a technical level rather than a strategic one, thereby limiting its overall impact.

Effectiveness of Communication Channels Used by GNFS

The findings indicate that GNFS employs a multi-channel communication approach, including social media, traditional media, Fire Service TV, and face-to-face engagement. Among these, social media particularly Facebook emerged as the most effective platform for real-time communication and public engagement.

This supports the work of Haupt (2021) and Steelman and McCaffrey (2013), who highlight the speed, reach, and interactive nature of social media in crisis communication.

The content analysis of Facebook posts during the Adum PZ fire confirms that GNFS's social media platforms served as a central source of crisis information. High levels of engagement, frequent sharing, and reliance by both the public and media organizations suggest that GNFS has successfully positioned itself as a credible and authoritative information source during emergencies.

Traditional media, though no longer dominant, was found to complement social media by reaching audiences with limited internet access. Fire Service TV also emerged as a strategic initiative aimed at continuous public education and correcting misconceptions. These findings align with FlowMSP, Inc. (2022), which emphasizes visibility and consistency as key factors in effective fire service public relations.

Face-to-face engagement during fire safety education exercises was particularly effective in influencing attitudes and encouraging safer behaviour. This supports Paton's (2003) view of preparedness as a combination of knowledge and behaviour and reflects the participatory principles emphasized in the Excellence Theory.

Public Perception of GNFS Engagement, Performance, and Safety Messages

Findings from traders at the Makola Market revealed mixed perceptions of GNFS engagement. While some participants viewed the Service as inactive or ineffective, others acknowledged regular education and daily safety announcements by stationed fire officers.

This variation highlights the subjective nature of risk perception, as explained by Rehani (2015), where individual experiences strongly influence attitudes toward emergency organizations.

Operational performance emerged as the most significant factor shaping public perception. Concerns about delayed response times and lack of water were frequently raised and tended to overshadow positive communication efforts. This supports Randall's (2025) argument that limited public understanding of operational constraints often leads to negative judgments of fire services.

Attitudes toward fire safety messages were generally indifferent or resistant, particularly in market settings. Fire officers attributed this to public complacency, while others pointed to weak community entry strategies. This finding reinforces the importance of culturally sensitive engagement approaches, as emphasized by the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience (2018). From the Excellence Theory perspective, the absence of strong community buy-in undermines genuine two-way communication and shared responsibility.

Challenges Affecting Strategic PR Practice in GNFS

The study identified several challenges that limit effective PR practice within GNFS. Bureaucratic communication structures and approval processes were found to delay the release of information, creating opportunities for rumours and misinformation to spread. This supports Krogh and Lo's (2023) observation that delayed communication during emergencies can weaken public trust.

Limited management support and inadequate PR logistics further constrain the department's ability to operate strategically. These findings reinforce Grunig's (1990) argument that PR units without strong managerial backing struggle to influence organizational reputation and decision-making.

Operational logistics shortages were also found to have a direct impact on public perception. Even when communication efforts are effective, poor operational outcomes tend to dominate public narratives. This highlights the close relationship between operational performance and public relations in emergency service organizations.

Misinformation, particularly on social media, remains a major challenge. While social media increases visibility, it also enables the rapid spread of unverified information, creating what Oktariani and Wuryanta (2020) describe as information overload. Although GNFS attempts to counter misinformation through timely updates, these efforts are often constrained by internal and external factors.

Findings that Differ from Existing Literature

Although the findings of this study largely support existing literature on strategic public relations and emergency communication, some differences emerged, mainly due to contextual factors.

Several studies reviewed earlier suggest that public perception of fire services is generally positive, especially in developed countries where firefighters enjoy high levels of trust and public appreciation (Bull et al., 2021; De Wit & Helsloot, 2021). However, findings from this study show that public perception of the Ghana National Fire Service is **mixed**. While some respondents praised the commitment and bravery of firefighters, others, particularly traders at

Makola Market expressed dissatisfaction with response times and resource availability. This suggests that in Ghana, public trust is more closely tied to visible operational outcomes than institutional reputation, highlighting the impact of resource constraints on perception.

Existing literature also emphasizes the role of public education in improving preparedness and influencing positive safety behaviour (Paton, 2003; Kuday et al., 2023). In contrast, this study found that public response to fire safety education, especially in markets, remains largely indifferent. Fire officers reported low participation and limited cooperation during sensitization exercises. This finding challenges the assumption that awareness automatically leads to behaviour change and points to socio-economic pressures and livelihood demands as factors influencing public engagement.

Social media is widely described in the literature as an effective tool for transparency and trust-building during crises (Haupt, 2021; Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013). While this study confirms that GNFS's Facebook page served as a major source of credible information during the Adum PZ fire, it also reveals that timely updates and visual evidence did not fully eliminate criticism. Negative perceptions persisted, suggesting that during crises, public reactions are shaped by emotions and expectations as much as by information.

Implications of Findings

The findings have several implications. First, they show that strategic PR is essential but insufficient on its own to change public perception without improved operational capacity. Second, the study highlights the need to reposition PR within GNFS as a strategic management function, consistent with the Excellence Theory. Third, the findings imply that public trust in emergency services depends on both communication quality and service delivery outcomes.

Recommendations based on Findings

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- GNFS should strengthen two-way symmetrical communication by institutionalizing feedback mechanisms beyond crisis periods.
- Management should provide stronger logistical and administrative support to the PR department.
- GNFS should intensify public education on operational limitations to manage expectations.
- Community entry strategies should be improved through collaboration with market leaders, chiefs, and local authorities.

4.7 Conclusion

In summary, the discussion shows that the strategic public relations practices of the Ghana National Fire Service have a positive influence on public perception, particularly through proactive communication, stakeholder engagement, and effective use of digital platforms. However, public perception is also shaped by operational realities, resource limitations, and public attitudes toward safety. While GNFS demonstrates elements of two-way symmetrical communication, the full application of the Excellence Theory requires stronger management support, reduced bureaucratic barriers, improved operational capacity, and deeper community involvement.

Although the Service engages the public through social media, feedback is rarely integrated into long-term decision-making, reflecting the bureaucratic nature of the organization. Overall, these differences highlight the importance of context in applying public relations theories and demonstrate that strategic PR practices must be adapted to local realities to effectively shape public perception.

CHAPTER FIVE:

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the key findings from the study, draws conclusions based on the research objectives, and offers recommendations for how the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) can use Strategic Public Relations to improve public perception. It also presents suggestions for future research in the area of public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) and the role of strategic public relations.

5.2 Summary of Findings

The aim of the study was to ascertain how strategic public relations can be applied to change public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) by analyzing the current public relations strategies being used by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), how the public responds to Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) communication and the challenges faced by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in the practice of public relations strategies. The data analyses revealed several themes relating to the research objectives.

First of all, the study found out that, the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) currently uses proactive engagement as its public relations strategy to change public perception about the service. This according the findings of the research is done through involving the public in emergency operations where videos and footages of live incidents are shared on social media and timely periodic updates given for the information of the public. By doing this, the public is brought along to observe for themselves happenings at incidents scenes instead of relying solely on what is reported by the media or other witnesses which may not necessarily reflect

the whole picture. This helps to prevent or correct misconception and expose the public to the effort fire fighters put into controlling and dealing with emergencies. Additionally, the use of social media as a public relations strategy has helped the service reach the public with prompt, timely and factual information which helps to prevent speculations and disinformation by bloggers and other social media users. A content analyses conducted on the official Facebook page of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) on a specific fire incident as part of this study strongly supports this position that, the public receives timely information and regular update in incidents. It came to light through the analyses that, regular update from the Service built trust and transparency in the Service. Also, one on one communication style adopted by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in disseminating fire safety information is contributing to improving fire safety awareness among the public thereby drumming home the importance of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in the lives of the public.

Another theme for the research is the communication channels used by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in its communication in order to improve public perception about the Service. The research revealed that, social media remains one of the fast-growing channels that offer the opportunity to reach the public in real time especially the youth who are present on the various social media platforms. Social media also helps the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) get timely feedback and also engage the public on issues of this interest. According to the content analyses, Facebook served as a primary crises source of information to the public. This promotes good understanding and a better relationship between the Service and the public. In addition to social media, traditional media is another channel used by the Service to communicate to the public. With the influx of media houses across the length and breathe of the country, it has become useful for the service to engage the public in local

languages which is more relatable to the people. It is therefore common to see fire officer throng to local media houses to interact with the people with the aim of changing perceptions and educating them on best safety practices. Scanning print media helps to identify issues that can degenerate into crises so as to nip them in the bud. This works to preserve the image and reputation of the Service. It is in line with this that Fire Service TV was acquired by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to augment its strategic public relations efforts by providing consistent education and trust worthy information to the public. This also helps the public to verify information sourced from other media outlets and individuals.

The third theme has to do with how the public perceives the Service as it discharges its mandate over the years. When it comes to perception about public engagement and education, most of respondents acknowledged the work of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in terms of visibility and frequency. It was gathered that, the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) carries out regular inspections in the Makola market and also prompts traders to put out all electrical garget and open fire sources before they leave the market by the close of each day. The research findings however pointed to nonchalant attitude and noncompliance on the part of some of the traders as part of the reason for which the market has seen fire outbreaks in the past. Intensifies safety education and enforcement of rules and regulations was suggested as an antidote to these findings. The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) therefore has a good perception when it comes to public education and safety inspections. On the other hand, when it comes to perception on operational performance, the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) scored low points with most responders unimpressed about the response, approach and speed of the Service. Even though some respondents indicated that there has been an improvement in this perception, it is still deeply rooted among many of the responders.

On the theme of challenges facing the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in the practice of strategic public relations, some of the issues raised include bureaucracy also known in paramilitary circles as “chain of command” this according the findings poses a great challenge to information dissemination especially in terms of time. The many reporting channels and the excessive interference in the work of the pr practitioner impacts negatively on information management which is an important component of the practice of strategic public relations practice. Management support is crucial in perception management if the best results are to be achieved. Misinformation also continues to pose a hurdle to the proper practice of strategic public relations in the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) according to findings.

5.3 Conclusion

The study concludes that the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) currently implements a public relations strategy which focuses on proactive engagement with the public with the aim of controlling the narrative on information concerning the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) and its operations. The result of the content analyses concluded that, the public relates very well with information share about Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) operations on social media. This has succeeded in keeping away false information and projecting the channels used by the service as a credible. In the same vein, letting the public in on the live operational efforts of the service during emergencies has helped to dispel to a large extent some long standing misconceptions about the operations such as coming to fire scenes without water. This effort which is often carried out on the various social media platforms has brought to the fore the heroic labours of firefighters and also their struggles. This is helping change the narrative of labelling the firefighters as lazy.

Given the finding, the research also concludes that social media has become one of the most useful tools of passing timely information to the public since it provides the opportunity for feedback and interactions. It also helping to achieve the long-term agenda of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) which is to grow a fire safety informed generation as most of the youth are present on these platforms. Furthermore, the influx of traditional media in nearly every part of the country affords the service the convenience of communication in a language best understood and relatable to the public. Fire Service TV has also come in to offer consistency and continues fire safety sensitization drive and a source of credible information to the public. One on one communication has helped the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) to relate on personal levels and proffer tailor made solutions solution to suit individual interest and habits.

With regards to public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS), the study concluded that, the general perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) in the area of public engagement and sensitization is far better compared to perception on its operational performance. This was confirmed by the views expressed in the content analyses which revealed an apparent credibility gap between public expectations and operational realities reinforcement of some negative perceptions, it has become abundantly clear that most of the of the bad perceptions associated with the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) emanates from its operational performances.

The study concluded that the identified challenges contorting the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) if not checked will continue to be a set back to the strategic public relations efforts of the organization. Bureaucracy or “chain of command” delays effort and enable a void that is often filled by information which may not exactly be a representation of the reality. Also, the

failure on the part of management to see the public relations apparatus as partners denies the service of making appropriate strategic public relations decision. Additionally, misleading information sometime from the quarters of high profiled personalities such as politicians have hampered strategic public relations efforts. It is concluded that inadequate supply of equipment has an indirect but significant bearing on the perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). The phenomenon feeds directly into poor operational performances on the part of firefighters which then creates doubts about the competence of the Service which further generate a cloud of negative perception for the service.

5.4 Recommendations

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) must dedicate more of its communications efforts to engagement instead of just putting out information. Even though some effort is already been done, a deliberate and consistent approach to this will be will create more understanding and clear more doubts.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to improve public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) using strategic public relations.

The public relations department must be allowed by the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) Management to take charge of its role of ensuring a good image and reputation for the service. The tradition of long reporting procedures must be relooked so as to facilitate information flow to and from the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). This will help eliminate delays in information dissemination to the public especially during crises situation and prevent the dependence on information from the grape vine by the media particularly and the public in general.

Management needs to see the public relations department as a partner in developing the service and give it all the support including the supply of modern gargets and equipment for its operations. Quality pictures and videos for example will attract the attention of the public to information being disseminated while poor visuals may convey unseriousness and cause lack of interest.

The Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) needs to undergo major retooling especially for its operations in order to perform creditably to the expectation of the public. Findings from this research has amply indicated that most of the poor perception issues associated with the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) is as a result of its questionable operational performances. The poor operational performance has also been linked to inadequate resourcing of the Service. the right and appropriate equipment will ensure good delivery which will engender trust and ultimately positive perception.

5.5 Future Studies

Based on the findings and recommendations of this study, future research could explore several areas to deepen understanding of how strategic public relations can shape public perception of the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS).

One important direction for future studies is to examine the role of leadership and management support in the success of strategic public relations within the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS). Since bureaucracy and limited autonomy were identified as major obstacles, further research could look into how leadership attitudes, decision-making structures, and internal communication systems influence the effectiveness of PR practitioners in the Service.

Future researchers may also consider investigating how public trust translates into actual behavioral change, such as compliance with fire safety regulations. Comparative studies involving other emergency service organizations, both within and outside Ghana, could also offer valuable lessons and best practices that the Ghana National Fire Service (GNFS) might adopt.

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APPENDIX

1.0 Interview Guide

Interview Guide

An Exploration of PR Strategies for Changing Public Perceptions About the Ghana National Fire Service.

My name is Joan Aku Adjei, a final year student offering MA in Strategic Public Relations Management at the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC). This thesis seeks to unravel public relations strategies on for changing public perception about the Ghana National Fire Service. I humbly request your views and participation in this study to enable me gain an understanding into how the Ghana National Fire Service can capitalize on PR Strategy to gain a better public perception. You are assured that all your contributions will be treated with the highest level of confidentiality. You are all free to withdraw from participating in this interview anytime you deem it necessary. Your support is highly appreciated.

PR Strategies employed by the Ghana National Fire Service

1. What public relations strategies or communication approaches does the GNFS currently employ to engage the public?
2. Through which channels or platforms does the Service communicate with the Public?
3. How often are public education or sensitization campaigns carried out?

4. what role do internal communication and stakeholder engagement play in GNFS's PR efforts?

5. Are there any specific PR campaigns you can highlight as examples of success?

6. How does the Service measure the impact or success of its PR strategies?

7. How often do you hear from or interact with the Ghana National Fire Service?

8. What kind of information do they usually share with the public?

9. Can you share the medium through which you mostly get information from the Ghana National Service? What is your preferred medium?

Public Perceptions about the Effectiveness of PR Strategies currently employed by the GNFS

1. How would you assess the effectiveness of your current PR Strategies in improving public understanding and cooperation?

2. How does the public generally respond to GNFS communication efforts?

3. Have there been any changes in public attitudes towards Fire Safety or the Service as a result of your PR activities?

4. What feedback mechanisms are in place to assess public perception of GNFS?

5. How would you describe your perception of the Ghana Nation Fire Service?

6. Do you think their communication with the public is effective? Why or why not?

7. How responsive are they when you contact them during emergencies?
8. Have their public education campaigns influenced how you handle Fire Safety?
9. In your opinion, what could the GNFS do differently to improve its relationship with the public?

Challenges preventing the GNFS from Implementing Effective PR Strategies

1. What major challenges does the GNFS face in implementing its PR strategies?
2. Are there resource or logistical constraints that affect your ability to carry out PR campaigns?
3. How supportive is management and government toward PR initiatives?
4. What internal or external factors hinder effective communication with the public?
5. What measures would you suggest to overcome these challenges?
6. What do you think prevents the Fire Service from communicating effectively with the public? Can you suggest a better approach?
7. What suggestions would you give to help improve the GNFS public relations and outreach activities