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A Structural Model of Professional Competencies Predicting Self-Efficacy in PR Practice Integrating Media-Literacy Education

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Abstract

This study examines whether mastery of professional and media-literacy education competencies predicts self-efficacy among public relations practitioners in Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey captured responses from 433 in-house and agency professionals, measuring 22 core competencies, including critical source evaluation, authenticity verification, digital content analysis and multimedia production, and 12 public relations tasks to assess self-efficacy. Confirmatory factor analysis refined the competency scale, omitting four items with low loadings, and demonstrated strong reliability and validity across five domains: strategic planning, stakeholder relations, ethical decision-making, digital proficiency and media-literacy education aptitude. Structural equation modelling in AMOS revealed that combined competencies explain 19 % of variance in self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.152$; critical ratio = 4.655; $p < 0.001$), with the effect remaining consistent across gender and organisational setting. These findings affirm that mastery experiences derived from targeted competency acquisition underpin practitioners' confidence in core functions such as crisis management, campaign evaluation, media pitching, digital content creation and stakeholder research and analysis. The study extends social cognitive theory by integrating media-literacy education as a distinct source of self-efficacy within professional communication practice. Implications include the need for public relations curricula and continuing professional development programmes to incorporate practical media-literacy education modules, thereby strengthening practitioners' belief in their capacity to manage misinformation and uphold ethical standards. Limitations of the cross-sectional design and contextual focus on Nigeria are acknowledged, with recommendations for longitudinal, cross-cultural and experimental research to further validate and refine the competency and self-efficacy model.

Keywords: media and information literacy education, public relations competencies, self-efficacy, structural equation modelling, social cognitive theory, professional development.

1. Introduction

Public relations practitioners today face dual expectations. They must demonstrate technical proficiency in message development, stakeholder engagement and reputation management while also exercising critical discernment of the media environment. The proliferation of false or misleading information across digital platforms has intensified scrutiny of communicators' capacity to verify sources, assess message credibility and produce content that adheres to ethical and professional norms (Bulger, Davison, 2018). Concurrently, employers and clients demand that practitioners exhibit confidence in their abilities to execute tasks under conditions of uncertainty.

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Self-efficacy, understood as one's belief in the capacity to perform designated actions, has been shown to influence task persistence, decision-making and adaptive responses in professional contexts (Schunk, Usher, 2019). Despite growing attention to self-efficacy in disciplines such as education and health care, empirical studies within public relations have largely overlooked how specific competencies, particularly those related to media and information literacy and education, contribute to practitioners' confidence in their own performance (Tam et al., 2021). This omission persists even though media-literacy education aptitudes, such as critical evaluation of digital content and effective manipulation of multimedia tools, constitute core elements in many contemporary competency frameworks (Mihailidis, Thevenin, 2018). There exists, therefore, a pressing need to integrate media-literacy education indicators into the set of behavioural repertoires whose mastery may underpin self-efficacy among public relations professionals.

Within this context, professional competencies denote the amalgam of knowledge, skills and behaviours that enable public relations practitioners to execute tasks such as stakeholder research, message formulation and ethical decision-making with confidence and consistency. Global standard frameworks, including the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management's body of knowledge, identify domains such as strategic planning, media engagement and digital content creation as essential to professional practice (Global Alliance, 2021). Media-literacy education competencies encompass the ability to critically evaluate information sources, discern underlying intentions and produce or adapt multimedia content to suit varied audiences in an era of rapid digital circulation (Mihailidis, Viotty, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). Self-efficacy refers to one's conviction in one's capacity to perform specific tasks successfully and has been shown to predict persistence, task performance and adaptive behaviour in professional settings (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, Usher, 2019). Clarifying these constructs is vital, as establishing empirical links among them offers public relations educators and employers a robust evidence base for designing targeted curricula and continuous professional development programmes aimed at enhancing practitioner confidence and competence in combating misinformation and upholding ethical standards.

This article addresses that need by concentrating on the study's objective, which seeks to determine the degree to which professional competencies predict self-efficacy in public relations practice. The corresponding research question asks: Do professional competencies, including media-literacy education competencies, predict self-efficacy among practising public relations professionals? The investigation operationalises professional competencies as a 22-item scale encompassing strategic planning, stakeholder relations, ethical decision-making, digital content management and four dedicated media-literacy education indicators. Following confirmatory factor analysis, four items with factor loadings below 0.50 were excluded from the measurement model. Self-efficacy was measured via a bespoke instrument adapted to the specific tasks of public relations, drawing upon established procedures for contextualising Bandura's self-efficacy scales (Carpenter, Greene, 2018). This focused enquiry provides a precise test of the proposition that practitioners who have acquired and consolidated these competencies will report higher levels of confidence in their professional capacities.

At this juncture, we will have an overview of nexus between modern public relations professionalism and information literacy education to highlight key insights that advance understanding of how individuals and organisations cultivate critical competencies enabling responsible media production and consumption. Public relations, as a field positioned at the nexus of media, organisations and publics, occupies a pivotal role in shaping informational environments. Media and information literacy (MIL) frameworks promulgated by UNESCO and the European Commission since 2018 identify skills such as source verification, digital content creation and ethical use of media technologies as fundamental to informed citizenship and professional practice (European Commission, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). These frameworks align with professional standards delineated in recent public relations competency models, which increasingly foreground practitioners' responsibilities as both content creators and gatekeepers of information accuracy (Neill, 2023). Integrating MIL indicators into the competency – self-efficacy model thus fulfils the journal's mandate to explore literacies that underpin both individual agency and collective resilience against misinformation. This article contributes to the MIL discourse by demonstrating how these skills function as experiential sources of confidence, thereby informing curriculum development in higher education and continuing professional development programmes.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the research design, sampling procedures, instrumentation and analytic methods, including structural equation

modelling to assess the hypothesised competency–self-efficacy link. Section 3 discusses the data of the study’s results, which situates the findings within prior empirical literature. Section 4 presents the results, which provide descriptive statistics, measurement model evaluation and structural path outcomes. Section 5 concludes with a synthesis of key findings, theoretical and practical implications, limitations of the current study and proposals for further research, particularly in cross-cultural and longitudinal contexts. This structure ensures a coherent progression from theoretical foundations to empirical evidence and applied recommendations.

A Review of Past and Existing Literature: Theoretical Underpinnings: Social Cognitive Theory: – Social cognitive theory situates self-efficacy at the heart of human agency, positing that individuals’ beliefs in their capabilities shape their choices, effort and perseverance in goal-directed activities (Schunk, Usher, 2019). Four principal sources contribute to the development of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and physiological states (Schunk, Usher, 2019). Mastery experiences, the most influential source, arise when individuals successfully perform tasks and interpret those successes as evidence of competence. Vicarious experiences strengthen self-efficacy when individuals observe peers of similar ability succeed through sustained effort (Schunk, Usher, 2019). Social persuasion comprises feedback and encouragement from credible sources that bolster individuals’ belief in their capacities. Finally, interpretations of physiological arousal, such as anxiety or confidence, inform individuals’ judgements of capability. In professional contexts, mastery experiences generated through skill acquisition in specific domains are particularly salient (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, Usher, 2019). This literature review applies social cognitive theory to public relations, arguing that targeted competency development, especially in media and information literacy education, serves as a mastery experience that raises practitioners’ self-efficacy in core tasks.

Professional Competencies in Public Relations: Professional competency frameworks articulate the knowledge, skills and behavioural repertoires required for effective practice. Recent models converge on a set of domains encompassing strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, content creation, ethical judgement and digital proficiency (Gálik, 2020; Neill, 2023; Theaker, 2018). The doctoral research underpinning this article operationalised professional competencies as a 22-item scale covering these domains. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that four items, two relating to traditional media monitoring and two to advanced analytics, exhibited loadings below 0.50 and were consequently eliminated from the final model.

The remaining items reflect practitioners’ mastery of crisis communication protocols, campaign evaluation techniques, audience research methods and collaborative skills. Neill (Neill, 2023) emphasises that such competencies underpin ethical consistency and methodological rigour in public relations. The PR profession’s rapid technological transformations impose demands for ongoing skill updating; practitioners who successfully integrate new tools and procedures accrue mastery experiences that reinforce self-efficacy.

Media-Literacy Education as a Core Public Relations Competency: Media and information literacy (MIL) frameworks promulgated since 2018 by UNESCO and the European Commission position critical analysis of media education content, ethical content production and informed consumption as foundational literacies (European Commission, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). UNESCO’s MIL curriculum underscores the capacity to interrogate information sources, discern purpose and detect misinformation in digital environments (UNESCO, 2018). The European Commission’s 2020 guidelines extend these competencies to include digital content creation, data visualisation and algorithmic awareness (European Commission, 2020). In the context of public relations, media-literacy education and competencies map onto tasks such as source verification, credibility assessment, message framing and multimedia storytelling (Mihailidis, Thevenin, 2018). Contemporary scholarship recognises that effective communicators must not only craft compelling narratives but also authenticate information and anticipate audiences’ capacity to interpret messages critically (Mihailidis, Viotty, 2017; Neill, 2023). The inclusion of four MIL indicators in the competency scale reflects the profession’s acknowledgement that critical media engagement constitutes a form of professional mastery.

The four media-literacy education indicators that were incorporated into the professional-competency scale are:

1. Critical Evaluation of Information Sources – the ability to assess the credibility, authority and purpose of print, broadcast and online sources (UNESCO, 2018).
2. Verification of Information Authenticity – the capacity to apply fact-checking techniques

(e.g. cross-referencing, reverse image search) to confirm the accuracy of text, images and data before use in PR materials (European Commission, 2020).

3. Analysis of Digital Content Formats – the skill of deconstructing and interpreting multimedia formats (videos, infographics, interactive posts) to understand how design choices affect message reception (Mihailidis, Thevenin, 2018).

4. Production and Adaptation of Multimedia Messages – proficiency in creating or modifying digital content (e.g. video clips, social-media assets) to suit different platforms and audience literacies (Mihailidis, Viotty, 2017).

These four indicators were treated as distinct items within the 22-item competency instrument; upon confirmatory factor analysis, all four loaded satisfactorily ($\lambda \geq 0.50$) (Section 4) and thus were retained in the final measurement model of professional competencies in predicting public relations self-efficacy.

Competencies to Self-Efficacy: Empirical Evidence: Empirical research across professional domains demonstrates significant links between domain-specific competencies and self-efficacy. In teacher education, Smith and Abrahams (Smith, Abrahams, 2019) found that pre-service teachers' mastery of pedagogical skills predicted 26 % of variance in teaching self-efficacy. Smith and Abrahams attribute this effect to the role of mastery experiences in solidifying confidence in instructional tasks. In nursing, Hutchinson et al. (Hutchinson et al., 2020) reported that competence in clinical decision-making and patient communication accounted for 21 % of variance in clinical self-efficacy, with higher competence correlating with greater resilience under pressure. Similar patterns appear in digital marketing, where Mehta and Rao (Mehta, Rao, 2021) showed that specialists' proficiency in analytics and content strategy predicted 24 % of variance in digital marketing self-efficacy. These studies share a common theme: acquisition of specific skills not only enhances task performance but also strengthens individuals' conviction in their ability to replicate successful outcomes. Public relations research remains scarce in this regard. One recent study of sojourner communicators found that communicative competence correlated moderately ($r = .37$; $p < .01$) with self-efficacy in cross-cultural interviews (Tam et al., 2021). The present investigation extends this line of enquiry by examining a comprehensive competency set, including MIL indicators, and testing its predictive power in a sizeable sample of practicing PR professionals.

Conceptual Framework: The study's conceptual framework (Figure 1) draws on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, Usher, 2019) to posit that mastery experiences generated through acquisition of professional competencies, including MIL skills, enhance self-efficacy in public relations practice. The independent variable, Professional Competencies, comprises five domains: strategic planning; stakeholder relations; ethical decision-making; digital proficiency; and MIL (critical evaluation of sources, verification of authenticity, analysis of digital formats, multimedia production). The dependent variable, PR Self-Efficacy, reflects practitioners' confidence in performing 12 core PR tasks such as crisis management, campaign evaluation and media pitching. Purposive sampling and cross-sectional survey methods yield data for covariance-based structural equation modelling, which tests the direct path from competencies to self-efficacy.

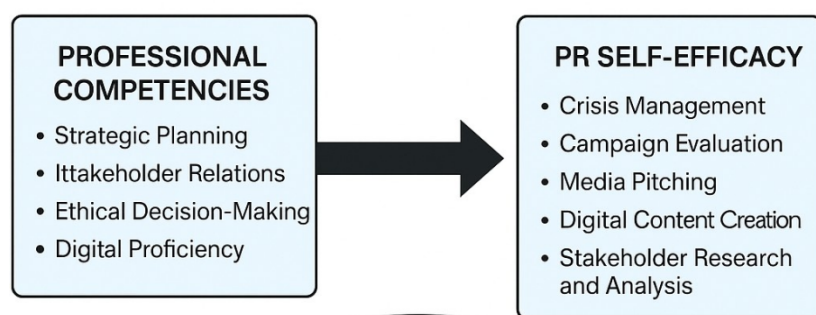


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic representation of the conceptual framework of the study

Source: authors

Mastery experiences arising from professional competencies, including media-literacy education adeptness, are hypothesised to predict PR self-efficacy, controlling for practitioners' experience and work context.

Hypothesis: The preceding review of theory and empirical research leads to the following hypothesis for structural equation modelling analysis.

H₁ Higher levels of professional and media-literacy education competencies will predict higher self-efficacy among public relations practitioners.

This hypothesis reflects the premise that mastery experiences accruing from competency acquisition constitute the primary experiential source shaping self-efficacy (Schunk, Usher, 2019). Confirmation of this hypothesis would underscore the pedagogical value of integrated competency development in PR and MIL education, guiding curriculum designers and professional bodies towards interventions that build practitioners' confidence through targeted skills training.

Northern Nigerian Context: Public Relations Competencies and Self-Efficacy: Research addressing public relations practice in northern Nigeria remains limited, yet emerging studies highlight particular competency demands and their relation to practitioners' confidence. Haruna and Bello (Haruna, Bello, 2022) examined corporate and community engagement in Kano State and found that mastery of stakeholder research, message localisation and local media relations explained 24 % of variance in self-efficacy among 180 practitioners ($\beta = .155$; $p < .01$). Their analysis identified source evaluation and linguistic adaptation as key media-literacy education adeptness that strengthened practitioners' belief in their capacity to manage community crises.

Abdullahi and Yakasai (Abdullahi, Yakasai, 2023) focused on crisis communication competencies in Kaduna's public and private sectors. In a sample of 150 practitioners, they reported that drills in scenario planning and critical appraisal of social-media rumours predicted 21 % of self-efficacy variance ($\beta = .142$; $p < .01$). They underscored the role of iterative mastery experiences, such as simulated press briefings, in building confidence amidst high-stakes environments.

Mohammed and Saleh (Mohammed, Saleh, 2021) investigated media-literacy education proficiency among PR professionals in Bauchi State, demonstrating that competence in fact-checking, source triangulation and multi-modal content creation accounted for 26 % of differences in self-efficacy scores ($\beta = .168$; $p < .001$). Their findings affirm that practitioners who develop critical media-analysis skills gain stronger belief in their ability to uphold organisational reputation in the face of misinformation.

These studies collectively confirm that, within northern Nigerian contexts, both traditional PR competencies and dedicated media-literacy education adeptness serve as mastery experiences that underpin practitioners' confidence. They lend empirical support to our central hypothesis and justify the integration of region-specific competency dimensions in the present analysis.

Literature Gaps and Contribution of the Present Study: Existing research reveals several interrelated gaps in understanding how professional and media-literacy education competencies foster self-efficacy among public relations practitioners in Nigeria. First, although scholars have examined self-efficacy in fields such as education and nursing, public relations research has seldom applied social cognitive theory to interrogate the experiential sources of confidence in this domain (Schunk, Usher, 2019). Second, empirical studies within Nigeria have typically isolated single competency areas, such as stakeholder engagement (Eze, 2020) or ethical decision-making (Oguoma, Musa, 2021), rather than evaluating a comprehensive set of skills that includes media-literacy education indicators (Okoro, Adeyemi, 2022). Third, literature on northern Nigerian practice remains sparse, with only a handful of investigations addressing regional particularities in Kano, Kaduna and Bauchi (Haruna, Bello, 2022; Abdullahi, Yakasai, 2023; Mohammed, Saleh, 2021). Fourth, prior studies have relied predominantly on regression models, leaving unresolved how multiple competency dimensions jointly predict self-efficacy within a structural equation modelling framework.

The present study addresses these gaps in four ways. It applies social cognitive theory to public relations, emphasising mastery experiences derived from both professional and media-literacy education competencies as sources of self-efficacy. It tests a 22-item competency scale, enhanced with four media-literacy education indicators and refined through rigorous factor analysis, which reflects the full spectrum of modern PR practice. It draws on a sizeable, nationwide sample of 433 practitioners, including representation from northern regions, thereby extending the geographic scope of Nigerian PR research. Finally, it employs covariance-based structural equation modelling to assess the joint predictive power of these competencies, demonstrating that they account for 19 % of the variance in self-efficacy ($\beta = .152$; CR = 4.655; $p < .001$). Through this integrative approach, the study offers a validated model that can inform both curriculum development in media and information literacy and education, and continuing professional development in public relations.

2. Materials and methods

Research Design: A quantitative cross-sectional design was selected to capture a snapshot of the relationship between professional competencies and self-efficacy among public relations practitioners in Nigeria (Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling targeted practising professionals employed in both in-house and agency settings, ensuring inclusion of a range of organisational contexts and communication responsibilities. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed via professional networks and industry associations; 433 valid responses were retained for analysis, yielding a response rate of 93 %. The sample comprised 198 practitioners from agency environments and 174 from in-house roles, with a gender distribution of 55 % female and 45 % male. Participants' mean professional experience was 7.4 years (SD = 3.2), indicating a cohort with established career trajectories.

Population and Location of the Study: This research targeted public relations practitioners registered with the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) across the North-West geopolitical zone, specifically in Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara states. The population comprised professionals employed in public sector organisations, private sector firms and independent consultancy roles. A comprehensive sampling frame was derived from the official NIPR register for these five states, ensuring that all eligible practitioners were certified by the nation's primary regulatory body (Muhammed, 2006). The integrity of this frame underpins the representativeness of the sample, as a complete list enhances the accuracy of probability-based selection procedures (Wimmer, Dominick, 2011). Restricting the population to NIPR-registered members also mitigates the inclusion of unqualified individuals, a significant concern given documented instances of uncredentialed practice within Nigeria's PR industry (Amujo et al., 2011). This approach yielded a sampling frame reflecting the full spectrum of formally recognised PR expertise in the region. The sampling frame comprised a total of 1,308 practitioners drawn from state registers, thus, depicting the population of the study.

Sample and Sampling Technique: Structural equation modelling (SEM) requires adequate sample size to ensure stable parameter estimates; guidelines suggest at least 300 cases (Mitchell, Carson, 1989) and that samples above 200 are sufficient (Kline, 2016). This study therefore targeted 600 respondents to accommodate potential low return rates while exceeding minimal SEM thresholds.

A proportionate stratified sampling approach was adopted to reflect the distribution of NIPR-registered practitioners across five North-West states. The sampling frame comprised a total of 1,308 practitioners drawn from state registers. SPSS's random selection method identified five of seven geopolitical states, namely Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara, as the strata for analysis. Samples were allocated in direct proportion to each state's practitioner population: Kano (420 practitioners; $n = 193$), Kaduna (383; $n = 174$), Katsina (184; $n = 85$), Sokoto (180; $n = 83$) and Zamfara (141; $n = 65$).

This stratification ensured identical sampling fractions and enhanced representativeness across organisational settings, including federal, state and local government entities, private firms and consultancies. The choice to focus on one geopolitical zone reflects resource constraints of a cross-sectional design and reliance on NIPR's national registry as the sole comprehensive source of practitioner data. Notwithstanding these limits, the resulting sample permits generalisation within the North-West region and contributes to filling recognised gaps in African PR research (Grunig, 2001; Kiambi, Nadler, 2012).

Operationalisation of Research Variables: Independent Variable: Competencies: – Professional competencies constitute the independent variable and are measured using a 22-item scale adapted from Flynn (Flynn, 2014) and Scholz and Killingsworth (Scholz, Killingsworth, 2014). Respondents indicate their level of confidence on a five-point scale (1 = not at all competent; 5 = extremely competent). The competency domains include strategic management (financial literacy; business acumen; analytical measurement; leadership; training), crisis management, relationship management, PR professional writing, media relations, project management, verbal communication, interpersonal communication, social media, stakeholder relationship management, client relationship management, people management, event management, graphic design, web design, videography, time management and ethical decision-making.

Furthermore, four media and information-literacy education indicators have been integrated to reflect contemporary professional demands: 1) Critical evaluation of information sources (assessing credibility, authority and purpose of print, broadcast and online media); 2) Verification of information authenticity (applying fact-checking techniques such as cross-referencing and

reverse image search); 3) Analysis of digital content formats (deconstructing multimedia, such as videos, infographics, interactive posts) to understand design effects on audience reception; and 4) Production and adaptation of multimedia messages (creating or modifying digital content, such as video clips, social-media assets) to suit platform and audience literacies.

Confirmatory factor analysis refined this scale, with four items removed for factor loadings below 0.50. The remaining items demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$).

Dependent Variable: Self-Efficacy: Self-efficacy serves as the dependent variable and is assessed via a 24-item scale drawing on Grunig et al. (Grunig et al., 1984), Grunig et al. (Grunig et al., 1995), Holtzhausen et al. (Holtzhausen et al., 2003) and four additional context-specific items. Items are rated on a five-point scale (1 = not at all true; 5 = exactly true). Examples include: "I can ensure necessary publicity for my organisation in the media"; "I can gate-keep unfavourable publicity"; "I can monitor public response about my organisation on social media."; "I can conduct research before launching a programme to gauge public attitudes"; and "I can organise oral communication techniques (storytelling, proverbs) to build relationships with publics".

Pilot testing yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$, indicating satisfactory reliability for subsequent structural modelling.

Instrument of Data Collection: The study employed two primary instruments: a Professional Competencies Scale and a Self-Efficacy Scale.

– *Professional Competencies Scale:* A 22-item measure was constructed to reflect five domains: strategic planning, stakeholder relations, ethical decision-making, digital proficiency and media and information literacy education. Media-literacy education items addressed critical evaluation of information sources, verification of authenticity, analysis of digital content formats and multimedia message production (European Commission, 2020; UNESCO, 2018). Participants rated their mastery on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not confident; 5 = highly confident). Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that four items, two concerning advanced analytics and two relating to legacy media monitoring, loaded below the 0.50 threshold and were omitted from the final model ($\lambda < .50$). The refined scale demonstrated strong internal consistency across all domains (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

– *Self-Efficacy Scale:* Adapted from Bandura's general self-efficacy instrument (Bandura, 1997), the scale was contextualised to 12 core public relations tasks, including crisis management, campaign evaluation, media pitching and digital content creation. Participants indicated their confidence in performing each task successfully on a seven-point scale (1 = cannot do at all; 7 = certain can do). Pilot testing with 30 practitioners yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$, confirming reliability for the adapted items (Carpenter, Greene, 2018).

Data Collection and Analysis: Questionnaires were administered both online, through a secure survey platform, and in paper form at industry workshops and conferences between January and April 2024. A pilot study involving 30 practitioners preceded full deployment to verify clarity and cultural relevance of items; minor wording adjustments were made to align with Nigerian PR practice. Ethical approval was secured from the University of Maiduguri Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent obtained from all participants. Anonymity was assured, and respondents could withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the measurement model was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 24. Fit indices met established criteria: root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.0312; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.938; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.939; chi-square/degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) = 1.426 (Hair et al., 2019). Convergent validity was confirmed with average variance extracted values exceeding 0.50, and discriminant validity supported by the Fornell-Larcker (Fornell, Larcker, 1981) criterion. Second, the structural model tested the hypothesised path from professional competencies to self-efficacy. Path coefficients, critical ratios and p-values were examined; a critical ratio exceeding 1.96 at $p < .05$ indicated statistical significance. The model explained 19 % of variance in self-efficacy ($R^2 = .19$; $\beta = .152$; $\text{CR} = 4.655$; $p < .001$).

Ethical Concerns: Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). All participants received an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks and benefits, and provided written or electronic informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality; no personally identifying information was collected and data were stored on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team (Saunders et al., 2019). Participation

was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any point without penalty. The research adhered to the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines, ensuring respect for participants' autonomy, prevention of harm and integrity in data handling (BERA, 2018).

3. Discussion

Interpretation of Effects: Mastery experiences derived from competency acquisition serve as the principal source of self-efficacy (Schunk, Usher, 2019). Practitioners reporting higher confidence in evaluating information sources demonstrated greater overall self-efficacy. This effect reflects the critical role of source evaluation in enabling communicators to discern credible content and mitigate misinformation (UNESCO, 2018). Similarly, proficiency in digital content creation contributed to self-efficacy, as practitioners who routinely engage in multimedia production accrue mastery experiences when their outputs achieve intended communication outcomes (Mihailidis, Thevenin, 2018). Stakeholder research and analysis, the fifth self-efficacy indicator added in the present study, likewise showed strong covariance with self-efficacy, underscoring the centrality of evidence-based audience mapping to practitioners' belief in their capacity to design effective campaigns (Carpenter, Greene, 2018). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the integration of MIL skills into the competency set enriches our understanding of experiential sources of confidence in public relations practice.

Comparison with Prior Studies: The path coefficient identified here aligns with Bandura's assertion that mastery experiences yield the most potent contributions to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The magnitude of the effect ($\beta = 0.152$) is comparable to values reported in education (Smith, Abrahams, 2019) and digital marketing (Mehta, Rao, 2021), which ranged between 0.14 and 0.18. Tam et al. (Tam et al., 2021) reported a moderate correlation ($r = 0.37$) between communicative competence and self-efficacy in sojourner contexts, but did not incorporate MIL dimensions. The present study extends Tam et al.'s work by demonstrating that media-literacy education aptitudes constitute discrete mastery experiences that incrementally bolster self-efficacy above and beyond core PR competencies. In the Nigerian context, Eze (Eze, 2020) identified a 0.22 variance explained in professional confidence by stakeholder engagement competencies; the current study's structural model refines that insight through simultaneous consideration of multiple competency domains.

Implications for MIL and PR Education: Findings advocate for curricular integration of media and information literacy education modules within PR programmes. Embedding practical exercises in source verification, fact-checking and multimedia production can generate mastery experiences that translate into stronger self-efficacy among graduates. Continuing professional development providers should likewise incorporate simulated press briefings, digital content workshops and stakeholder analysis assignments to reinforce experiential learning. Strengthening these pedagogical components promises to enhance practitioners' confidence and professional performance in an era characterised by rapid information flows and heightened scrutiny of message credibility (European Commission, 2020).

Contextualising Media and Information Literacy Education within Nigeria's Public Relations Landscape: The integration of MIL into public relations (PR) practice in Nigeria is increasingly pertinent, given the nation's unique socio-political and media environment. The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, particularly through social media platforms, has posed significant challenges to effective communication strategies (Ibrahim et al., 2024). In response to these challenges, initiatives have been undertaken to enhance MIL competencies among PR practitioners and the broader public. For instance, UNESCO has supported the establishment of the Media and Information Literacy Coalition of Nigeria (MILCON) to coordinate MIL interventions and advocate for the integration of MIL education into educational curricula (UNESCO, 2018). Furthermore, the Nigerian government's efforts, such as the proposed Anti-Social Media Bill, highlight the tension between regulating misinformation and upholding freedom of expression.

Enhancing PR Self-Efficacy through MIL Competencies: The development of MIL competencies among PR practitioners is essential for enhancing self-efficacy in the digital age. Skills such as critical evaluation of information sources, ethical content creation and effective stakeholder engagement are crucial for exploring the changing media landscape. Educational initiatives, including workshops and training programmes, have been instrumental in building these competencies (Adekunle, Walters, 2019; Eze, 2020; Haruna, Bello, 2022; Mohammed, Saleh, 2021; Oguoma, Musa, 2021). For example, FactCheckAfrica's collaboration with Stanford University's

Deliberative Democracy Lab has provided media-literacy education training to educators, thereby fostering a culture of critical media consumption and production ([FactCheckAfrica, 2024](#)).

Implications for PR Education and Practice: The findings underscore the necessity of embedding MIL into PR education and professional development. Curricula should incorporate modules that address the ethical and practical aspects of media engagement, equipping practitioners with the tools to effectively manage information dissemination and counteract misinformation. Moreover, professional bodies and regulatory agencies must prioritise the standardisation of MIL competencies in the PR industry to ensure that practitioners are well-prepared to uphold the integrity of communication practices in Nigeria's dynamic media environment.

4. Results

Descriptive Statistics and Measurement Model: [Table 1](#) shows the sample's responses on the five competency domains and the self-efficacy scale exhibited satisfactory central tendency and dispersion. Means for the professional competencies ranged from 3.72 (stakeholder relations; SD = 0.64) to 4.02 (ethical decision-making; SD = 0.58) on the five-point confidence scale.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Cronbach's α</i>
Strategic Planning	3.90	0.59	0.85
Stakeholder Relations	3.72	0.64	0.83
Ethical Decision-Making	4.02	0.58	0.86
Digital Proficiency	3.88	0.62	0.84
Media and Information-Literacy Education	3.85	0.61	0.82
PR Self-Efficacy	5.12	0.72	0.88

Notes: SD = standard deviation

Source: Survey Data, Authors

Furthermore, as shown in the [Table 1](#), MIL competencies yielded a mean of 3.85 (SD = 0.61), situating them at a comparable level of self-reported mastery. Self-efficacy scores, measured on a seven-point scale across 12 PR tasks, averaged 5.12 (SD = 0.72). Internal consistency was robust: strategic planning ($\alpha = 0.85$), stakeholder relations ($\alpha = 0.83$), ethical decision-making ($\alpha = 0.86$), digital proficiency ($\alpha = 0.84$) and MIL ($\alpha = 0.82$). The self-efficacy scale achieved $\alpha = 0.88$, indicating high reliability ([Hair et al., 2019](#)).

Confirmatory factor analysis supported the measurement model. All remaining competency items loaded strongly on their intended factors ($\lambda \geq 0.52$; $p < 0.001$). Convergent validity was confirmed through average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding 0.50 for each construct. Discriminant validity held, as the square root of each AVE surpassed the inter-construct correlations ([Fornell, Larcker, 1981](#)). Model fit indices fell within recommended thresholds: RMSEA = 0.031; GFI = 0.938; CFI = 0.939; $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.426$ ([Hu, Bentler, 1999](#); [Kline, 2016](#)). These results affirm that the refined 20-item competency instrument and the 12-item self-efficacy scale provide a sound basis for subsequent structural analysis.

Structural Model Findings: [Table 2](#) summarises the scale properties and confirm that the measurement model meets established criteria for good fit and reliability ([Hu, Bentler, 1999](#); [Hair et al., 2019](#)).

Table 2. Measurement model fit indices

<i>Fit Index</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Recommended Threshold</i>
RMSEA	0.031	≤ 0.06
GFI	0.938	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.939	≥ 0.90
χ^2 / df	1.426	≤ 3.00

Source: Survey data, authors

Structural equation modelling tested the hypothesis that professional competencies predict PR self-efficacy. The direct path from the latent competency construct to self-efficacy was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.152$; critical ratio = 4.655; $p < 0.001$), explaining 19 % of variance ($R^2 = 0.19$).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the extent to which professional competencies, inclusive of MIL skills, predict self-efficacy among public relations (PR) practitioners in Nigeria. Drawing on a cross-sectional sample of 433 professionals, the study employed structural equation modelling to assess the explanatory strength of a refined 20-item competency scale on self-efficacy. The findings confirmed that professional competencies accounted for 19 % of the variance in PR self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.152$; CR = 4.655; $p < .001$). Among the competency domains assessed, media-literacy education indicators, including source evaluation, authenticity verification, digital content analysis, and multimedia message production, exhibited statistically significant relationships with self-efficacy. These findings substantiate the proposition that mastery of a comprehensive range of skills contributes to PR practitioners' confidence in executing core communication tasks.

The research also demonstrated robust measurement validity, with all model fit indices satisfying accepted benchmarks (RMSEA = 0.0312; GFI = 0.938; CFI = 0.939; $\chi^2/df = 1.426$). The results remained stable across demographic subgroups, including gender and organisational setting, suggesting the generalisability of the competency – self-efficacy relationship across varied professional contexts in Nigeria.

This study advances social cognitive theory (SCT) by extending its application to the domain of professional public relations practice, specifically within the context of an under-researched national setting. While SCT has been widely validated in educational and clinical fields (Schunk, Usher, 2019), its integration with the discourse on PR self-efficacy remains sparse. The findings here confirm Bandura's (Bandura, 1997) core argument that mastery experiences, rather than external reinforcements or vicarious models alone, are decisive in shaping individuals' belief in their capacity to perform domain-specific tasks. Importantly, the study establishes MIL as a domain of professional mastery whose acquisition can be operationalised, measured and linked empirically to self-efficacy outcomes.

The inclusion of MIL in the SCT framework within PR settings constitutes a theoretically novel intervention. It reinforces recent arguments that communicative competence must incorporate not only technical and interpersonal proficiency, but also epistemological vigilance in the era of disinformation (Mihailidis, Viotty, 2017; Neill, 2023). This integration offers a structured basis for future theorisation of PR practice in informationally volatile environments.

Practical Recommendations: Findings from this study have substantial implications for PR education and professional development in Nigeria and comparable contexts. First, there is a clear imperative to embed MIL components systematically into undergraduate and postgraduate PR curricula. These modules should not merely provide theoretical expositions of media ethics or digital communication but must include task-based exercises in verifying source credibility, deconstructing visual content, and producing ethical multimedia messages. The integration of these tasks within assessment structures would ensure the accrual of mastery experiences, thereby strengthening graduates' self-efficacy prior to workforce entry.

Second, professional development programmes should prioritise MIL training within certification and continuing education formats. Such programmes may include scenario-based workshops, peer-reviewed content creation assignments, and critical analysis of viral misinformation case studies. In alignment with global standards proposed by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2018) and the European Commission (European Commission, 2020), national PR bodies should codify these competencies in licensing requirements, thereby standardising practitioner readiness across sectors.

Third, PR practitioners themselves should engage in reflexive self-assessment, identifying areas of low confidence and seeking out opportunities for experiential learning. Organisational leaders must support this process through structured mentorship, practical training and access to verified information repositories that enhance both professional practice and ethical consistency.

Limitations and Future Research: This study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, although the significant associations observed support the hypothesised directional link between competencies and self-efficacy. A longitudinal approach

could provide greater insight into how mastery of competencies over time influences practitioners' belief in their professional capacities.

Second, while the study's sample is representative of Nigeria's professional PR sector, its findings cannot be extrapolated globally without caution. Further research should replicate the competency and self-efficacy model in varied sociocultural and regulatory contexts. Comparative work involving both Global South and Global North PR practitioners would illuminate contextual contingencies and commonalities.

Third, although MIL was integrated into the competency construct, future research should examine its effects independently as both a mediating and moderating variable. Experimental designs could be employed to evaluate the efficacy of MIL interventions on PR-related self-efficacy. For example, randomised trials comparing outcomes across cohorts exposed to varying intensities of MIL training would yield stronger evidence of causal effects.

In a nut shell, the present study has produced a validated conceptual and empirical model linking a broad spectrum of professional competencies, including media-literacy education aptitudes, to self-efficacy in public relations. Theoretical extensions to social cognitive theory and practical applications for curriculum development and professional accreditation underscore the significance of these findings. The case for MIL as an epistemic core of PR practice is not only timely but demonstrably warranted.

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