

Public Relations and the Management of Students in Selected Tertiary Institutions in Taraba State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the extent of recognition and application of public relations in the management of students in selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on excellence theory. The study adopted a survey design. The instrument for data collection was questionnaire. In this regard, the study administered 380 copies of the questionnaire on the respondents. The collected data were presented, analyzed and interpreted both quantitatively and qualitatively. Findings revealed that selected tertiary institutions poorly apply public relations to achieve harmony with their students. The study concluded that the extent public relations is applied by the management of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in managing the relationship with their students is very low. It therefore, recommended among others that tertiary institutions in Taraba state should be conscious of what public relation can do for them by effectively applying it in achieving a harmonious relationship with their students.

Keywords: Management, public relations, relationship, students and tertiary institution

Introduction

One issue which has become a norm in tertiary institutions is the concept of public relations practice, which is essential for effective management of students and other publics of universities. This is based on the fact that no institution whether product or service based can survive in complete isolation. Chiakaan and Chile (2020) have stated that every institution needs public relations to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between the managements and the students. These have gone a long way to question the extent of recognition, appreciation and application of public relations by university managements to manage students related affairs effectively. Consequently, all these approaches if not well managed and applied could affect the smooth running and harmonious working relationship between students and the managements. Of course, such lack of effective management and recognition due to poor application of public relations may no doubt create room for constant hostility between the management and students of tertiary institutions not only in Taraba State but Nigeria as a whole.

However, a situation whereby students' demands and vital needs are seemingly ignored which created rooms for such students to be aggrieved probably, as a result of not tackling their problems while initiating policies, taking critical decisions and implementing them. With such understanding, if full explanation of the reasons behind certain action are not carefully explained by using any of the public relations approaches like staging of event, public meetings and conferences to some extent, students will not maintain positive view about the institution and its leadership (Ogah, Abutu & Terna, 2016), consequently, a mutually agreeable and mutually student-friendly school environment and a mutually acceptable union will not be established (Ugande, 2001).

Echoing a position that is similar to the above assertion, Chiakaan and Chile (2020) maintain that all efforts by public relations in any organization should be geared towards creating a healthy environment for institutions to thrive in order to carry out their activities successfully. In line with this, the role of public relations is very crucial in universities, polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Colleges of Agriculture, even in primary and secondary schools, as public relations can help to redeem the lost glory of education at these levels of education, because the situation as it is now is not good enough (Chiakaan & Chile, 2020). Of course, public relations can also serve as a tool of cultivating, managing and sustaining a cordial and harmonious relationship between the institutions and their publics who Chiakaan (2016) has described as "non-conformists". While studies by different scholars such as Chiakaan (2016) and Oshunbiyi (2004) have shown that tertiary institutions are not in the dark about the benefits of public relations to them, the way institutions practice it in projecting their corporate image and achieving a peaceful and a harmonious relationship with their various publics leaves much to the desired. Apart from the numerous strike actions embarked upon by staff of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, students have on numerous occasions embarked on both violent and peaceful demonstrations as a result of unpopular policies by management of tertiary institutions or government. This no doubt becomes questionable the way and manner public relations is practiced by tertiary institutions in Nigeria which is the crux of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, tertiary institutions have been bedevilled with various crises ranging from violent protest to boycotting of classes. Such crises are either caused by staff or students who are internal stakeholders of the institutions. One bad thing about such crises is that academic activities are always disrupted, apart from closure of schools. These crises become more dangerous when students are against policies, plans and programmes of managements of their institutions. This is because lives are lost and properties destroyed, apart from disruption of public peace.

This has been the ugly situation with tertiary institutions in Nigeria - implying that the relationship between tertiary institutions and one major group of their stakeholders, students is very poor. Of course, poor relationship, in this regard, is a testimony of lack of recognition and application of public relations strategies by the managements of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This is because

public relations that supposed to play a very crucial role in almost every educational institution to help institutions become better known, influence decision making, build relationships between staff, students and managements, improve the image of tertiary institutions, establish goodwill and maintain a good and positive relationship with the host communities appears not to be fully utilized by the managements of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

No wonder, students of tertiary institutions carry out protests or demonstrations to express high level of dissatisfaction over diverse issues economically, politically or socially inclined (Ericson, 1975). Given this background, it becomes worrisome as to whether the institutions apply public relations effectively or not in relationship management with their students. Fundamentally, therefore, this study investigates the public relations approaches by selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in achieving harmony with their students.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives to be achieved by the study include:

- i. To determine the extent to which managements of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State apply public relations in managing relationship with their students.
- ii. To identify the public relations approaches adopted by managements of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in achieving harmony with their students.
- iii. To determine the effects of the public relations approaches on the relationship between managements and students of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba state.

Conceptual Clarification

Public Relations

Public relation is about reputation management, the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Many scholars have come up with different definitions of public relations because of their diverse culture and background but, despite the different definitions offered by scholars in this field, there are key elements that have managed to appear in their various definitions such as communication, understanding, goodwill mutuality, publics, organization, relationship etc. This indicates that no matter the angle one tries to look at, public relations deal with human beings and physical facility and not abstract things.

Cutlip, Centre and Broom (2006) define public relations as a management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutual relationship between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends. That means, the effective performance of any institution depends greatly on the extent public relations is perfectly practiced for posterity because no institution can operate in a vacuum.

Okafor (2003) says that public relations is a term used in three senses: The relationship with those who constitute the organization's publics or constituencies, the ways and means of achieving relationships and the quality or status of the relationship. The Webster's New International Dictionary, third edition, looks at public relations as the promotion of rapport and goodwill

between persons, firms, institutions and the publics. This is because, public relations is a distinct management function which helps to maintain mutual lines of communication between an organization and its public.

However, the Institute of Public Relations in Britain (IPRB) in her own conception sees public relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and her publics. Similarly, Hutton (2021) added that the World Assembly of Public Relations in Mexico City in August 1978 cited in Chiaakaan and Chile (2020) states that public relations is the art and science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization's leadership and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest. As an art, public relations involve some creative challenges. While as a science, it incorporates tested principles that guide operations and practice of public relations as a philosophy and function of management to study and evaluate public attitudes, news, expectations and opinions as well as to develop and implement programme of actions to serve the public interest, so as to achieve goodwill and reputation. Chiaakaan and Agaku (2014) added that, Public relations is a soft-sell where everything involved in achieving favourable opinion about the organization is put in place to project, reflect and promote the image of such an organization, which will in turn lead to positive perception of the organization to gain a well-deserved prestige and reputation.

This therefore, implies that the attainment of organizational goals to a greater extent lies on the ability of the organization to make effective use of public relations to elicit sound corporate image in that, the main thrust of public relations is to provide conducive learning atmosphere in institutions and business to thrive effectively in organizations. However, it goes beyond ensuring harmonious relationships among staff students and the management in universities and the host communities.

Tertiary Institution

Tertiary institutions are educational centres whereby students enjoy unrestrained freedom. Many students of tertiary institutions are leaving their parents and guardians to a place, where there appears to be no regulation as per when to wake up and how to eat for the first time. As part of their contributions, Chiaakaan and Tsafa (2021) point out that most tertiary institutions only exist in principle as they are not delivering the required services that can create student-friendly school environment that can take Nigeria out of under-development. Likewise, Ode (2006) observed that there is no doubt that our tertiary institutions have plethora of problems which are rooted in non-provision of essential amenities. According to him, various problems such as staff and student's indiscipline, insubordination, students' protest or riots have behind them deep communication problems.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on excellence theory. The theory was propounded by James E. Gruing in 1985. The excellence theory is a general theory of public relations which spells out how public

relations can be organized and managed in order to enable organizations achieve their goals (Udo and Apkan 2010). This is to say that organization that adopts public relations can enjoy favourable conditions in their areas of operations. Wilson (2004) argued that communication add value to an organization because it helps to build good long-term relationship with its strategic publics. In support of this, Asemah (2010) agreed that public relations are a management function of which, any organization that recognize and appreciates the managerial value of public relations can be in a better position to organize and manage the function excellently for their overall goal attainment. Atero (2013) explains that the value of public relations to organization lies on how they organize and manage it especially, the good relationship organizations have with their publics. This is true because effective implementation reduces cost of negative publicity caused by poor relationship, as well as the risk of making wrong decision that affects different stakeholders.

The essence of the theory is the explanation of how best public relations can contribute excellently as a management ideology to the overall organizational effectiveness. However, adopting this theory in institutions of higher learning will contribute to the overall organizational excellence which the managements can use to enhance their operations by maintaining two-way, balanced communication and healthy relationship with their various stakeholders especially the students. The recognition and application of this theory will go a long way in fostering lasting relationship between the students and the managements of Federal University, Wukari and Taraba State University, Jalingo.

The Roles of Public Relations in Organizations

No business organization in the present dispensation can survive without the activities of public relations. This is because public relations play crucial role in building the reputation of organizations based on its vision, mission, goals and performance (Adamolekun & Ekundayo, 2007). Cutlip *et al* (2006) choose to categorize the role of public relations in organizations along task lines, by listing ten elements that summarize what public relations do at work thus:

- i. **Writing:** Editing print and broadcast media, news releases, feature stories, newsletters, correspondence, website/online media, annual reports, speeches, brochure and booklet texts, institutional advertisement, product information and technical materials.
- ii. **Special events management:** Arranging and managing news conferences, conventions, anniversaries, fund-raising, visiting dignitaries, awards, facility visits, exhibitions, annual general meetings, press launch and trade shows.
- iii. **Speaking:** Gaining speaking platforms, coaching others, speaking to groups
- iv. **Production:** Creating art, photographical layout, brochures, booklets, reports, advertisements and periodicals, recording and editing audio and video tapes, preparing audio visual presentations.
- v. **Training:** Media training and public appearance, coaching others in writing and communication skills. Helping to introduce change in culture, policy, structure and process.

- vi. **Contact:** Liaising with media, community, internal and external groups, listening, negotiating, managing conflict, mediating, meeting and entertaining guests and visitors.
- vii. **Counseling:** Advising management on social, political and regulatory environment, crisis, avoidance and management, working with others on issues management.
- viii. **Management:** Overseeing the cost of running the public relations programmes, paying the bills.

Methodology

The study adopted survey research design with the population of 33,954 involving students and management staff of the institutions under study. Adopting Taro Yamane's sampling size formula, the study reduced the size of the population to 400. Data were collected through the instrument of questionnaire which was administered both purposively and by the use of simple random method. Administration of the data was done for four days and only 380 questionnaires, representing 96% was collected back and found worthy for analysis. Before the instrument was administered, it was validated by senior and experienced experts in the field of public relations. The collected data were presented in tables using simple percentages with analysis done contextually.

Result of the Findings

Below is the presentation and analysis of the data collected.

Table 1: The Extent to which Managements of Institutions apply Public Relations.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Very low extent	138	36
Low extent	106	28
High extent	72	19
Very high extent	18	5
I do not have any comment	46	12
Total	380	100

Source: Field survey 2022.

In Table 1 above, it can be noted that managements of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State practiced public relations at a very low extent in managing their students. This is the position of 36% of the sampled respondents. According to 28% of the respondents, the institutions practice public relations but to a low extent. 19% identified high extent, 18% identified said the institutions practiced public relations to a high extent while 12% said they have no comments as to the extent the institutions practiced public relations in achieving and maintaining harmony with the students. This shows that even though institutions recognize and apply public relations, they apply it to a low extent.

Table 2: Public Relations Approaches Adopted by management of the Institutions.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Addressing students during convocations and matriculations	85	22
Organizing football matches and extra-curricula activities	67	18
Sponsoring field trips and excursions	47	12
Organising orientations, workshops and seminars	62	16
Counselling students	109	29
I cannot tell	10	3
Total	380	100

Source: Field survey 2022.

Data in the Table have shown that 22% of the respondents said that the public relations approach adopted by managements of the selected institutions in Taraba State include addressing students during convocations and matriculations, 18% of the respondents identified organizing football matches and extra-curricula activities, 12% of the respondents identified sponsoring field trips and excursions, 16% of the respondents pitched tents with organising workshops and seminars as the approach adopted, 29% of the respondents said counselling students is the approach adopted while 3% of the respondents said they could not identify any approach used by the managements of the selected tertiary institutions in managing relationships with their students. This shows that managements of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State adopt different public relations approaches in managing relationship with their students.

Table 3: How Managements of Institutions Apply Public Relations to Achieve Harmony with Students.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Poorly applied	108	28
Not applied at all	83	22
Effectively applied	74	19
Applied but not much	48	13
I do not know	67	18
Total	380	100

Source: Field survey 2022.

In the Table above, 28% of the respondents indicated that the way and manner managements of the selected institutions apply public relations to achieve harmony with their students is poor, 22% of the respondents indicated that public relations is not applied at all by the selected tertiary institutions, 19% of the respondents indicated that public relations in the selected tertiary institutions is effectively applied. 13% said that it was applied but not much, while 18% said they do not know. The result of Table 3 shows that managements of the selected institutions in Taraba State do not apply public relations effectively in managing, achieving and maintaining harmony with their students.

Table 4: Relationship between Institutions and Students.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	20	5
Very cordial	80	21
Not too Cordial	180	74
Total	380	100

Source: Field survey 2022.

Data in Table 4 have shown that 5% of the sampled respondents said relationship between managements and students of the selected tertiary institutions is excellent. 21% said that the relationship is very cordial, 74% said that the relationship between students and managements of the selected tertiary institutions is not very cordial. From the data collected, it can be deduced that the relationship between managements and students of the institutions under study is poor.

Table 5: Effects of the Relationship between Management and Students of Selected Tertiary Institutions

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Constant closure of schools and expulsion of students due to riot or protest	117	31
Hostile relationship between students, staff and host communities	75	20
Students always abusing & fighting lecturers	50	13
High rate of cultism and other anti-social vices by students	98	25
Students are very happy and peaceful – managements friendly	30	8
I do not have any comment	10	3
Total	380	100

Source: Field survey 2022.

Data in Table 5 have shown that 31% of the sampled respondents said that the effect of the relationship between managements and students of the selected tertiary institution in Taraba State is constant closure of schools and expulsion of students due to riots. 20% identified hostile relationship between students, staff and host communities while, 13 % of the respondents revealed that students always abuse and fight their lecturers. Also, 25% of the respondents indicated high rate of cultism and other anti-social vices by students while 8% said that students are very happy, peaceful and friendly to management, as 3% of the respondents indicated that they do not have any comment. This implies that as a result of the inability of management of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State to apply public relations in an effective manner, the institutions have a poor relationship with their students resulting in constant demonstrations by the students and other negative consequences which do not project the corporate image of the institutions positively.

Discussion of Findings

This study was aimed at determining public relations practice and the management of students in selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. In order to achieve the objective of this study, research questions were raised and data were collected accordingly. The findings of this study are hereby discussed. Foremost, the study wants to find out, to what extent public relations is applied by managements of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in managing relationship with their students. The answer to this question had been provided by the data collected in Table 1, where 36% of the respondents said that the extent public relations is applied by managements of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in managing relationship with their students is very low while 28% respondents said the managements applied public relations to a low extent. Very low extent and low extent imply that the institution recognize public relations but unfortunately, they are not good at applying it in order to achieve and sustain a very cordial relationship with their students. Public relations according to Haywood (1984) in Chiakaan (2016) is what all organizations recognise because they want to be known by their publics. Recognising and applying public relations, however, are two different things. This finding has therefore clearly shown that although management of the selected tertiary institutions recognise public relations, the way they apply it is nothing to write home about.

Of course, even though, the institutions apply public relations to a very low extent, there was need to find out the public relations approaches they adopt. This is the concern of question two. The answer to this question had been provided by Table 2. The respondents affirmed that the approaches adopted by the managements of the selected tertiary institutions include addressing students during convocations and matriculations, organizing football matches and extra curricula activities, sponsoring field trips and excursions, organizing workshops, conferences, seminars, having interactive sessions with students and counselling students in form of giving them advice on things they can do that they can attain their goals in life. These approaches, unfortunately, as good as they appear according to Ajala (2001) are more inclined to communications.

Public relations in Chiakaan and Chile (2020) is proactively inclined; it is ninety five percent action and five percent talking. Keghku (2005) in support of this discourse has agreed that public relations are about good performance. It is about the things an organization does and is doing to make its publics happy, peaceful and friendly with it. This implies that public relations approaches by tertiary institutions should go beyond mere communications. public relation activities that can guarantee peaceful coexistence should be involved an inclusion of students in key policies of the institutions, provision of basic amenities or provision of conducive learning environments devoid of constant strike by staff. More to these and other friendly measures are put in place, peace and harmony no doubt, can be attained between tertiary institutions and their students.

While an organization does not consider its performance as a key public relations tool, it will be considered to be lacking in the understanding of what public relations really is. Where this is the case, such an organization is bound to apply public relations poorly as attested by 28% of the respondents in Table 3. It is obvious that where public relations are poorly applied, the desired goal by an organization to enjoy a peaceful coexistence with its public will be hardly attained. This is testified by data collected in Tables 4 and 5. In Table 4, 40% of the respondents have agreed that the relationships between management of the selected institutions and their students is very poor. This does not go down well for the institutions. No wonder, data in Table 5 revealed poor relationship the institution have with their students as a result of their poor application of public relations. According to data in this regard, students are always on rampage resulting in closure of schools and suspension of academic activities. The relationship between the students, staff and the institution's host communities is also not very cordial. Findings here has clearly shown that the selected tertiary institutions do not apply public relations as demanded in the excellent theory, a theory upon which the study is anchored. Where public relations are excellently applied, the relationship between managements and students will be very cordial thereby preventing the students from embarking on protests that cannot only disrupt academic activities but which can affect peace, disrupt business activities in host communities.

Conclusion

This study has examined the extent public relations is recognized and applied by managements of some selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State, Nigeria. The basic concern of the study is to find out how public relations is applied in managements of the selected tertiary institutions in achieving a harmonious relationship with their students. Unfortunately, management of the selected tertiary institutions recognize public relations but they are not effective in its application in relationship management with their publics especially students. The resultant effects of the poor application of public relations by the institutions is that they do not have a cordial relationship with their students. The students are therefore always disrupting academic activities through protests.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Managements of selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State should build intimate and good working relationship with its staff and students for harmonious synergy.
- ii. Authorities of tertiary institutions need to adopt various impactful public relations approaches to manage students' affairs effectively.
- iii. Managements of tertiary institutions need to appreciate and apply public relations fully as a management function in order to establish cordial and healthy relationship with the students and other of its publics.
- iv. Management staff of the universities should attend workshops and conferences organized by NIPR or other experts in public relations so that they can be fully educated on what public relations is and how it is applied in achieving results.

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