

MEDIA RELATIONS PRACTICES IN SELECTED TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study examined media relations practices in selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. The objectives of the study were to determine the extent to which media relations are practised by the selected tertiary institutions, identify the media relations approaches used by the institutions, and investigate the effectiveness of the approaches. The study adopted mixed methods research that included in-depth interviews and descriptive survey. The population of the study is 108, which comprises journalists, Vice Chancellors, Rectors, Registrars, and Information and Public Relations Officers from the selected tertiary institutions. Findings revealed that media relations is practised to significantly the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. Additionally, the study identified a variety of media relations approaches utilized by the institutions. These media relations strategies include the use of press conferences, prioritizing the willingness to answer questions, and sending invitations to events, among others. The study also found that challenges hindering the effectiveness of the media relations strategies adopted by the selected tertiary institutions include funding constraints, network connectivity issues, non-participation, and impromptu arrangements. This study concludes that media relations play a vital role within tertiary institutions in Taraba State, highlighting their active engagement and diverse approaches. The study recommends, among others, that the government should provide more funding to the management of the institutions to enable them to carry out both their media relations and other activities more effectively.

Keywords: Media, Media Relations, Tertiary Institutions, Taraba State

INTRODUCTION

All organizations or institutions surely need public relations activities, whether they like it or not. As institutions grow, they are forced to refine their methods of communicating with the public. Johnston (2020) submissions suggest that the focal point of an organization's survival today is highly dependent on its operations, especially as regards how it relates to the publics. Human relations, however, as noted by Hartati, (2020) is a complex of self-conflicting interest.

According to Hartati, (2020) every individual, whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, opinion leaders or followers and every group irrespective of ethnic backgrounds have their own aspirations and hopes which they aspire. However, there are tremendous counter-demands such as feeding, clothing, housing, education, leisure etc. on people's interests and aspirations. This, in turn, makes loyalty to a particular producer, Service Company or an organization by an individual a herculean task".

Therefore, the growing complexity of today's world continually calls for a clearer understanding of organizations' policies, goals as well as activities. In the words of Shaw and White, (2004) Media relations have been and remains one of the most important areas of public relations practice. However, the academic study of media relations was for many years, subject to the stigma that it is primarily a tactical function of a public relations programme (Grunic, 1990). While measuring the impact of media relations as being a key area of interest for some time, (Bollinger's, 2001) research into the process of media relations has only recently sparked a larger number of academic studies (Rus, et' al, 2022; Johnston, 2020).

According to Salu (1989) in Chiakaan (2016), tertiary institutions including Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, and Universities exist to provide knowledge leading to the production of low and high-level manpower in society. This implies that producing skilled labour leading to economic, social and political advancement is the major concern of tertiary education. This implies that tertiary institutions exist for members of the society.

Since tertiary institutions exist for members of the society, they need the media to propagate their activities and contribute to building favourable image in the eyes of the public. This is based on the fact that the media will provide members of the public with information about their existence, their activities, admission policy, employment policy, quality of staff, both academic and non-academic, academic calendar, security management and other relevant information about them to enable members of the public to decide patronising them or not.

The foregoing submission reiterates the reason why the relationship between management of tertiary institutions and journalists is expected to be cordial. Managements of tertiary institutions are expected to cultivate and establish a sound relationship with members of the press so that members of the public can always get informed about the activities of their institutions. However, it appears a stormy and unhealthy relationship, according to scholars of public relations like Ajala (2001), Chiakaan (2016), Chiakaan and Chile (2015), Nwosu (2004) and many others, often exists between managements of organisations, including tertiary institutions and members of the press. This is not a good development as it has an adverse effect on organisations, which can lead to misrepresentation of the institution and the management and by extension contribute to misunderstanding or conflict with some key policies of the school.

According to Ajala (2001), there are different sources of conflicts between organisations including tertiary institutions and members of the press. Salu (1994) has added his voice in support of Ajala's submission that journalists of media organisations often feel that managements of organisations are hiding important information about their organisations from them, they also feel bad when managements of organisations do not respond to enquiries from them and do not like to make themselves accessible for interaction. Incidentally, scholars of media relations have also noted that organisational managements on their part, accuse members of the press of being more interested in sensational stories rather than progressive and developmental programmes and projects executed by organisations (Brown, et' al, 2018).

Whatever is the situation, managements of tertiary institutions should always cultivate the friendship of the journalists. According to Chiakaan and Chile (2015), people who are friends, no matter the situation, they find themselves, should always try to act in the interest of each other. This implies that cultivating and establishing a sound relationship with members of the press is what managements of tertiary institutions should never hesitate to do.

There are several studies carried out by different scholars showing that public relations is practised by educational institutions, especially tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Chiakaan (2016) for instance, carried out a study to determine the applicability of public relations by selected tertiary institutions in Benue and Nasarawa States. Even in faraway Ghana, many scholars of public relations have carried out studies to find out whether tertiary institutions apply public relations in managing relationships with their public. Incidentally, in spite of the numerous studies on public relations and tertiary institutions in Nigeria and Africa, studies focusing on whether and how tertiary institutions practice media relations are rare. Being a very unique area in the field of public relations and due to the importance of media/journalism to tertiary institutions, it has become necessary to carry out a study in this regard. This study is, therefore, carried out to determine whether tertiary institutions in Nigeria, with more emphasis on Taraba State, recognise and apply media relations strategies in managing their relationships with members of the press or not.

Statement of the Problem

Effective media relations practices play a pivotal role in shaping institutional reputation and engagements (Aikins & Adu-Oppong, 2015). However, despite their significance, there is a dearth of empirical research that evaluates the specific strategies, challenges, and outcomes of media relations within selected tertiary institutions. This research aims to bridge this gap by examining the pragmatic aspects of media relations and their impact on institutional success.

Tertiary institutions in Taraba State may grapple with limited visibility and awareness in the media. This lack of prominence can impede their ability to showcase academic achievements, research breakthroughs, and contributions to community development, hindering the institutions' overall positive image. Effective media relations by these institutions are pivotal for disseminating accurate information, fostering positive public perception, and building strong stakeholder relationships. However, the tertiary institutions in the state may not fully leverage diverse media platforms to disseminate information. In an era dominated by digital media, the underutilization of online channels and social media platforms may result in missed opportunities for engagement with diverse audiences, including prospective students, parents, and the wider community.

In spite of the benefits associated with media relations, it is not very clear whether tertiary institutions, especially the ones in Taraba State are aware of it. Again, despite the fact that many scholars such as Chiakaan (2016), Keggku (2015) have carried out studies on the need for organizations and institutions to establish and maintain a healthy relationship with members of the fourth estate of the realm, none of the studies has been carried out specifically to determine whether the tertiary institutions in Taraba State recognize and practice it. This study, therefore investigates media relations practices used by selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify media relations approaches applied in the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State.

2. Determine the extent media relations is practised in selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State.
3. Determine the challenges in the practice of media relations in the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Media Relations

Media Relations means working with media for the purpose of informing the public of an organization's mission, policies and practices in a positive, consistent and credible manner. According to Jane (2008) media relations entails developing symbiotic relationships with media outlets, journalists, bloggers, and influencers to garner publicity for an organization. Typically, this means coordinating directly with the people responsible for producing the news and features in the mass media. The goal of media relations is to maximize positive coverage in the mass media without paying for it directly through advertising (Ridgway, Judy 1996 and Kroon 2014).

Macnamara (2013) clearly observed that public relations have been cited as a major influence on modern mass media but journalists reject such suggestions and cling to an ideological-based notion of independence and objectivity. The studies of the relationship between the public relations (PR) industry and the news media show that PR actors and journalists often establish close relations in order to fulfil a mutual need, Davis (2020, p.26). The situation is similar to what research has shown about the relation between the media and institutional representatives such as politicians and government leaders (Tunstall 1970; Hand 1979; Ericson *et al.* 1987; Cook 1989; and Larson 1998).

Most people use the terms public relations and media relations interchangeably; however, as distinct concepts, "media relations" refers to the relationship that a company, institution or organization develops with journalists, whereas "public relations" extends that relationship beyond the media to the general public (Dustin, 2009). Similarly, integrated marketing is also related but not the same, while integrated marketing attempts to unify all aspects of marketing communication which include advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, and social media to create consistent, customer-focused messaging.

Igben (1997) as cited in Uche et al. (2019) defines media relations as a "persistent interaction with the media of communication in order to maintain exchange of newsworthy confidence and sustained public information." Baran (2004) observes that media relations requires that the "public relations professional maintains good relationship with professionals in the media, understand their deadlines and other restraints and earn their trust." Biagi (2005) adds that media relations is contacting news media, freelance writers and trade publications with the intent of getting them to publish or broadcast news and features about or originated by the organizations. Similarly, Hanson (2005) states that media relations "are a two-way interactions with members of the press."

According to O'Brien (2014), media relations is the systematic well planned mutual cooperative relationship and company interactions with journalists, reporters of mass media, like television, newspapers and the internet. Cherwick (2018) opines that a media relation is how the sender tells a story and how we get the message out through media relations. The author explains that

media relations communication has three main parts – the sender (organisation) who sends the message (information) and the transmitter (media) who gives the information through television, radio, newspaper and the receiver (audience) who reads the message and provides feedback.

From the above definitions, it can be deduced that Media relations refers to the strategic management and interaction between an organization and the media to influence how the organization is portrayed and perceived in the public eye. It involves building and maintaining positive relationships with journalists, reporters, editors, and other members of the media to ensure accurate and favourable coverage of the organization's activities, events, and messages.

Tertiary Institutions

A tertiary institution means any public or private institution, school or centre, one of the objects of which is to provide post-secondary education offering courses of study leading to the award of certificates or diplomas and conducting research. As contained in the Federal Government of Nigeria's National Policy of Education, NPE (2008): Tertiary education is the education given in institutions such as universities and inter-university centres such as the Nigeria French Language Village, Nigeria Arabic Language Village, National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Innovation Enterprise Institutions, (IEIs), and Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Monotechnics (NPE, 2008).

Tertiary education also called post-secondary education is any level of education pursued beyond high school or secondary school, including undergraduate and graduate credentials. These credentials encompass certificates, diplomas or academic degrees. It is also referred to as specialized education in a specific field, taken on after finishing high or secondary school. Tertiary education is non-compulsory and provided in a special institution, usually a college, polytechnic or university. This form of education may be delivered virtually or at a distance (Tertiary Education, 2023).

Tertiary education, also referred to as third-level, third-stage or post-secondary education, is the educational level following the completion of secondary education. The World Bank, for example, defines tertiary education as including universities as well as trade schools and colleges. Higher education is taken to include undergraduate and postgraduate education, while vocational education beyond secondary education is known as 'further education' in the United Kingdom, or included under the category of 'continuing education' in the United States. Tertiary education generally culminates in the receipt of certificates, diplomas, or academic degrees (Tertiary Education, 2023).

UNESCO (2020) stated that tertiary education focuses on learning endeavours in specialized fields. It includes academic and higher vocational education. The World Bank's 2019 World Development Report on the future of work argues that given the future of work and the increasing role of technology in value chains, tertiary education becomes even more relevant for workers to compete in the labour market.

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2008) stipulates that the goals of tertiary education shall be:

- a. contribute to national development through high-level manpower training,

- b. provide accessible and affordable quality learning opportunities in formal and informal education in response to the needs and interests of all Nigerians,
- c. provide high-quality career counselling and life-long learning programmes that prepare students with the knowledge and skills for self-reliance and the world of work;
- d. reduce skill shortages through the production of skilled manpower relevant to the needs of the labour market;
- e. promote and encourage scholarship, entrepreneurship and community service;
- f. forge and cement national unity; and
- g. Promote national and international understanding and interaction.

The NPE, 2008 further explains that tertiary educational institutions shall pursue these goals through:

- a. Quality teaching;
- b. Research and development;
- c. High standards in the quality of facilities, services and resources;
- d. Staff development programmes;
- e. Provision of a more practical based curriculum relevant to the needs of the labour market;
- f. Generation and dissemination of knowledge, skills and competencies that contribute to national and local economic goals which enable students to succeed in a knowledge-based economy;
- g. A variety of modes of programs including full-time, part-time, block release, day release, sandwich, etc.;
- h. Access to training funds such as those provided by the Industrial Training Fund (ITF);
- i. Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES);
- j. Maintenance of minimum educational standards through appropriate agencies;
- k. Supporting affordable, equitable access to tertiary education through scholarships and student loans;
- l. Inter-institutional co-operation and linkages; and dedicated services to the community through extra-moral and extension services.

From the above definitions, it could be understood that a tertiary institution is an educational establishment that provides education beyond the secondary level. Tertiary education is typically pursued after the completion of secondary education (high school or equivalent) and includes various post-secondary levels of learning. It offers a diverse range of academic and vocational programs, including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, diplomas, and certificates.

Media Relations Practices

Organizations globally as well as media relations practitioners must adopt different strategies to be able to survive and succeed in this global competitive environment. It, therefore, behoves on organizations' media relations department to map out effective strategies for effective media relations practice. Essentially, media relations should be planned and implemented based on certain rules, principles and guidelines. It is these rules, principles and guidelines that make up the strategies of media relations. Tench and Yeomans (2006) have provided some basic rules for effective media relations practices such as the following:

- i. Act as a service to the media: answer questions, return calls before deadlines, and provide information and context.
- ii. Accept the independence of the media; do not offer payment, do not ask for copy approval.
- iii. Disclose your interest i.e., let the journalist know who you are representing.
- iv. Be as available to the media when the news is bad as when you have good news to promote.

Also, Bivin (2008) advises that in dealing with the media, the organization's media relations department should not bombard journalists with a daily barrage of press releases. This is because reporters and editors who you bombard with such releases know this and are likely to stop releasing your information because they are saturated with the organization's releases. Cutlip *et al.* (2006) provide some guidelines for good media relations as follows:

- i. **Shoot Squarely:** Shooting squarely begins with honesty and truth when dealing with the media. This gives the organisation credibility which they have to earn usually over a period of time. If for some legal or legislative reason they are unauthorized from commenting, it is better to make no comment.
- ii. **Give Services:** The quickest and surest way to give the cooperation of journalist is to promote them with newsworthy, interesting and timely stories, and pictures that they want when they want them and in a form they can readily use. This is easier today with social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram.
- iii. **Do not Beg or Carp:** Nothing irritates journalist and editors as well as news directors more than the practitioners who beg to have stories used or complain about story treatment and placement. If information is not sufficiently newsworthy on its own merit, to attract their interest, no amount of begging or carping can change the quality of that information.
- iv. **Do not Ask for Kills:** Public relations practitioners have no right to ask the media to suppress or kill a story. It is seen as an insult and trying to usurp or intimidate the media gatekeepers. However, if the media reports an inaccurate or misleading story, ask for a correction, retraction, and/or apology.
- v. **Do not Flood the Media:** It is advised that you stick to what journalists will consider news, keep media mailing hot, current and send the most appropriate journalist to each news media.

Furthermore, Ikpe and Olise (2010) enjoin every organization's media relations department to conduct surveys to find out not just the objective of the media relations practice but also the problem if any. They should decide what the message should be and which channel/contemporary tool to use for the dissemination of the message to the media. Ikpe and Olise (2010) outlined some strategies of media relations as follows:

- i. **Identify the Contacts:** The journalist might be a small-sounding word, but it encompasses the different functions and duties of that person. Most of them are related to specific fields and will write about them only. You cannot ask a journalist who writes about foreign news to take up your case and publish news about the current financials of your company. What you can do is read several newspapers and identifies the stories or news that are similar to the ones you want to publish. Now find out who the writer is because generally, the news mentions the name of its writer. For example, you want to publish about the events that your company holds every month then find out about

the journalists who write about such events. According to Bhasin (2020), for good media relations, analyse the newspaper or magazine where the articles are published and find out whether it has a good viewership or not and what people think about their writing and the relevant news.

- ii. **Track the Publication:** You have already identified and zeroed into the publication house where you want to publish your news. Circle and keep aside the articles that are similar sounding to the ones you want to publish. Track the reporter's name, contact information, and publication information. Do so with all the journalists who have managed to impress you. Keeping things handy will help you in making contact as soon as you are ready with your decision.
- iii. **Contact:** One of the easiest and effective ways of direct contact is via email, social media portals, messages, and phone. Engage them in a conversation and try to make yourself clear about your interests. Show the story that has impressed you and give him specifics about your expectations. Convince him your organization and its activities will be beneficial for him and his newspaper as you have enough material to feed him regularly.
- iv. **Keep your language clear and words distinct:** Sometimes people are unable to express themselves and try to explain their point of view. Be specific in your demand and go for a journalist who writes clearly and precisely with a human angle. Nobody wants to read a scientific journal as it sounds overwhelming to the common reader.
- v. **Wider reach:** Consider those publications and journalists who have a way with words and can reach the heart of the matter and their target audience.
- vi. **Suggest third-party experts:** You can suggest third-party experts to your media liaison to make the news interesting. This will help in reaching a wider target audience.
- vii. **Tailor-made material:** Remember short is sweet hence tailor-made your material appropriately. You cannot outline the where, when, how and why every time hence choose your articles carefully. Sometimes give only one-liners as catchy phrases or news flashes and at other times give a verbal pitch to sound intimate and connected. Once the journalist and the publishing house start liking the news about your organization, they will respond favourably to your efforts. This will help a company maintain a good relationship with media relations.

Why Media Relations by Tertiary Institutions

In a higher education context, media relations can be a platform for publishing a university's achievements and outcomes. Through media, scientific papers can be published and popularised, so the public could be aware of this. Media relations is carried out by tertiary institutions aimed to publish achievements and outcomes of the institutions to the public. The more outcomes generated, the more the public become aware to it. This could create positive results for the sustainability of Tertiary institutions (Winata, & Loisa, 2021).

Tertiary institutions, although are not focused on profit-making, still need to have media relations managements such as those found in corporates organisations. Educational institutions could bear the same, or even more tasks, functions, and duties as found in corporates. One of the activities performed by universities' public relations divisions is media relations. Frank Jefkins explained that media relations is an effort to publish and broadcast messages or information to the public of an institution optimally, in order to create awareness and understanding among the public (Susanto, 2011).

New media relations by tertiary institutions is essential in the contemporary digital landscape due to several factors as outlined by (Winata & Loisa, 2021) as follows:

- i. **Changing Media Landscape:** The traditional media landscape has evolved significantly with the rise of digital media platforms, social media, blogs, podcasts, and online news outlets. Tertiary institutions need to adapt their media relations strategies to leverage these new channels effectively.
- ii. **Instantaneous Communication:** New media allows for immediate and direct communication with a global audience. Tertiary institutions can share information, updates, and achievements in real-time, fostering a quicker and more direct connection with their stakeholders.
- iii. **Diverse Communication Channels:** The emergence of new media provides tertiary institutions with a diverse set of communication channels. Institutions can engage with audiences through social media platforms, multimedia content, and interactive online experiences, reaching a wider and more diverse audience.
- iv. **Engagement with Younger Audiences:** Many tertiary institution stakeholders, including current and prospective students, are active users of social media and other online platforms. New media allows institutions to engage with younger demographics more effectively and on the platforms they frequent.
- v. **Global Reach and Accessibility:** New media facilitates global reach and accessibility. Tertiary institutions can share information about their programs, research, and achievements with an international audience, attracting students, faculty, and collaborators from around the world.
- vi. **Interactive and Two-Way Communication:** Unlike traditional media, new media enables interactive and two-way communication. Tertiary institutions can receive instant feedback, answer inquiries, and engage in conversations with their audience, fostering a sense of community and transparency.
- vii. **Cost-Effective Communication:** New media often provides cost-effective communication channels compared to traditional media. Institutions can share information through their websites, social media profiles, and other digital platforms without incurring the same costs associated with traditional advertising.
- viii. **Data Analytics for Performance Measurement:** New media platforms offer data analytics tools that enable institutions to measure the performance of their media relations efforts. They can track engagement, audience demographics, and other metrics to assess the effectiveness of their communication strategies and make data-driven decisions.
- ix. **Crisis Management in the Digital Age:** In times of crisis, new media can be a crucial tool for rapid and transparent communication. Tertiary institutions can use digital platforms to address issues promptly, correct misinformation, and maintain control over their narrative during challenging situations.
- x. **Innovation and Technological Advancements:** Tertiary institutions are often hubs for innovation and technological advancements. Embracing new media allows these institutions to showcase their cutting-edge research, technological developments, and contributions to various fields through engaging and dynamic content.

New media relations by tertiary institutions are a strategic necessity to stay relevant, reach diverse audiences, and effectively communicate in the dynamic and fast-paced digital environment. It complements traditional media relations efforts and enhances the overall visibility and reputation of these institutions.

As noted by Theaker (2004), while it is largely a tactical nature in practice, good media relations can contribute to longer-time strategic objectives such as:

- i. Improving company or brand name
- ii. Higher and better media profile
- iii. Changing the attitudes of target audiences such as customers
- iv. Increasing relationships with the community
- v. Increasing market shares
- vi. Influencing government policy at local, national and international level
- vii. Improving communication with investors and their advisers
- viii. Improving industrial relations (Theaker, 2004. Pp. 148-149).

Tertiary educational institutions can use media relations to improve their relationships with their host communities and as well build good image among its various publics with a view to attract more patronage. No wonder, Asemah (2011), posits that all the media at the disposal of an organisation are employed for the promotion of goodwill and mutual understanding because, public relations officers are always in contact with media practitioners. When organisations want to launch a programme, they organise press conferences. In the same vein, Nkwazema (1993) agrees that no matter what one does in public relations, one must get in touch with the relevant public and one major way of doing so is through press relations or what some prefer to or call media relations. Thus, media relations become the means through which public relations practitioners achieve the aims of reaching their public.

Factors Affecting Effective Media Relations Practice in Nigeria

Increasingly, new media are becoming gateways for effective media relations planning, implementations and practice. Media relations practitioners globally, are now embracing new media due to the numerous benefits accruing from utilizing them. This, in turn, has helped in effective media relations practice in this 21st century. Regrettably, as it seems, developing countries like Nigeria are still lagging behind in the development and utilization of new media technologies in all spheres of life, including media relations practice. Some of the factors responsible for this unfortunate development as identify by Uche *et al.* (2019) includes:

- i. **Low Penetration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)/Cost:**
The world is getting digitalized, but generally, Less Developed Countries (LDCs) like Nigeria have low penetration of technology. Danaan (2006) has argued that it will take Less Developed Countries many decades to adopt systematic, efficient and reliable ICTs. However, since most LDCs have realized that virtually all new technologies are needed in every aspect of life, including media relations practice, they have started to take bold steps in making policies that would encourage the acquisition and utilization of the various new media. Nonetheless, Nigeria is still lagging behind when compared with countries like Ghana and South Africa, whose power supply history is higher.

Another damper is the cost of the ICTs. Even the internet, e-mail and mobile phones in Nigeria are not easily affordable, accessible and efficient. For example; when e-mails with attachments are sent, opening the file takes a lot of time and sometimes may not even open due to the nature of the type of network selected in a bid to save cost. One of the reasons for this low technology penetration in Nigeria is their high cost of

purchase and maintenance. Most of the new media are produced and designed in Europe, Asia and America and imported in Nigeria at a high cost.

- ii. **Poor Funding of Media Relations Department:** Media relations should be seen as investment. Unfortunately, most organization tends to ignore the proper funding of media relations department, especially in area of the acquisition of new media. In regard to this situation, Ikpe (2005,2006) asks “will some Nigeria organizations be able to bear the cost of acquisition and maintenance of ICTs”? Indeed, inadequate funding also contributes immensely to poor media relations practice in this era of new media technologies. Apart from acquiring and maintaining of new media, media relations department need finance for both planning and implementation of media relations strategies.
- iii. **Lack of Expertise:** Media relations practice in this era of new media technologies requires expertise for optimum performance. It also requires regular on-the job training of media relations department personnel. The requisite expertise is, unfortunately, lacking in most developing countries, including Nigeria. Okafor (2002) attributes this situation to the fact that early practitioners included people who did not receive any formal training in either public relations or media relations to enable them function effectively. They were either those who rose through the ranks or graduates from other disciplines like Marketing, Psychology, Linguistics, etc. Even those who read Public Relations are not knowledgeable in all the new media usage and are not constantly trained in this regard.

Worse still, the few practitioners who have good knowledge of new media usage for the practice of media relations are seriously hampered by the problem of unsteady power supply in Nigeria. Most new media require constant and stable power supply. This, unfortunately, has been a mirage in Nigeria for a long time. All these factors if not properly handled can put the practice of media relations in this era of new media technologies in jeopardy.

- iv. **Cyber Crisis:** This is one of the major factors affecting media relations practitioners in their use of new media. Media relations professional should be careful not to make any mistake that could ruin, not just his or herself, but also the organization, especially when using new media like the internet. The internet revolution came with its problem. It has the problem of human system failure, network problem, virus issues and many others. Campbell, Martins and Fabos (2009) have noted that “spam and spurious news” are some of the problems associated with the internet. This among other related issues constitutes cyber crisis for effective media relations practice. In this age of new media, it is very easy for anyone to wreak havoc, create a controversy that can mar the image of a company or an individual. Even a disgruntled employer or small/large group of people can mar the image of an organization by pasting controversial information on the net. This, no doubt, would affect effective media relations practice negatively. However, prompt response to any such information online is one of the fastest means to combat cyber crises.
- v. **Corruption:** Corruption is another factor militating against effective practice of media relations in the era of new media technologies. In this regard, Okafor (2002) observes that many forms of bribery have been erroneously described as public relations practice, and this misconception adversely affects the integrity of the profession. In Nigeria for instance, it is commonly believed that some media gatekeepers ask for ‘white envelope’

in one way or the other before accepting stories and news releases from organizations. Sometimes, some journalist, without recourse to professional ethics, rejects stories that are newsworthy and attractive from organizations' media relations department, because of lack of incentive. It is not surprising therefore that occasionally, there have been issues of distrust or mistrust in media relations practice globally, as manipulations of information has become the order of the day. To tackle this corrupt practice, media gatekeepers must ensure that they operate within the confines of the ethics of their profession.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the two-way symmetrical model to provide a framework for analysis.

Two-way symmetrical model

This theory was propounded by Grunig (1989) who recognized the two-way symmetrical model as a way of practising Public Relations through "using bargaining, negotiating, and strategies of conflict resolution to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviours between the organization and its publics". The two-way symmetrical model is characterized as most ethical and effective in practice, which provides a normative theory for achieving excellent communication management. From a directional perspective, two-way communication allows for the exchange of information— information flows freely between systems, such as organizations, the public, management, and employees. From a purposive perspective, symmetrical communication seeks moving equilibrium through cooperation and mutual adjustment (Grunig, 1992). Organizations will become much more effective through two-way symmetrical Public Relations than through one-way communication or asymmetrical positions. Grunig presents several reasons why a two-way symmetrical relationship is best including (1) there are no clear boundaries between organizations and other systems due to the free flow of information; (2) conflicts will be resolved through negotiation and communication due to thoughts of cooperation and mutual benefits; and (3) the input of all people, including employees, is valued.

The success of a PR campaign lies in two-way communication. It is imperative for the sender of any message to get the reactions of the receiver through the feedback mechanism. Through feedback, an organization fine-tunes its products or services before they are sold to the (consuming public). The International Public Relations (IPRA) in the Mexican statement was signed by representatives of more than 30 nations and regional Public Relations associations.

Lindeborg (1994) opines that two-way symmetrical Public Relations "serve as a mechanism by which organizations and publics interact to manage interdependence and conflict for the benefit of all". It infers that everyone involved is equal and that everything can be solved through dialogue, discussion and negotiation. Grunig & Hunt, (1984) suggests that by promoting bonds of mutual trust between the organization and its publics by empowering them to shape and collaborate on organizational goals through feedback, the organization-Public Relationship is strengthened. A prominent theme in Public Relations research and commentary since the articulation of Grunig's model has focused on "either supporting or challenging Grunig's symmetrical model of Public Relations as most ethical way to conduct Public Relations" (Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). The significance of the two-way symmetrical model can be found in the following aspects.

First, the two-way symmetrical model makes organizations more effective. From a directional perspective, two-way communication, such as the two-way symmetrical model, allows for the exchange of information – information flows freely between systems, such as organizations, the public, management, and employees. From a purposive perspective, symmetrical communication seeks moving equilibrium through cooperation and mutual adjustment. In contrast, asymmetrical communication “leaves the organization as is and tries to change the public” (Grunig, 1992). It can be generalized that organizations will become much more effective through two-way symmetrical public relations than through one-way communication or asymmetrical positions. Grunig presents several reasons why a two-way symmetrical relationship is best including (1) there are no clear boundaries between organizations and other systems due to free flow of information; (2) conflicts will be resolved through negotiation and communication due to thoughts of cooperation and mutual benefits; and (3) the input of all people, including employees, is valued.

Second, the two-way symmetrical model makes organizational public relations more ethical. As Lindeborg (1994) argues, two-way symmetrical public relations “serve as a mechanism by which organizations and publics interact to manage interdependence and conflict for the benefit of all” (p.9). It implies that everyone involved is equal. Everything can be solved through dialogue, discussion and negotiation. By promoting bonds of mutual trust between the organization and its public by empowering them to shape and collaborate on organizational goals through feedback, the organization-public relationship is strengthened (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). On the contrary, the other three models, press agency/ publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, tend to be less ethical. As Grunig and Hunt (1984) proposed, the press agency/publicity model is dominated by one-way, persuasive communication aimed at manipulating audience attitudes and behaviours, while the public information practitioner provides accurate information about her or his organization to the public but does not volunteer negative information. These two models established communication as one-directional, from organization to public. Although the emergence of the two-way asymmetrical model shifted communication from one-way to two-way, which significantly altered communication relationships; the primary goal for feedback under this model is to refine persuasive message strategies toward specific targeted publics in an effort to predict behaviour.

By adopting this approach in media relations practices, tertiary institutions in Taraba State can strengthen their connections with students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the broader community. This engagement fosters a sense of inclusion and allows institutions to better understand and respond to the needs and expectations of their stakeholders, hence, its relevance to the study.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a survey research design. The population of the study includes Vice Chancellors, Rectors, Registrars, and Information and Public Relations Officers from the selected tertiary institutions. In this regard, therefore, the population of the study is 108. The study adopts a purposive sampling technique. In-depth interview was conducted with twelve (12) management staff of the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State who were purposively chosen due to their extensive interaction with the media and their role in disseminating information to the public. Also, simple random sampling was used to sample 96 journalists across media organizations in Taraba State. This study utilizes a questionnaire as the primary research instrument. Although interviews were conducted, the focus remained on the questionnaire. Both open-ended and closed-ended response formats were employed. The

questionnaire was administered to selected journalists from different media organizations in Taraba State. Out of the total 96 questionnaires administered, only 77 were retrieved for analysis, while the in-depth interview was conducted with the management of the selected tertiary institutions. Data for the study were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data in this regard were presented in a simple table using 4 4-point Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, strongly disagree and disagree respectively. Also, the in-depth interview with key staff of the agency was analysed contextually under subthemes.

DATA PRESENTATION

Table 1: Media relations strategies used by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State

Media relations practices	SA	A	UD	SD	D	Total
They always invite us to events they organize	11 (14.3%)	41 (53.2%)	18 (23.4%)	-	7 (9.1%)	77 (100%)
Their management are quick to answer our calls	-	37 (48.1%)	18 (23.4%)	5 (6.5%)	17 (22.1%)	77 (100%)
Their management are always willing to welcome us in their offices and campuses	2 (2.6%)	49 (63.6%)	12 (15.6%)	-	14 (18.2%)	77 (100%)
Their press releases sent to our media houses are always professionally written	-	29 (37.7%)	17 (22.1%)	-	31 (40.3%)	77 (100%)
They treat us with respect	9 (11.7%)	43 (55.8%)	14 (18.2%)	-	11 (14.3%)	77 (100%)
They always call us any time they seem not to understand stories we publish about them for clarifications	-	31 (40.3%)	12 (15.6%)	-	34 (44.2%)	77 (100%)
Their management once in a while pay our organizations visits	6 (7.8%)	34 (44.2%)	19 (24.7%)	-	18 (23.4%)	77 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Data in Table 1 was designed to determine the media relations practices applied by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. Data in this context shows that 11 respondents representing 14.3% strongly agree that the media organizations always them to events they organize, 41(53.2) agree with the statement; 18(23.4) are undecided and 7(9.1%) disagree with the statement. Also, 37(48.1%) agree with the statement that the management of selected tertiary institutions are quick to answer their calls, 18(23.4%) are undecided, 5(6.5%) strongly disagree and 17 respondents amounting to 22.1% disagree with the statement. Data further shows that 2(2.6%) strongly agree, 49(63.6%) agree with the statement that the management of the selected tertiary institutions are always willing to welcome them in their offices and campuses, and 14(18.2%) disagree with the statement.

Similarly, data shows that 29 respondents amounting to 37.7% agree with the statement that the process release from the tertiary institutions are professionally written, 17(22.1%) are yet to decide and 31(40.3%) disagrees with the statement. Respondents also show that 9(11.7) of the respondents strongly agree that the selected tertiary institutions often treat the journalist with respect, 43(55.8%) agree with the statement, 14(18.2%) are yet to decide and 11(14.3%) disagreed with the statement. To buttress more, 31 respondents representing 40.3% agree that managements of the selected tertiary institutions always call the media organizations anytime they seem not to understand stories they published about them for clarification, 12(15.6%) are yet to decide while 34(44.2%) disagrees with the statement.

Finally, data depicts that (6(7.8%) strongly agrees with the statement that the management of the selected tertiary institutions pay their organizations visit once in a while; 34(44.2%) agrees with the statement, 19(24.7%) are yet to decide and 18(23.4%) disagrees with the statement.

Table 2: Extent of Media Relations Practice by Select Tertiary Institutions in Taraba State

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	6	7.8
Agree	48	62.3
Strongly Disagree	5	6.5
Disagree	18	23.8
Total	77	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 2 above was designed to determine the extent to which media relations is practiced by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. Data in this regard shows that out of 65 sampled respondents, 6 respondents representing 7.8% strongly agree with the statement that media relations is practiced to a high extent, 48(62.3%) agree with the statement, 5(6.5%) strongly disagree with the statement and 18 respondents representing 23.8% disagree with the statement that media relations is practiced to a high extent in the study area. This is an indication that majority of the respondents are of the opinion that media relations is practiced to a high extent by the selected tertiary institutions.

Table 3: Challenges faced by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in their media relations practices?

Challenges	SA	A	UD	SD	D	Total
We do not see them as our friends	-	15(19.5%)	18(23.4%)	13(16.9%)	31(40.3%)	77(100%)
We are not happy with them	-	15(19.5%)	8(10.4%)	14(18.2%)	40(51.9%)	77(100%)
We do not care to honour their invitations	-	21(27.3%)	16(20.8%)	7(9.1%)	33(42.9%)	77(100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 3 highlights the challenges faced by selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in their media relations practices. Data in this context showed that out of the total 77 sampled

respondents, 19.5% agrees that they do not see them as their friends, 23.4% are undecided, 16.9% strongly disagrees and 40.3% disagrees with the statement. In addition, 19.5% agree that the management of the selected tertiary institutions are not happy with them; 10.4% are yet to decide, 18.2% strongly disagrees and 51.9% disagrees with the statement that the management are not happy with them. However, responses in Table 4 also shows that 27.3% agrees with the statement, 20.8% are undecided, 9.1% strongly disagrees and 42.9% disagrees with the statement that they do not honour their invitations.

In-depth Interview with Management Staff of the selected tertiary Institutions

Media relations strategies applied by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State

The above theme seeks to explore the extant media relations strategies used by selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. Here varying views emerged regarding the strategies used by the selected tertiary institutions. For instance, the Deputy Registrar of Federal Polytechnic Bali highlighted two main media relations strategies they employ in the institution. The first strategy is based on one-on-one media relationships, especially during events. They invite media houses to cover their programs or occasions. This direct interaction allows the media to have a firsthand experience of the events. The second strategy involves utilizing various social media platforms and their website to disseminate information. The Deputy Registrar stated that:

We do invite the media houses to come down to Bali to cover our programme or occasion... We have various social media platforms, and our website where certain vital information is disseminated."

Conversely, the Head of Information and Protocol Unit at Federal University Wukari revealed that they adopt a multifaceted approach to media relations. According to the participants, they engage in regular interactions with journalists and media houses, both through press releases and briefings. Additionally, they host journalists after events to discuss the institution's achievements. This hands-on approach ensures that media practitioners are well-informed and maintain a positive relationship with the university.

According to the Vice Chancellor of Taraba State University:

The institution employs various media strategies tailored to specific situations. According to the VC, the institution utilizes different media outlets such as television, radio, and print to disseminate information about the institution. Additionally, they leverage advertisements to reach a larger audience during admission application periods. The Vice Chancellor mentioned, that "depending on the situation or circumstances, we choose the kind of media to use to disseminate our information, radio, TV and print."

On the other hand, the Director of Information at Taraba State University highlighted their strategy of inclusivity and openness. He stated that they ensure that various media organizations are involved in the dissemination of information. By sharing information with different media outlets, they aim to effectively communicate the institution's messages to both the university community and the wider public. The Director stated, "We adopt the strategy of inclusivity and openness by carrying all the media organisations along."

In précis, the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State employ a combination of strategies to engage with the media effectively. These strategies include direct interactions, social media utilization, hosting journalists, and using various media outlets for information dissemination. The approach taken by each institution reflects their unique goals, target audiences, and resources.

The extent media relations is practiced by selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State

The above theme seeks to examine the extent at which media relations is practiced by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. Based on the responses provided in the interview sessions, it was revealed that media relations is practiced to large extents by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. For instances, the Deputy Registrar of the Federal Polytechnic, Bali highlighted the significance of media relations, emphasizing that media is a channel for disseminating information, educating the public, and promoting institutional activities. The Registrar further revealed that:

“The polytechnic has a partnership with both print and broadcast media to propagate their programs and reach their target audience. In his word, he captured it thus "We have partnership with both print and broadcast Media as well as other media outfits for the purpose of propagating or reaching out to our publics."

In the vein, the Head of Information and Protocol Unit at Federal University, Wukari emphasized the institution's commitment to media relations. He stated that:

The university regularly invite media personnel to their events and collaborate with journalists and media houses for press releases and data sharing. This according to him, is aimed at building positive relationships and ensuring effective coverage.

Similarly, the VC of Taraba State University, Jalingo highlighted the importance of media relations in reaching a wider audience. He further noted that:

Taraba State University, Jalingo choose media outlets based on the situation and the targeted audience. The VC also stressed the achievements of their media strategies, indicating that effective media coverage leads to increased awareness and admission applications. Additionally, the Director of Information, Taraba State University, Jalingo stated that Taraba State public relations unit plays a vital role in generating, managing, and disseminating information through various media outlets. They employ a strategy of inclusivity and openness by involving multiple media organizations. Their goal is to ensure that accurate information reaches the university community and the general public.

From these responses, it is clear that media relations is an essential practice for these tertiary institutions in Taraba State. They actively engage with various media outlets, collaborate with journalists, and leverage different media platforms to communicate their messages, increase visibility, and achieve their institutional goals.

Challenges in the practice of media relations by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State.

Based on the data obtained from the in-depth interview sessions, it was found that there are different challenges bedevilling the practice of media relations among the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. The Deputy Registrar of Federal Polytechnic, Bali highlighted several challenges, including improper understanding of the communication to be conveyed, network connectivity issues, and improper funding of media activities. These challenges impact the effectiveness of media patronage and timely dissemination of information. He mentioned that:

Proper understanding of the communication you want to pass across... Another aspect is improper funding of media activities... improper funding and network connectivity are some of the things that are compounding the media patronage for better results.

Similarly, the Head of Information and Protocol Unit at Federal University, Wukari pointed out challenges related to the timely release of funds for advertisement placement. This challenge affects their ability to effectively plan and execute media-related activities. The unit needs to manage limited resources to ensure successful media engagement. The Head of the Unit stated, that:

“The greatest challenge I do encounter is timely release of funds, particularly for advertisement placement.” On his part, the Vice-chancellor of Taraba State University revealed challenges such as non-participation by some key actors and impromptu arrangements. These challenges can hinder the smooth execution of media relations activities and impact the overall effectiveness of communication efforts. The VC acknowledged that these challenges require proactive measures for resolution. The VC stated, “Some of the challenges include non-participation by some key actors, impromptu arrangements and so on.”

The Director of Information at Taraba State University also highlighted challenges such as impromptu arrangements and non-participation by key actors. These challenges can disrupt planned media activities and affect the institution's ability to effectively communicate its messages. The Director emphasized that challenges are managed by addressing them in a timely manner. The Director noted that: “The challenges are managed by bracing up to the situation and taking corrective measures to forestall future occurrences.”

In summary, the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State face challenges in media relations, including issues related to funding, network connectivity, and timely release of funds, non-participation, and impromptu arrangements. These challenges can impact the efficiency and effectiveness of their media engagement efforts. However, the institutions recognize the importance of managing these challenges and taking proactive measures to ensure successful media relations practices.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the quantitative data obtained, findings on media relations approaches applied by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State indicate in Table 1 that most of the respondents

representing 67.5% agree that they always invite us to events they organize, 48.1% agreed that their management are quick to answer their calls, 67.2% agreed that their managements are always willing to welcome them in their offices and campuses, 40.3% disagreed that their press releases sent to our media houses are always professionally written and 55.8% agree that they treat them with respect. More so, data in Table 1 further depicts that 44.2% disagree with the statement that they always call them anytime they seem not to understand stories they publish about them for clarifications and majority (51.8%) agree that their management once in a while pay their organizations visits. In qualitative interviews, participants provided deeper insights into these strategies, highlighting direct interactions, social media utilization, and collaborative efforts with media houses. The alignment between the quantitative data and qualitative interviews effectively identifies the media relations strategies adopted by the institutions. This result agrees with that of McCoy et al. (2011) who argued that journalism and public relations have had a long and often contentious relationship and Journalists write stories to inform a general audience. Public relations practitioners provide information to particular audiences on behalf of their clients. This finding also agrees with that of Asemah (2011) who posits that all the media at the disposal of an organisation are employed for the promotion of goodwill and mutual understanding because, public relations officers are always in contact with media practitioners.

Findings in Table 2 which sought to determine to what extent is media relations practiced by the tertiary institutions in Taraba State revealed that most 48(62.3%) agree that media relations is practiced to a high extent in tertiary institutions in Taraba State. In qualitative interviews, the participants further emphasized their active involvement with media outlets, highlighting collaborations, partnerships, and event coverage. Therefore, it is apt to infer that to a large extent, media relations is practiced in the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State. This finding is similar to that of Winata, and Loisa, (2021) who reported that Media relations is carried out by tertiary institutions aimed to publish achievements and outcomes of the institutions to the public. The more outcomes generated, the more the public become aware to it. This could create positive results for the sustainability of Tertiary institutions.

Finally, findings on challenges of faced by the selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State in their media relations practices (Table 3) showed that most of the respondents representing 57.2% disagree with the statement that they do not see them as our friends, majority (70.1) also disagree with the statement that they are not happy with them and most of the respondents representing 50% disagree that they do not care to honour their invitations. In qualitative interviews, participants further elaborated on challenges, including funding issues, network connectivity, non-participation, and impromptu arrangements. The alignment between the survey data and qualitative interviews effectively highlights the challenges faced by the institutions in media relations. This finding is in tandem with that of Obi and Ukwueze (2015) who argues that showed that the public relations capabilities of the new media have not been fully explored by Higher Institutions in Nigeria especially in the area of blog. The study concludes that the new media has been acknowledged as needful in doing public relation based on the merits of its interactivity, flexibility and speed of message dissemination among others but is still underutilized. This result correlates with that of Ndinojuo et al. (2016) who reported that some new media technologies like the internet (websites, email, social media, blogs), video news releases, webcasting, videoconferencing etc. are in some way interconnected with the diverse media of communication due to technological innovations and media convergence, and have today transformed media relations practice universally notwithstanding the myriads of issues such as high cost of new technologies, cyber security, corruption, low level of internet

penetration, poor funding, lack of training opportunities, epileptic power supply among others. All posing as challenges to the effective application media relations practice by public relations practitioners in Nigeria. Uche et al. (2019) highlighted that new media technologies present fresh challenges to media relations practice in Nigeria. The study concludes that the challenges of media relations in Nigeria require advocacy for deliberate and conscious government policies to tackle the various challenges and a clarion call to all the stakeholders for a way forward.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shed light on the significance, strategies, impact, and challenges associated with media relations practices within these institutions. The insights gained from these interviews offer valuable insights into the role of media relations in enhancing institutional communication, visibility, and reputation.

It is evident from the interview data that media relations play a pivotal role in the communication strategies of the selected tertiary institutions. The consistent and strategic engagement with various media outlets, both through direct interactions and social media platforms, has allowed these institutions to effectively disseminate information, reach their target audiences, and achieve their institutional goals. The proactive approach taken by the institutions in involving media personnel in events, press releases, and interviews has contributed to positive relationships and enhanced coverage.

Furthermore, the impact of media relations practices on the selected tertiary institutions is undeniable. These practices have led to increased admissions, improved visibility, positive reputation management, and effective crisis communication. Through media coverage, these institutions have showcased their academic programs, research advancements, and infrastructural developments, positioning themselves as thought leaders and credible sources of information.

However, the practice of media relations is not without its challenges. The interview data highlighted obstacles such as improper understanding of communication messages, inadequate funding, network connectivity issues, non-participation by key actors, and impromptu arrangements. These challenges can hinder the seamless execution of media relations efforts, impacting the effectiveness of communication strategies.

Recommendations

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

1. The selected tertiary institutions in Taraba State should allocate proper funding for media activities. Insufficient funding can hinder effective media engagement and timely dissemination of information. By ensuring adequate financial resources, these institutions can better plan and execute their media relations efforts.
2. The institutions should work on ensuring a clear understanding of the communication messages they want to convey through the media. Properly defined and articulated messages will enhance the effectiveness of media engagement, ensuring that accurate information reaches the intended audience.

3. Given that network connectivity challenges were identified, institutions should explore ways to improve connectivity. This can include investing in reliable internet services and technology infrastructure to support seamless communication with media outlets.
4. To overcome challenges related to non-participation by key actors, institutions should emphasize on the importance of collaboration among stakeholders. Regular involvement and active participation from various departments and personnel are vital to ensure coordinated and effective media relations efforts.

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