

Assessment of Corporate Image and Reputation Management of University of Port Harcourt

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Abstract

This study assessed the corporate image and reputation management of University of Port Harcourt. The objectives of the study were to among other things: find out whether students' subscription promote the corporate reputation of University of Port Harcourt; examine how infrastructural facility contribute to promote the corporate reputation of the University of Port Harcourt and assess how students perceive the institutional reputation of the University of Port Harcourt. Theory of organizational image management, stakeholder theory and perception theory formed the theoretical framework for the study. The study adopted the descriptive survey design with a population of 40,902 drawn from the population of undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt. Data were collected from a sample of 370 with cluster and purposive sampling techniques. Among others, findings reveal that the high subscription of students was a testament of the positive image of the University of Port Harcourt; legacy projects on campus promote the corporate image of the university; the extent of trust of students on the management was high and there was overwhelming expression of satisfaction with the growing reputation of the university. The study recommended among others that the University of Port Harcourt should sustain its excellent relationship with the students for enhanced corporate image and reputation of the university.

Keywords: *Assessment, Corporate image, Reputation management*

Introduction

There seems to be consensus among scholars that organizations attach importance to their corporate image and reputation. The foregoing is true to the extent that organizations that render commercial services seem to place more importance to their corporate image than the ones that render public services, due to the profit-making drive of the former. Organizations and institutions, generally place premium on corporate image to attract more patronage and sustainability. The importance attached to corporate image is premised on the critical role which clients or stakeholders play in the realization of organizational goals. The vision of an organization can only be realized when critical stakeholders key into it and support the vision to come to light. To realize the vision, the stakeholders must hold certain views and conviction that

the goal is built on some principles that are worthy of partnership or collaboration.

Corporate image is the perception which clients or stakeholders have about an organization. It can be wish or mirror image. Wish image is the perception that an organization wants its clients to have about it, while mirror image is the image that the audience sees an organization. Martineau (2008) avers that publics are influenced by what they perceive in an organization and what they perceive forms an impression in their minds. In other words, image is the functional qualities and psychological attributes in the minds of the customers. Nwosu (1996) states that corporate image can be seen as a general picture of an organization or corporate entity in people's minds. Simply put, corporate image is the way the publics see or perceive the organization. Corporate image does not exist in isolation but must be influenced by what the organization does directly or indirectly. Corroborating the foregoing submissions, Villanova et al (2000) posit that corporate image is an overall perception of an organization which is held by its different publics. Alvesson (2000) lends credence to the above by adding that corporate image is the holistic and vivid impression held by the publics of an organization. Nwosu et al (2019) observe that "when the corporate image as perceived by the organization's customers is positive, it becomes advantageous to the organization. However, when the corporate image of an organization is misinterpreted, it means the motive of the organization was not well defined and has turned out to be misleading and this can lead to an identity-image gap" (p.41).

Nkwocha (2016) notes that at the elementary level, corporate image and corporate reputation are used interchangeably as synonyms, adding that "... at the professional level, 'reputation' and 'image' mean different things and should be used more appropriately in communication" (p.57). On why corporate reputation should not be used interchangeably with corporate image or corporate identity, Nkwocha states that the major distinguishing argument is that corporate image can be created, while corporate reputation can only be earned. Also, corporate image takes a very short time to build, while corporate reputation takes a longer time to build. Citing Barnett et al (2006), Nkwocha (2016) states that corporate reputation is the judgments made by observers about a firm, and such judgment is rooted in perception of the firm's identity and impressions of a company's distinct collection of symbols, whether that observer is internal or external to the firm. Corporate reputation targets all key stakeholders consisting of consumers, employees, investors, business partners and community. Citing scholars such as Levitt (1965) and Brown (1995), Caruana (2000) highlights some indices for evaluation of corporate reputation of an organization. The indices include: the extent to which a firm is well known, good or bad, reliable, trustworthy, reputable and believable.

For an organization to have positive perception, Nwosu et al (2019) assert that the organization should have strategic plans, part of which must include laid down corporate identity. "The corporate identities of an organization are those unique features that distinguish the organization from others or those communication elements employed by an organization which make it identifiable" (p.37). They note that when activated, corporate identity may either improve or vitiate the organization's existence. When corporate image is advantageous to the organization, it makes a positive impression on its publics. If it fails to yield a positive outcome, then there is bound to be a gap between the corporate identity of the organization and its corporate image as perceived by its publics. According to van Riel (1997), corporate identity is synonymous with organizational nomenclature, logos, company house style, and visual identification. The objective of corporate identity management, is to establish favorable reputation with an organization's stakeholders.

Foroudi et al (2024) state that corporate identity involves managing numerous elements such as

strategy, leadership style, corporate culture, behavior and corporate design. Foroudi et al add that the corporate identity model introduced by van Riel and Balmer (1997) encompasses behaviour, communication and symbolism. Stuart (1999) extends the model to include behavior, management, symbolism and communication (Foroudi et al, 2024).

It should be noted that one common element in the corporate identity model is communication. This is because other elements such as symbolism, behavior, leadership style or management have a way of communicating to the publics. Communication is seen as a tool for enhancing organizational performance. It is the mainstream of any organizational growth. According to Stephen (2011), communication is a critical factor in directing and mobilizing the workforce towards the accomplishment of the organizational goals or objectives. By creating understanding, it enhances cooperation and promotes effective performance. According to Mickinney et al. (2004), communication is essential to effective team performance and communication for any organization is like blood flow in the human body.

The crux of this study centers on how the elements of corporate identity as outlined above either enhance or mar the corporate image and reputation of University of Port Harcourt. Considering that corporate image is the accumulation of judgments of an organization that exist in the minds of the audience and that reputation is an abstract value indicating people's evaluation on a given situation and certain level of reliability which can only be earned after years-long consistent behaviors, this study sought to assess the corporate image of the University based on two key elements which are communication and leadership.

The University of Port Harcourt is a federal institution founded in 1975 originally as a university college that was affiliated with the University of Lagos. The University of Port Harcourt commenced academic activities in 1977 with an initial intake of 571 students across various programs of study. In 1980, the University College, Port Harcourt became the University of Port Harcourt through the University of Port Harcourt Act No. 1 of 1980. This Act granted the university full autonomy to govern itself and control its academic and administrative affairs independently. Over the years, the university has expanded its academic programs, research activities, and infrastructure.

The vision of the University of Port Harcourt is to become the highest ranked amongst the best universities in Africa, renowned for its teaching, research, creativity and innovation. The mission of the University of Port Harcourt is the pursuit of academic excellence, advancement of knowledge and community service through quality teaching, life-long learning, social inclusion, strengthening civil society and policy-relevant research that addresses the challenges of contemporary society. To achieve this mission, University is guided by the spirit of enquiry, self-reliance, fairness, ethical and professional standards of the disciplines. The philosophy of the University of Port Harcourt is commitment to academic freedom, tolerance, probity, equal opportunity and respect for cultural diversity (First Choice Destination, 2011). As at the time of this study, Professor Owunari Abraham Georgewill was appointed the 9th Vice Chancellor of the University of Port Harcourt.

Statement of The Problem

All over the world, there seems to be systemic issues with public service. There is always discontentment in the way services are rendered to the public. Several studies have outlined some of the challenges to quality service delivery and part of such challenges are leadership problem and lack of proper communication between service providers and the audience. When there is poor service delivery it affects organizational performance and the publics feel alienated

from the system.

Ineffective leadership and communication are part of the major barriers to quality service delivery which also hamper good relationship among workers and stakeholders. Ineffective leadership and lack of communication can be assessed by both internal and external publics. Internal publics in the context of this study are staff, students and some business vendors on the campus of University of Port Harcourt, while external publics include host communities and alumni. This study is limited to internal publics with students and management as the focus.

It is therefore, imperative to always find out the perception of stakeholders and means of bridging the gap of perceived communication deficiency and ineffective leadership. The problem of the study therefore, is to assess the corporate image and reputation management of the University of Port Harcourt.

Aim and Objectives of The Study

The aim of the study is to assess the corporate image and reputation management of the University of Port Harcourt. The objectives are to:

1. examine how infrastructural facility contribute to corporate reputation of University of Port Harcourt;
2. find out the extent to which students trust the management of University of Port Harcourt;
3. assess how students perceive the institutional reputation of the University of Port Harcourt;

Literature Review

Akande (1999) describes corporate image as the true image of an organization, which represents the overall impression held by the people about an organization contingent upon its reputation, corporate social responsibility, its character, staff strength, personality, amount invested, amount expended on advertising, (especially public service advertisements) its policies, history, community relations drive, employee relations policy. Nwosu (2003) in agreement with the above statement explains that corporate image is a general picture of an organization or a corporate entity in peoples' mind and can be described as the way an organization is being perceived by its public. Nwosu views corporate image of an organization as similar to its composite corporate personality of an organization and as the sum total of impression about an organization that influence the behavior of its public through the activities of the organization.

Nwosu also stresses that organizations should put tremendous effort to ensure that image is properly managed and nurtured through image building mechanism such as projects and programs that are continual and systematic in nature. Nwosu adds that image of an organization is very important and commitment should be given to it because the way the public sees an organization's mission, vision, culture/lifestyle, identity, media and her communication strategies will definitely have a positive or negative perception of the image of the organization.

According to Jefkins (1988), corporate image and identity are similar yet there are differences between them. Jefkins states that corporate image is a mental perception, while corporate identity is seen as a physical perception. This shows that corporate image is the way an institution is perceived by its public based on its corporate identity. Hence, when an organization is seen to be good, then the corporate image of the organization is positive. Corporate image and identity make up an organization's reputation. Ohiagu (2014) explains that organizations create their corporate identity through communication elements such as name, logo, slogan, colour, messages, all communication activities, actions, etc. It is also important that these elements communicate the right messages because corporate identity is used to influence corporate image

and eventually corporate reputation.

Latimore et.al (2004) explain that an organization's corporate image can be viewed as the conglomeration of people's attitudes, opinions and beliefs about the organization established through several influences and built overtime, consequent upon organizational actions and general relationship with its publics. This means that the cordial relationship with key publics and mutual understanding can boost the organization's status. The foregoing submission aligns with the view portrayed by Stanley (2001) as cited in Udeze (2005) that image is "the totality of impressions people has about a company, an individual, an organization... the personality of an organization as perceived by its various public" (p57).

Kotler (1985) explains that organization should always endeavor to properly nurture and maintain their image since it affects the behavior of the publics of an organization. It is imperative to note that a favorable or positive corporate image is not only attained through public relations but can also be achieved through the activities of the organization such as deeds communication strategies, character and pre-consciousness. These elements are essential tools which support public relations towards achieving organizational goals and positive image.

Corporate image can be viewed as: Mirror image, Wish image, Real image, Current image and Stereotypic image. For mirror image, the headship of an organization has the feeling that the external public of an organization has a particular impression which is portrayed by them. What the headship of the organization has identified may be in tandem with the impression of the external public, on the other hand, it might also be a contradiction based on the experience or knowledge of the external public of the organization. In support of the above explanation, Dokuma (2004) explains that the individual organization or government therefore needs to carry out regular public opinion research or image survey to determine what people really think of them, findings from the image survey can then be fine-tuned in line with the public relations objectives of individual, organization or government.

Wish image is the expected impression that an organization, particularly the management would want the external public to have about it. In other words, it is the desired image which the organization would want to attain. Ndimele (2005) sees wish image as the desired image which the management of an organization envisages for its organization. This is related to Dokuma's (2004) opinion that wish image is reflected or stated in the vision and mission statement, or aims and objectives of the organization. Wish image is a near perfect situation, a preferred outcome which is continuously aimed for. Every organization should set a wish image for itself and work towards achieving it.

The perception an external public has of an organization is called current image (Ndimele, 2005). The perception can be favorable or unfavorable as a result of the information and knowledge the public has about the organization. This means that an organization, to an extent, determines the image the external public has of it. If an organization behaves positively, the public has a positive image of it but if the organization portrays negative behavior, it will be seen negatively by the external public which will definitely project the organization in bad light.

Stereotype image is the view of an organization's public based on the existing stereotypes which could be ethnic, geographical and operational. This explains that stereotype is the opinion of the public about an organization usually portrayed through the prism of ethnicity, political/religious affiliations or the geographical area where the organization is located. As a result of these variables, the attitude of the publics of an organization will definitely be different from what the organization represents. Here, public relations practitioners go an extra mile in order to change any contrary impression the public may have of an organization.

Real image is the impression the publics have about an organization based on the knowledge and experience of the publics. Real image includes the experience, knowledge and impressions which people have of an organization. .

Reputation is the judgement or opinion that people have about somebody or something. According to Nkwocha (2016), reputation is the accumulation or aggregation of positive identity, values, character, qualities, attributes and goodwill over time in the life of somebody, corporate organization or government. Reputation consists of the general opinion or perception held by important people, publics, stakeholders, individuals, or groups about a thing, person, organization or government. Reputation is a set of assumptions, beliefs, ideas and images that reflect the position and respect of the given object, person, social group, product, organization, higher institution of learning and host of others. Kewell (2007) notes that positive corporate reputation is an important driver of a successful organizational relationship with our clients, who may have a significant impact on the business of a company.

Corporate reputation refers to how an organization or firm is perceived or viewed by all its stakeholders. Corporate reputation is the judgment about an organization. It is the public's perception or the impression of how people perceive an organization and the products or services of the organization. Fombrun and van-Riel, according to Nkwocha (2016) define corporate reputation as a collective representation of a company's character that gauges the firm's relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders. Bennett and Kottasz (2000) see corporate reputation as perception of an organization developed over time. Smaiziene and Jucevicius (2009) posit that corporate reputation is the evaluation of a company's socially transmissible characteristics, practices, behavior and results; settled over a period of time among stakeholders that represent expectations for the company's actions and levels of trustworthiness, favorability and acknowledgement comparing to rivals.

Nkwocha (2010) defines corporate reputation management as an emerging concept in public relations practice which deploys various strategies, tools and techniques to build, sustain, protect, rebuild and relaunch positive image, perception, impressions, knowledge and information about the organization through excellent relationships with both internal and external stakeholders such as employees, shareholders, customers, community, government and the media.

Theoretical Framework

Organisational image management theory was proposed by Joseph Eric Massey in 2003. The theory postulates that organisations must create, maintain, and in many cases, regain a legitimate image of themselves in the eyes of their stakeholders (Willi et al, 2014). The image of an organisation is the mental picture held of an organisation by its stakeholders. Organisation's image springs from its identity which overtime, results in corporate reputation. Willi et al (2014) believe that organisational image management focuses on the actions taken to create, maintain, and when necessary, regain a desired image in the eyes of organisational stakeholders. By implication, the theory reveals that the survival and sustainability of any organisation is dependent on how well the organisation manages its image before its publics.

The theory adds that organisational credibility, identity, image, and reputation are essential. When the image of an organisation is poorly managed, it would affect the productivity and sustainability of the organisation, as well as its relationship with the publics. Therefore, the theory of organisational image management is relevant to this study as it looks at the need for an organisation to maintain positive image, especially in a competitive university environment where more universities are granted approval by the Federal Government to operate.

Methodology

The design adopted for this study is the survey design. A survey research design is a design that involves the study of a sample taken from a population in order to know their major characteristics. The survey design is chosen for the study due to the fact that it is often regarded as one of the most appropriate and effective means of conducting opinion research which deals with the feelings, perceptions, opinions, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudinal disposition of people on a given subject-matter or issue in their natural setting. Since this study has to do with assessment of respondents' views of the corporate image and reputation of the University of Port Harcourt, the survey design is deemed appropriate.

The population of the study consists of undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt. According to data released by the Registry Department, the population of undergraduate full-time students of the University for the 2023/2024 academic session was 40,902. Therefore, the population of the study is 40,902. The justification for using students is premised on the fact that students are critical internal members of the public who can authoritatively assess issues on corporate image and reputation management.

The study adopted the formula developed by Keyton (2001) to determine the sample size from the population of the study. Going by Keyton (2001) Sample Table, the sample size for this study is 370. The table shows that population figures between 10,000 and 49,999 have a sample size of 370. Therefore, the sample size of this study is 370. There are 16 Faculties in the University of Port Harcourt which are Faculties of: Education, Humanities, Social Sciences, Agriculture, Engineering, Management Sciences, Science, Law, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Basic Medical Sciences, Basic Clinical Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Health and Allied Sciences, Dentistry, Communication and Media Studies and Computing.

The researcher adopted the stratified sampling to group respondents into the faculties. Then purposive sampling technique was used to choose specific faculties due to their interrelatedness and exposure to aspect of corporate management or communication and public relations. Students of the selected Faculties were deemed to have knowledge of corporate image and reputation management. The faculties are: Humanities, Social Sciences, Law, Management Sciences and Communication and Media Studies. Each of the faculties had a total of 74 copies of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was the basic instrument for gathering data from the respondents. The questionnaire consisted of items based on a four-point Likert Scale. Items in the instrument were generated based on the research questions. Data were collected through the administration of copies of the questionnaire to respondents.

Results and Discussion

Of the 370 copies of questionnaire administered to the respondents, a total of 360 was retrieved from the respondents. The data are represented in tabular form and analysed using mean statistics. The presentation of data and discussion of findings were worked around the research questions.

Table 1: Infrastructural Facility and Corporate Image

Item	Description of Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean Score	Decision
1	The new Convocation Arena of the University of Port Harcourt is a legacy infrastructure that contributes to the corporate reputation	181	106	44	29	360	3.2	Agreed
2	The CBN Centre of Excellence projects the University of Port Harcourt in a good light	724	318	88	29	1159		
2	The CBN Centre of Excellence projects the University of Port Harcourt in a good light	201	99	24	36	360	3.3	Agreed
		804	297	48	36	1185		
3	The street light on campus with improved power supply contributes in sustaining the positive brand of University of Port Harcourt	167	111	39	43	360		Agreed
		668	333	72	43	1116	3.1	
4	The new spacious classroom blocks assist in conducive learning and providing better reputation	171	121	33	35	360		Agreed
		684	363	66	35	1148	3.2	
	Cumulative					5880	3.2	Agreed

The data from table 1 show that all items on whether infrastructural facility promote the corporate image and reputation of the University of Port Harcourt are in the affirmative.

Table 2: Leadership Trust and Reputation Management

Item	Description of Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean Score	Decision
5	The regular visits of the Vice Chancellor to lecture halls and hostels build strong relationship between students and the management	199	101	27	33	360	3.3	Agreed
		772	297	98	19	1186		
6	The regular information and updates by the Vice Chancellor on events happening on campus bridge information gap between the students and authorities of the university	201	112	17	30	360	3.4	Agreed
		804	336	34	30	1204		
7	The leadership of the students including the students trust the Vice Chancellor because he attends promptly to their requests	137	105	69	49	360	2.9	Agreed
		548	315	138	49	1050		

8	The accessibility of the Vice Chancellor is a boost to the corporate image of the University of Port Harcourt	187	143	12	18	360		
		748	429	24	38	1239	3.2	Agreed
	Cumulative					4679	3.2	Agreed

In summary, data from table 2 show that all items on whether there is trust between the students and management of the University of Port Harcourt are in the affirmative.

Table 3: Perception of Institutional Reputation

Item	Description of Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean Score	Decision
9	The reputation of the University of Port Harcourt is generally excellent	73	69	137	81	360	2.4	Disagreed
10	The reputation of the University of Port Harcourt is generally good	292	207	274	81	854		Agreed
		121	149	82	8	360	3.1	
		484	447	164	8	1103		
11	The reputation of the University of Port Harcourt is generally poor	43	23	197	97	360	2.0	Disagreed
12	I am satisfied with the reputation which the University of Port Harcourt is building for itself	172	69	394	97	732		
		178	123	25	29	360	3.2	Agreed
		712	369	50	29	1160		
	Cumulative					3849	2.7	Agreed

In summary, data from table 3 show that the students are satisfied with the reputation that the University of Port Harcourt is building for itself.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

Research One: In what ways do infrastructural facility contribute to corporate reputation of University of Port Harcourt?

The new Convocation Arena of the University of Port Harcourt is a legacy infrastructure that contributes to the corporate reputation. The CBN Centre of Excellence projects the University of Port Harcourt in a good light. The street light on campus with improved power supply contributes to sustaining the positive brand of University of Port Harcourt. The new spacious classroom blocks assist in conducive learning and providing better reputation.

The finding that buildings on the campus of University of Port Harcourt contribute to the corporate reputation of University of Port Harcourt is in line with the submission of van Riel (1997) that corporate identity is synonymous with organizational nomenclature, logos, company house style and visual identification. Stuart (1999) further elaborates that corporate identity involves managing numerous elements which include symbolism, management and behaviour. With regards to symbolism, the presence of state-of-the-art buildings adds to the positive corporate image of the University of Port Harcourt.

Research Two: To what extent do students trust the management of University of Port Harcourt in course of their dealings with the University?

The regular visits of the Vice Chancellor to lecture halls and hostels build strong relationship between students and the management. The regular information and updates by the Vice Chancellor on events happening on campus bridge information gap between the students and authorities of the university. The leadership of the students including the students trust the Vice Chancellor because he attends promptly to their requests. The accessibility of the Vice Chancellor is a boost to the corporate image of the University of Port Harcourt.

Foroudi et al (2024) state that corporate identity involves managing numerous elements such as strategy, leadership style, corporate culture, behavior and corporate design. Stuart (1999) had listed management and behavior as part of corporate identity model. Therefore, the leadership style and approach to management deployed by the authorities of the university have to a large extent, influence on the students.

The finding validates the thesis of Stakeholder Theory which suggests that an organization's real success lies in satisfying all its stakeholders, whether internal or external publics.

Research Three: In what ways do the students perceive the institutional reputation of University of Port Harcourt?

The students agreed that the reputation of the University of Port Harcourt is generally good. They expressed satisfaction with the reputation which the University of Port Harcourt is building for itself.

The finding that the respondents were satisfied with the institutional reputation of University of Port Harcourt strengthens the argument of Kowell (2007) that positive corporate reputation is an important driver of a successful organizational relationship with clients. This finding also validates the notion of Theory of Organizational Image of Management which states that organizations must create, maintain and in many cases regain legitimate image of themselves in the eyes of their stakeholders.

Summary of Findings

The major findings of the study are:

1. The siting of legacy infrastructural buildings such as the new Convocation Arena and CBN Centre of Excellence projects on the campus of University of Port Harcourt projects the university in a good light. Similarly, the street lights on campus with improved power supply, new spacious classroom blocks for conducive learning contribute in sustaining the positive brand of University of Port Harcourt.
2. The extent to which students trust the Management of the University of Port Harcourt is high and this was made possible by the relationship which the Vice Chancellor has built with the students. The Vice Chancellor built strong relationship between students and the management through regular visits to lecture halls and hostels to identify with the students directly and by so doing, addressing their needs. The regular information and updates by the Vice Chancellor on events happening on campus also bridge information gap between the students and authorities of the university. The accessibility of the Vice Chancellor is a boost to the corporate image of the University of Port Harcourt.
3. There is overwhelming expression of satisfaction with the reputation which the University of Port Harcourt is building for itself.

Conclusion

The study concludes that various corporate identity elements such as communication, leadership style, behavior, symbolism and visual identification combined to present a favorable corporate image of the University of Port Harcourt among its students, majority of whom expressed satisfaction that the university is building a positive image for itself. The positive image is anchored on high students' subscription, state-of-the-art infrastructural projects and cordial relationship between students and the authorities of the university. These variables persuade the students to express satisfaction with the trend of steady growth of the reputation of the university.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researcher recommends as follows:

- 1.The siting of legacy projects contributes to promote an organization in positive light. The authorities of the university should step up the drive to attract quality infrastructural projects to the institution to add to address some needs and add to its aesthetics.
- 2.The authorities of the University of Port Harcourt should sustain the cordial relationship that exists between management and the students as this will boost the corporate image of the University of Port Harcourt.
- 3.A success story when not properly handled flops. Therefore, there is the need to build on the good image of the university, to attract more goodwill and corporate reputation for the University of Port Harcourt.

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