Students' Perception of Public Relations in Conflict Resolution in Selected Tertiary Institutions in Akwa Ibom State

Herbert E. Batta, Ph.D; Etinyene Friday Offongekpe
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies
University of Uyo, Nigeria
etinyeneoffongekpe@gmail.com
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Abstract
This study investigated public relations practices in conflict resolution by selected tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. It adopted the survey research method. The theoretical framework adopted for the study were the Stakeholder Theory and the Social Judgment Theory. The population of the study was 151,802, from which a sample size of 400 was determined using the Taro Yamane formula. The questionnaire was adopted as the instrument for data collection, and data gathered were analysed in tables. The findings from the study revealed that: the prevailing public relations practices employed in conflict resolution in selected tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State was (25%) stakeholder engagement; and public relations practices in conflict resolution was considered (38%) as effective, with interview data showing that public relations officers observed renewed engagements among members of the institutions' communities. Consequently, it was concluded that the effectiveness of these strategies was constrained by power imbalances among institutional actors, with the overall rating of public relations practices as effective suggesting that stakeholders acknowledged their value in calming tensions, clarifying issues, and facilitating engagement. It was recommended that tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State should institutionalise stakeholder engagement frameworks by creating clear guidelines for inclusive participation, feedback integration, and follow-up communication.

Keywords: *Crisis management, Higher Education, Stakeholder Engagement, Survey research, Nigeria*

Introduction

Tertiary institutions are increasingly beleaguered by conflicts arising from varied interests, ethnic tensions, and power struggles. These disputes often escalate into violent or even non-violent confrontations, impacting academic activities and undermining institutional reputation. Effective conflict resolution strategies are central to upholding harmony and stability. Consequently, it is believed that public relations, with its emphasis on stakeholder engagement, communication, and issue management, offers a vital framework for addressing these conflicts. Furthermore, Touitou (2020) rightly submits that public relations combines several synergistic strategies in its approach to communication, and through it, the creation of management principles could be obtained. The author further identifies three thought approaches to conflict – traditional, human relations perspective, and integrationist views. All of these is wrapped in the component of public relations known as crisis management, even as Wobodo, Orianzi, and OkoJaja (2020) underscore that conflict, which is the focus of this article, may arise as a result of personality differences. This

suggests that crisis may be a weightier end of conflict, which may be more difficult, and require stronger tact to contain. As a communication tool, public relations is useful for various reasons and is applied in diverse situations for optimal results. The phenomenon plays a significant role in the success of organisations across the globe. It is employed to manage situations ranging from image-making to marketing, reputation management, etc., through to conflict resolution. Edafejirhaye and Alao (2019) in light of this, hold the opinion that public relations also has some potential in the achievement of conflict resolution in tertiary academic institutions in Nigeria.

An observation of tertiary institutions reveals that they are a melting point for people of diverse origins, educational and social standing, who also hold different opinions on issues; some of them are resistant to, or slow to embrace change, and these are some factors that can engender tension in the course of running the institutions, thereby causing conflicts. Given the possibility of such issues arising, management puts in place mechanisms that are hoped can help in containing them. Moreover, Samuel and Etamesor (2021) remark that public relations plays defined roles in society, pointing out that issues that require resolution may be unforeseen, yet management must aim to resolve them whenever they emerge. Moreover, among the several tools that could be employed for the purpose of conflict resolution, Aligwe and Alegu (2018) identify public relations as one, and outline that it employs several strategies including but not limited to negotiation, mediation, inquiry, conciliation, arbitration, mass media, public opinion, and propaganda devices. Each of these strategies may be individually employed and may also be combined depending on the outlook of the conflict aimed to be resolved, and the subjects involved in the conflict situation, given what may be acceptable to them. In Akwa Ibom State tertiary institutions, conflicts arise from disagreements by students, following some decisions of management which they believe may have an adverse effect on them, or make their academic journey tortuous. They could also stem from differences in the host community's disposition to management actions or inactions believed to undermine the standing of the community. Located in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, the State is home to several tertiary institutions, including the University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State University, and Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, among others including privately-owned establishments. Each of these institutions has experienced recurring conflicts, impacting academic outputs. Ayandele, Ogosi, Andem and Zibigha (2022), for instance, point out that conflict starters in tertiary institutions in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria, wherein Akwa Ibom State belongs, could range from the feeling of marginalisation and undervaluation by non-teaching staff by members of the academic stock; to management experiences of frequent clashes with students, staff, and other stakeholders in the course of discharging tasks such as recruitment, admission, examination, and providing welfare services. Practical examples suffice in the Akwa Ibom State College of Education, which similarly, experienced a conflict situation in 2022, when four members of staff were allegedly dismissed unduly, and as Simon (2022) reports, they were demanded to tender a letter of apology to the institution after implementing the national directive of COEASU on a nationwide strike to press home demands for Colleges of Education across the country. This development attracted the intervention of the Nigeria Labour Congress (which argued that the lecturers were innocent) and later the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly. The same institution, Ekponta (2017) reports, wrongfully disengaged eleven lecturers leading to a conflict situation that was only fixed following a resolution of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly. These cases escaped resolutions within the institutions and were only resolved by the intervention of external forces, the State government in the case of the University of Uyo, and the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly in the case of the College of Education on two occasions.

In light of conflict resolution in tertiary institutions, therefore, studies such as Umana (2019), Varma, and Gupta (2023), that considered conflict resolution strategies and organisational performance, identified several tools employed to resolve conflict, as well as the outcome and effect of resolved conflicts. Similarly, Ayandele, Ogosi, Andem, and Zibigha (2022) surveyed conflict management strategies and performance of tertiary institutions in South-South, Nigeria, reporting a significant positive relationship between some strategies and the performance of tertiary institutions. Osman (2021) evaluated workplace conflict management's impact on employees' performance in Ghana's tertiary institutions, while Yusuf and Ibrahim (2019) considered conflict management strategies and administrative effectiveness among tertiary institutions in Sokoto Metropolis. Exploring the connection between public relations and conflict resolution, this study looks to contribute to the several context-specific strategies for managing conflicts and fostering peaceful coexistence in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, specifically, Akwa Ibom State. It seeks to unravel how public relations tools and strategies are employed in these tertiary institutions to resolve conflicts that arise at different times as well as understand their effectiveness or otherwise.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Public relations practices could prove to be a veritable tool in the resolution and management of conflicts in organisations and institutions such as tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State – universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, and colleges of education alike. Moreover, tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State have experienced certain kinds of issues that resulted in conflicts including the 2013 wreckage of the Vice Chancellor's office at the University of Uyo, which followed an unresolved matter involving the transfer of the Engineering Faculty to the university's Main Campus, and arrangement of transportation services for students. This situation spiraled into a brawl between students and the Nigeria Police Force, who were deployed to restore calm, leading to a gunshot that killed one student on the Annex Campus. Studies, however, leave gaps that could be filled by further research; as there appears to be little to no consideration for the employment of diverse public relations practices in the pursuit of resolution by the institutions. Therefore, this research investigates the use of public relations practices by universities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, to resolve conflicts. In exploring conflict resolution in Akwa Ibom State tertiary institutions, this study specifically considers issues in these institutions and how public relations, where employed, yielded resolution or otherwise, as well as the extent to which it proved effective. Consequently, to investigate how universities in Akwa Ibom State utilise public relations during conflict resolution, and how strategic communication plays a role in arriving at that desired end; the question answered by this research was: how are public relations practices used in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

i. examine the prevailing public relations practices employed in conflict resolution in selected tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State;
ii. determine the perceived challenges of employing public relations in conflict resolution in selected tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State; and
iii. evaluate the perceived effectiveness of public relations practices in conflict resolution in selected tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State.

Literature Review

Sources of Conflict in Tertiary Institutions

Several events can be the source of conflicts in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. Exploring conversations on this opens us up to the understanding of issues, latent and active, that could become triggers for conflicts in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. Isaiah and Damilola (2023), for instance, identify poor funding mechanisms by the government to the institutions. And, for private institutions, poor funding for projects could also breed conflicts.

Similarly, Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024) observe that labour conflicts in Nigerian public universities are one aspect that has persisted. Akparep, Bagah and Teng-Zeng (2019) note that administrator's decisions about students are sources of conflict in tertiary institutions. This is true, also, for institutions in Akwa Ibom State, whereas Igbinoba, Salau, Atolagbe and Joel (2023) suggest that academic staff turnover in tertiary institutions pose serious challenges, and is a potential trigger for conflict in tertiary institutions, albeit those in Akwa Ibom State.

Additionally, Mbokazi, Masina, Mbokazi, and Nsibande (2022, p.423) state that the following suffice as issues that are not alien to tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, and they present as sources of conflicts too. They include: "poor teacher-class attendance, competition for resources, leadership and management issues, politics and unionism, poor initial teacher preparation and contestation for school leadership positions". Similarly, Baptist and Ackah (2026) identify several factors that could breed conflict in tertiary institutions. They list the following: task interdependence, scarce resources, lack of opportunity, ability or motivation to communicate effectively, all of which paint pictures of what is obtainable in the various strata of tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State. From the foregoing, it could be inferred that conflicts are ingrained in the day-to-day operation of tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, and the sources of these conflicts are not peculiar to these institutions but cut across tertiary institutions in Nigeria and beyond. They are a pointer to issues that bedevil the system, and bring to mind the possibilities of management's approach to resolving them. This portends broad ramifications, implying that disputes in higher education institutions frequently stem from more fundamental structural and systemic problems. Institutions must, however, prioritise efficient communication, teamwork, and resource management in order to resolve these conflicts in a more comprehensive and proactive manner. By doing this, tertiary institutions, including those in Akwa Ibom State, can establish a more favourable and encouraging learning environment, which can ultimately improve the standard of education and the general wellbeing of both employees and students.

Conflict Management and Resolution in Tertiary Institutions

Nigerian tertiary institutions, like every other organisation, are riddled with issues that beyond being said to be resolved, must be seen to have been resolved. Some conflicts take a longer time to be resolved and the duration depends largely on the approach of those involved in the resolution or management process. This section traverses literature, through secondary sources, to establish a collation of knowledge on how conflicts have been managed in various educational institutions. Conflict, according to Ayandele, Ogosi, Andem and Zibigha (2022), when properly managed, enhances cooperation and fosters the attainment of institutional goals. The authors also indicate that conflict could exist among staff, students, institutional and authority figures, and the community. They submit that conflict management techniques should be commensurate with the complexity and intensity of the issue sought to be resolved. Consequently, they identify five strategies for managing conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions thus: accommodation, avoidance, compromise, competition, and collaboration. Moreover, Isaiah and Damilola (2023) reiterate that

conflict in universities could be caused by internal or external conflicts, adding that one way to approach it for resolution is to consider it a foundation for a successful level of the best possible management strategy. Given that conflicts could be seasonal, the study by Yuhan, Jianguang, and Haratyan (2023) focused on conflict resolution during COVID-19, and report that online education was a tool for managing conflict during the period. It would be recalled that several universities in Nigeria adopted online education system, stemming, issues that might have arisen as a result of not engaging in academic activities. While Oseremen and Anoghene (2023, p.290) observe that conflict management, especially in Nigerian tertiary institutions, faces the difficulty of implementation given that, "it evolves with knowledge and existence," they suggest that contrast in the styles or approaches of those involved in conflict could also hamper its management or resolution. Notwithstanding, Iddrisu, Abdulai, and Abdulai (2024) note that the development of a positive communication approach could lead to the resolution of conflicts. In addition, they believe that stakeholders involved in a conflict situation must cultivate effective negotiation skills. Similarly, Aule and Musa (2022) agree that management of conflict in tertiary institutions was possible, hence they suggest the use of mechanisms such as compromise, mediation, and conciliation, among other things can suffice, paving the way for conflict resolution.

A report by Ojika (2024) advances a contestation on whether the management of organisational conflicts enhances or deteriorates the development of the university community. The author suggests further that the outcome could either be beneficial for the individuals involved or detrimental to relationships and self-esteem, depending on how conflict is handled in the university. Shehu-Usman, Uzochukwu, Gambo, and Abubakar (2024) express worry that there is a failure of managers to systematically and comprehensively approach conflict the same way they do financial, information, and human resources, thus, placing impediments to conflict resolution, including in Nigerian universities.

In managing or resolving conflicts in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, a study such as Arikpo, Charles, and Emmanuel (2022) highlights the correlations between conflict resolution and general productivity in the institution. Also, Yusuf and Ibrahim (2019) found that the patterns that involved academic staff in conflict resolution did have a significant relationship with the academic staff's job performance. Similarly, Dada (2020) reports among other things, that a strong positive relationship subsisted between the school management's style of conflict resolution and academic staff performance. And, these are a pointer to the fact that the way conflict is managed in Nigerian tertiary institutions plays a major role in the total outcome of the institutions.

Public Relations Practices and Conflict Resolution in Tertiary Institutions

Public relations in conflict resolution can be used to engage with stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and the media, to build trust, understanding, and support. By employing it, those directly and indirectly affected by an organisation's actions and inactions could be reached and pacified over uncomely issues. Organisations, tertiary institutions in the case of this study, can adopt public relations practices in the explanation of issues, and apologising for occurrences that may have adversely affected some sections of the community.

Public relations practice is a deliberate and systematic approach to managing relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders (Sheyigari, Abraham, and Abigail, 2023). In the context of tertiary institutions, it plays a crucial role in maintaining a positive reputation, fostering stakeholder engagement, and resolving conflicts. Given the diverse nature of stakeholders involved in tertiary institutions, including students, faculty, alumni, and the wider community, Shimawua and Ternenge (2022) note that they face unique challenges in managing their public

image, entrenching the need for providing a coordinated effort that gears toward the promotion of a positive image. The practices, Suleiman and Osaro (2024) state, are indispensable in navigating these complexities, as they enable institutions to proactively manage their reputation, build relationships, and mitigate potential conflicts. Consequently, research has shown that the phenomenon can be effective in enhancing the reputation of tertiary institutions. A study by Gogiashvili (2022) reports that universities that engaged in public relations activities, such as social media engagement and community outreach, experienced improved reputation and stakeholder satisfaction. Similarly, Suleiman and Osaro (2024) discovered that PR efforts, including media relations and crisis communication, contributed to increased reputation and trust among stakeholders. Conflict in tertiary institutions is an inherent aspect of stakeholders' interaction, and attempts at resolution are also a prevalent feature, given this scenario. Conflicts can arise from various sources, including student-faculty disputes, administrative decisions, and resource allocation as Ayandele, Ogosi, Andem, and Zibigha (2022) reiterate. Effective conflict resolution is critical in maintaining a positive and productive learning environment. Research has highlighted the importance of communication in conflict resolution. A study by Ahmad and Chowdhury (2022) reports that open and transparent communication was essential in resolving conflicts in universities. Similarly, Tanifum and Fabien (2024) note that effective communication and conflict resolution strategies, such as mediation and negotiation, contributed to improved relationships and reduced conflict escalation. The stages of conflict come into play even in tertiary institutions, and public relations practices can also be applied in those stages. Firstly, from the pre-conflict stage, tertiary institutions' management and other stakeholders can embark on any of the following: establishment of relationships, crisis communication planning and issue management. Tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, with their diverse cultural and socio-political landscapes, present a unique case for exploring the application of strategic public relations in pre-conflict stages. The establishment of relationships would include activities such as stakeholder mapping, as Ewata, Sakue-Collins, Ubodiom, and Harcourt (2024) underscore the importance of understanding stakeholders' objectives and their interests in an ongoing issue. The result of this step, according to DesJardine, Zhang, and Shi (2023), is the provision of a new angle on discussions that better highlight the intersection of stakeholder interests, and where they misalign. This precedes, and then attracts regular communication, collaborative initiative, and cultural sensitivity, all of which are important for achieving resolution.

Similarly, public relations at this stage involves crisis communication planning which aims to mitigate the impact of potential conflicts. It consists of several activities including but not limited to risk assessment, which, according to Chandralekha (2024), makes room for the identification of danger zones, and the development of avoidance or navigation plans. A crisis communication team is also convened at this stage, alongside the development of protocols, noted by Omokhele (2024) to include messaging, tone and channels. Also, the pre-conflict stage suffices for the adoption of issue management, wherein stakeholders can halt issues by identifying potential issues that could impact the institution; issue analysis; stakeholder engagement, and issue resolution. Ebhodaghe, Bello, and Asala (2024) state that with these in place, the chances of escalation are low, adding that it involves the quick use of peace-keeping, peace enforcement, ceasefire, and buffer zone.

Peradventure an issue in the tertiary institution degenerates into a conflict stage, some public relations engagements are deployed: situation assessment, communication strategy, stakeholder engagement, and media management. Zelenko, Zhdanova-Nedilko, Stepanenko, Ahivska, and Nonik (2024) underscore that the comprehensive evaluation of the situation leads to knowledge formation and indicates readiness for conflict resolution. It connotes that several things come to

the fore when the situation is assessed; some of them include the conflict triggers, stakeholder analysis – understanding those involved (parents, students, staff, management, and the wider community), as well as the potential for escalation, which could be curbed.

Furthermore, Gjerazi (2023) observes that the development of communication strategies suited for the assessed situation is crucial to achieving a resolution for an ongoing conflict situation. This helps in addressing stakeholder concerns, maintaining transparency, promoting institutional values, and managing misinformation. These, when put in place, are expected to calm frayed nerves within an institution and set in motion, processes that bring about concrete stakeholder management, which Sanyaolu, Adeleke, Efunniyi, Akwawa, and Azubuko (2023) highlight, is pivotal to achieving success where diverse expectations and deliverables are obtained. In addition, a part of this stage is the development of plans to manage the media, engage with media outlets and straighten narratives on social media platforms. For Munduate, Medina, and Euwema (2022), to resolve conflicts, engagements take certain shapes, and public relations experts work to establish negotiation and mediation, compromise and agreement, communication of resolution, and reputation management. All of these are carried out with the view to achieving mutually beneficial relationships and understanding across the board in a conflict situation in an institution. Consequently, when a resolution is reached, public relations professionals embark on reviewing and evaluating the entire process, highlighting stakeholder feedback as well as providing feedback where necessary, and rebuilding relationships. The intersection of public relations practices and conflict resolution is critical in tertiary institutions. The phenomenon can play a proactive role in preventing conflicts by fostering positive relationships, building trust, and promoting open communication. In the event of a conflict, it can smoothen effective conflict resolution by providing timely and transparent communication, managing stakeholder expectations, and promoting a positive institutional image. Universities that adopt a strategic public relations approach, combined with effective conflict resolution strategies, experience improved reputation, stakeholder satisfaction, and conflict resolution outcomes

Theoretical Framework

Social Judgement Theory

The social judgment theory was conceived in the 1960s by psychologists Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif, and Carl Hovland. The main idea of the theory is that people use their judgment groups to assess new information. To explain how an audience interprets messages, the theory suggests that a comparison is made of recently received information with preexisting beliefs. The theorists point out that the choice to accept or reject the information is the result of this subconscious-to-conscious exercise. The theory explains how people can be persuaded by a message, thus, whether or not people accept new information is dependent on how a new piece of information compares to their preexisting beliefs or notions. Hence, the goal of social judgment theory is to explain why audience members accept some persuasive messages while rejecting others. Messages are received in several ways: with positive regard, skepticism, or neutrality. The social judgment theory asserts that attitudes toward media characters are influenced by individuals' ongoing moral evaluations of the characters' actions. This explains why members of Akwa Ibom's tertiary institution communities may accept or reject public relations tactics used by mediating parties or other parties involved in the conflict to stop it from getting worse. Consequently, a key determinant of whether a message is accepted or rejected is the cognitive state of the recipients at the moment it is delivered; people assess their attitude by contrasting it with the attitude that is portrayed in a message. The central tenet, therefore, is that judgmental processes and outcomes are mediated and

that behaviour modification is the result of this mediation. A summation of arguments on the theory infer the following: people have categories of judgment with which they evaluate persuasive communication; when we receive persuasive information, we use our categories of judgment to judge the information; our level of ego-involvement affects the size of our latitudes; we tend to distort incoming information to fit our categories of judgment; and small or moderate differences between our anchor positions and the one being proposed will cause us to change; large discrepancies will not. Additionally, the theory has certain advantages and disadvantages. In terms of strengths, it acknowledges and clarifies the part perception plays in comprehension and judgment. As a drawback, the theory ignores the reality that in some situations, communication can be straightforward enough without requiring the recipients to struggle with accepting or rejecting it. The social judgment theory is important to this study because in so many ways, and from the explanations in the preceding paragraphs, it explains the possibility of what perception members of tertiary institution communities in Akwa Ibom State may hold of the public relations strategies for conflict resolution. It also helps in explaining that whatever perception they hold of the strategies, may have been on the basis of the dispositions they hold of the situations around them.

Method

The survey method was employed based on the fact that its primary goal is to collect people's thoughts, answers, and viewpoints on various topics. Beyond the questionnaire survey, interviews were also held with public relations officers in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, gathering on-the-spot thoughts based on the objectives set out earlier the study.

The population of the study consisted of students of tertiary institutions' across Akwa Ibom State, pegged at 151,802. The figure distribution included 31,482 (University of Uyo), 25,572 (Akwa Ibom State University), 2,898 (Ritman University), 20,231 (Federal Polytechnic, Ukana), 42,626 (Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic), 5,132 (Heritage Polytechnic, Eket), 14,122 (College of Education, Afaha Nsit), 9,739 (Akwa Ibom State College of Arts and Science). This is a sum of the figures from the various institutions' Student Affairs and Personnel or Human Resources offices. Meanwhile, the selection of these institutions followed the need for proper representation across federal, state and private universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Consequently, the sample size for this study was 400, determined using Taro Yamane's formula for calculating the sample size. The study used the multi-stage sampling technique to reach the respondents, adopting the cluster, purposive, and availability sampling techniques at different stages. Thus, the cluster sampling method was useful for the delineation of tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State into universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. In administering the copies of the questionnaire, each of these clusters received copies based on their percentage in the entire sample size. The number of residents in each of the clusters was ascertained to achieve this.

CLUSTER	INSTITUTIONS	POPULATION	SAMPLE	%
Universities	University of Uyo	31,482	84	21
	Akwa Ibom State University	25,572	72	18
	Ritman University	2,898	8	2
Polytechnics	Federal Polytechnic, Ukana	20,231	52	13
	Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua	42,626	108	27
	Heritage Polytechnic, Eket.	5,132	12	3

Colleges of Education	College of Education, Afaha Nsit	14,122	36	9
	Akwa Ibom State College of Arts and Sciences	9,739	28	7
	TOTAL	**151,802**	**400**	**100**

The purposive sampling method sufficed in the second stage for selecting respondents. The selection was for respondents who were either registered students of the institutions or the public relations officers of the institutions to participate in the research. They were people who were at least 18 years of age: the legal adult age in Nigeria and were interested in participating in the study. The availability or convenience sampling technique, in the third stage, was adopted and allowed every member of the population who was available to participate in the study.

A nine-item questionnaire, validated by communication experts, was designed to collect data for the study, and examined the opinions of members of tertiary institutions' communities in Akwa Ibom State on what they thought about the employment of public relations practices in resolving conflicts within their communities. The reliability of the instrument was achieved using the test-retest method of computing reliability using a correlation coefficient. In this method, the same people were measured at different points, and a coefficient between the scores was computed. The equation showed a score of 0.8, indicating a very high reliability of the instrument. consequently, the fieldwork data were arranged in tables and subjected to basic percentage analysis based on frequency counts. The researcher sorted the responses into different categories, and the results presented and interpreted.

Table 1: Most Prevalent Conflict Resolution Approach in the Institutions

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Negotiation	88	23
Avoidance	46	12
Recognition	54	14
Collaboration	102	26
Alternative Dispute Resolution	63	16
Compromise	33	9
Total	**386**	**100**

According to data in Table 1, 102 respondents (26%) identified collaboration as the most prevalent conflict resolution approach in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 2: Public Relations Strategies Adopted in Conflict Resolution Efforts in Tertiary Institutions

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Media relations	62	16
Establishment of Crisis Communication Plan	74	19
Stakeholder engagement	98	25
Community outreach	68	18
Social media engagement	52	13

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Post-conflict review and evaluation	32	9
Total	**386**	**100**

The table 2 shows that stakeholder engagement, indicated by 98 of the respondents (25%), stood out as the most visible public relations strategy in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 3: Assessment of the Adoption of Public Relations Strategies in Conflict Resolution

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Very well	96	25
Simply well	148	38
Not well	104	27
Not applicable	38	10
Total	**386**	**100**

Table 3 shows that 148 (38%) assessed the adoption of public relations practices in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State as simply well.

Table 4: Views on the Employment of Public Relations Strategies in Conflict Resolution

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Necessary for managing conflicts	138	36
Insincere or manipulative	72	19
Attempt to spin or control narrative	84	22
Necessary evil	54	14
A simple tool for conflict resolution	38	9
Total	**386**	**100**

Table 4 shows that 138 of the respondents (36%) viewed the employment of public relations practices in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State as necessary for managing conflicts.

Table 5: Rating of Public Relations Strategies in Conflict Resolution

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Very effective	102	26
Effective	148	38
Not effective	90	23
Highly ineffective	46	13
Total	**386**	**100**

Table 5 shows that 148 respondents (38%) viewed public relations practices in conflict resolution as effective.

Table 6: Factors Influencing Respondents' Perception of Public Relations Strategies in Conflict Resolution

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Level of stakeholder engagement during resolution	104	27
Perceived transparency during conflict resolution	122	32
Effectiveness of public relations strategies	96	25
Institution's track record in managing conflicts	64	16
Total	**386**	**100**

Table 6 shows that perceived transparency during conflict resolution, indicated by 122 respondents (32%), stood out as the leading factor influencing respondents' perception of the use of public relations strategies in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 7: General Outcome of Public Relations Involvement in Conflict Resolution

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Plays a key role in reaching peaceful solutions	132	34
Supports resolution but is not central	104	27
Has minimal impact on how conflicts end	68	18
Mainly communicates decisions made elsewhere	52	13
Does not seem connected to conflict outcomes	30	8
Total	**386**	**100**

Table 7 shows that 132 respondents (34%) held the view that public relations involvement played a key role in reaching peaceful solutions in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 8: Role of Public Relations/Communication in Preventing Escalation of Conflicts

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Helps address issues before they escalate	144	37
Responds only when issues become visible	96	25
Reacts after tensions have already grown	72	19
Rarely involved in early stages	46	12
I do not see PR playing a preventive role	28	7
Total	**386**	**100**

Data in Table 8 show that 144 respondents (37%) held that the role of public relations/communication in preventing escalation of conflicts was that it helped address issues before they escalated.

Table 9: Ways Public Relations Efforts Contribute to Rebuilding Confidence after Conflicts

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Messages clearly explain the situation and next steps	96	25
Calms tensions and encourage dialogue	118	31
Concerns are openly acknowledged and addressed	104	27
Explains what was learned and what will change	68	17
Total	**386**	**100**

Table 9 shows that calming tensions and encouraging dialogue, indicated by 118 respondents (31%), was the dominant view regarding how public relations efforts contributed to rebuilding confidence in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State after conflicts are addressed.

Discussion

The prevailing public relations practices employed in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State was stakeholder engagement, as well as the establishment of crisis communication plans and community outreach. This answer is reflected in Table 2, with 98 (25%) of the respondents indicating the first option, while 74 (19%) indicated the latter option. Thus, it suffices that they are the prevailing public relations practices used in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State, reflecting a strong communication-centered approach to managing disputes. This pattern found in this study closely aligns with Ebuziem and Emenyonu (2019) study where dialogue was identified as a primary tool for resolving conflicts. Both studies underscore the importance of inclusive communication platforms that allow stakeholders to express concerns and negotiate understanding. However, while Ebuziem and Emenyonu (2019) focused mainly on interpersonal dialogue and negotiation at the micro level, the present finding expands the scope to include structured crisis communication planning and broader outreach efforts, showing a more institutionalised PR framework suited to the complexity of tertiary environments. A comparable pattern also emerges in Edafejirhaye and Alao (2019), which documented the use of dialogue, negotiation, mediation, and inclusive communication in managing church conflicts. The similarity lies in the emphasis on relationship-building and participatory communication as core PR practices. In both contexts, PR is seen less as a publicity function and more as a mechanism for maintaining harmony and restoring trust. The difference, however, lies in the formalisation of processes. While the church study highlighted more personalised and spiritually integrated approaches, the present study shows a more structured application through formal crisis communication plans and institutional stakeholder engagement systems. The finding also complements insights from Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024), though in a more indirect way. The study revealed how prolonged conflicts in universities often lead to disruptions and strained governance structures. The prominence of crisis communication planning and stakeholder engagement in the present study can thus be interpreted as institutional responses designed to mitigate the kinds of disruptions highlighted in the ASUU research. Where the ASUU study emphasised the consequences of conflict, the current finding sheds light on preventive and responsive PR mechanisms aimed at managing such crises more effectively.

Moreover, finding from Ogunode, Ayeni and Samuila's (2024) study further reinforces this orientation by stressing that organisational conflicts require systematic communication strategies that balance stakeholder interests and prevent escalation. The inclusion of community outreach in the present finding is particularly significant, as it demonstrates that tertiary institutions do not

operate in isolation; their relationships with host communities also influence conflict dynamics. This expands the understanding of PR beyond internal communication to include external stakeholder relations, an aspect less emphasised in the context of the reviewed study.

Weighed against the provisions of the social judgment theory, these practices also acknowledge that stakeholders interpret institutional actions through their own attitudes and experiences. Through direct engagement with stakeholders and transparent communication during crises, institutions attempt to shift perceptions from suspicion toward understanding.

In addition, the challenges of employing public relations practices in conflict resolution are evident in Table 3, which shows that "power imbalances" identified by 102 respondents (26%) was the most significant challenge. This indicates that unequal influence among stakeholders often limits open dialogue and mutual trust. Together, quantitative and qualitative data sources reveal that the effectiveness of PR practices in conflict resolution is challenged by structural inequalities.

The finding highlights the structural realities that shape communication processes within institutions, a suggestion that even when public relations mechanisms are available, unequal authority, influence, or access among stakeholders can hinder genuine dialogue and consensus-building. A related pattern is visible in Ebuziem and Emenyonu (2019), where conflict resolution depended on participation from both authority figures and subordinates. However, while the secondary school context portrayed dialogue as largely cooperative, the present finding reveals that in tertiary institutions, disparities in institutional authority can make balanced communication more difficult. A similar concern appears in Edafejirhaye and Alao (2019), where leadership authority sometimes complicated conflict resolution processes. In that context, hierarchical structures within the church occasionally limited open expression, requiring deliberate mediation efforts. The present study reinforces this but in a more secular and bureaucratic setting, where management hierarchies, union influence, and student representation structures create uneven negotiating positions. Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024) provide even stronger convergence. Their study investigated how tensions between academic unions and government authorities often stem from imbalances in decision-making power, in addition to funding control, and policy influence. These macro-level power disparities mirror the micro-level imbalances observed within individual institutions in the present study. In Ogunode, Ayeni and Samuila's (2024) study, it is also noted that organisational conflicts frequently intensify when stakeholders perceive decision-making processes as dominated by a few powerful actors. Directly, the findings showed that government actors frustrated public institutions. This reinforces the idea that PR strategies alone do succeed unless institutional structures allow equitable participation. The present study, therefore, contributes a grounded perspective, showing that stakeholders in tertiary institutions recognise power imbalance as a barrier to effective communication and trust-building.

The perceived effectiveness of public relations practices in conflict resolution is demonstrated in Table 5, which shows that 148 respondents (38%) rated PR strategies as effective, representing the dominant view among participants. Overall, both the quantitative and qualitative evidence indicate that PR practices were widely viewed as important and moderately effective tools in conflict resolution, though their success is closely tied to the timeliness, sincerity, and follow-through of institutional actions. The finding suggests that the respondents generally recognised the value of communication-based strategies in managing disputes, a position that aligns with Ebuziem and Emenyonu's (2019) study, where communication and inclusive dialogue were found to promote understanding and reduce tensions. It also supports Oyeleke's (2020) finding, that public relations had a significant effect on employees' performance. Moreover, the researcher observes a comparable pattern in Edafejirhaye and Alao (2019). The duo highlights that dialogue, mediation,

and inclusive communication were credited with sustaining unity and resolving internal tensions. In both settings, communication is seen as instrumental in achieving peace. The difference lies in institutional scope: the church study reflected community-based harmony, whereas the present finding highlights effectiveness within bureaucratic and multi-stakeholder academic environments, where conflicts often involve formal structures and policies.

Furthermore, Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka's (2024) study provides a slightly contrasting but still relevant perspective. Their study highlighted the damaging effects of prolonged conflicts and implied that inadequate communication contributes to escalation. Against this background, the present finding that PR practices are rated as effective suggests progress at the institutional level, where communication mechanisms may be helping to prevent disputes from reaching the disruptive scale observed in national labour conflicts. Thus, while the ASUU study illustrates the consequences of ineffective engagement, the current finding offers evidence that strategic PR can improve conflict outcomes when applied consistently. From the data, the following summarise the findings: the prevailing public relations practices employed in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State was stakeholder engagement (25%); the major challenge of employing public relations practices in conflict resolution is power imbalances (26%); and public relations practices in conflict resolution are considered as effective (38%).

Conclusion

The central conclusion drawn from this study is that the prevailing public relations practices employed in conflict resolution in tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State was stakeholder engagement, as well as the establishment of crisis communication plans and community outreach. Furthermore, the perceived challenges of employing public relations practices in conflict resolution are "power imbalances," and the perceived effectiveness of public relations practices in conflict resolution was effective, representing the dominant view among respondents.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

i. tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State should institutionalise stakeholder engagement frameworks by creating clear guidelines for inclusive participation, feedback integration, and follow-up communication;
ii. tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State should create more inclusive and balanced communication structures that give equal voice to all stakeholder groups; and
iii. tertiary institutions in Akwa Ibom State should build on the positive perception of public relations employment by strengthening and formalising successful PR mechanisms such as stakeholder dialogue forums, crisis communication protocols, and feedback systems.

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