

Public Relations Strategies in the Management of Tertiary Institutions in Post COVID-19 Nigeria

Abstract

The eruption of a global pandemic in the late 2019 known as the coronavirus or COVID-19 and its containment measures, including prolonged economic lockdown have affected all sectors of economy around the world, including Nigeria. The education sector in particular was badly affected by the pandemic due to physical closure of schools even though online learning was adopted in some schools during the period. However, the reopening of the schools for academic activities has placed heavy burden on school administrators in the management of the the reopening process. Interestingly, Public Relations, which is part of organizational management is expected to play very crucial role in successful reopening and quick recovery of the sector from the pandemic; hence, this study became necessary to investigate the public relations strategies in the management of the tertiary institutions in the post period of this pandemic in Nigeria. Anchored on the Stakeholders and Excellence Theories of Public Relations practice, the researchers made use of secondary sources to obtain data for the study. Thematic qualitative method was used in analysis of the data that were obtained in the study. Through the data analysed, there was sufficient evidence on the way coronavirus pandemic has affected found education sector the world over in general and Nigeria in particular. The study has also shown the public relations strategies relevant to engage stakeholders in safe schools' reopening plans; target resources to where they are most needed; get children back to school confidently; make school environments safe; and quick recovery of lost learning activities among others. While this study acknowledged through its conclusion, the indisputable centrality of public relations in effective management of schools' reopening and recovery process in the post Covid-19 period, it observed unfortunate challenges that are in the practice among schools which can disrupt the achievement of the desired success in the reopening and recovery process.

Key words: Public Relations Strategies, Management, Tertiary Institutions, Post Covid-19

Introduction

“Public Relations is one of the areas that attracts tremendous attention of scholars across disciplines. This is due to its relevance in the coordination and management of modern organizations. It has really become important for almost every institution to keep a long term and trustworthy relations with the community or public groups in order to handle upcoming challenges and also to maintain its survival and success” (Dornyoy & Adiku, 2015; Okafor & Nwatu, 2018). It was observed that public relations activities and practice are necessary in providing a coordinated effort that gears towards promotion of a positive image of the organisation (Musa, 2016). Due to the relevance of public relations in profit and nonprofit organisations, it is believed that it can be useful also in the management of schools (Aikins & Adu-

Oppong, 2015; Bates, 2006; Eniola, 2011; Igben, 2022; Itodo, 2021; Sharp & Pritchard, 2003; Veena, Dayaneethie&Zukiswo, 2012). Also, there were indications that the establishment of public relations across the schools, particularly tertiary institutions to enhance effective communication and stakeholders' engagement has received a significant recognition, acceptability and boost over the years (Grillis, 1997; Igben, 2022; Itodo, 2021; Kettman & Robinson, 1991; Mullins, 1996). The essential role of public relations to manage crises and other related issues has already been acknowledged among scholars previous (Hirsh and Weber, 1999; Ojumo, Nikona & Kiroma, 2006; Spagnolia, 1998).

Consequently, the outbreak of the global coronavirus pandemic which started in the month of December 2019 in Wuhan City of China has tremendously affected the global economy and has challenged stakeholders in finding a lasting solution to the problem during the pandemic and speedy recovery after the pandemic respectively (Anthony & Damiete, 2021; Bintube, 2020). In particular, the pandemic has challenged school administrators to adopt effective recovery strategies after reopening of their institutions that were closed down due to the Covid-19 containment measures. Public relations is expected to play a crucial role in the reopening and survival of the schools in post Covid-19 pandemic era and the kind of strategies used in achieving success in this regard remains very crucial (Fadele, Abubakar, Olfat & Salamah, 2022; Nwafor, Omoevah&Umuze, 2022; UNICEF, 2021; Yunusa et al. 2021); hence, this paper is to examine such public relations strategies effective in the management of tertiary institutions in the post Covid-19 era in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of this paper is to critically establish the appropriateness of public relations in the management of tertiary institutions in post COVID-19 in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

This study adopted secondary research design to examine public relations approach in the management of tertiary institutions in post COVID-19 in Nigeria. Consequently, sources from which data were harvested to address the concern of this study included Google search, Google Scholar, ResearchGate and journals, books, periodicals, etc. Materials selected and used in this work were those relevant to address the problem of this paper.

Public Relations

Different scholars have defined public relations in different ways (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2007; Grunig, 2001; Ferguson, 2004; Jefkins, 2006). "Basically, public relations has to do with effort by the organisation which aimed at establishing and maintaining a mutual beneficially relationship with the publics in order to achieve its set objectives. According to the British Institute of public relations, public relation is a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (Jethwaney & Sarkar, 2000). Public relations, according to Broom & Trucker (2008), "is the management process whose goal is to attain and maintain accord and positive behaviours among social groupings on which an organization depends to achieve its mission. Its fundamental responsibility is to build and maintain a hospitable environment for an organization". James (2006) defines it as "the management of communication between an organization and its publics.

In the context of educational process, public relations is defined as a planned and systematic management function to help improve the programmes and services of the educational system” (Okwelle, 2010). In the same vein, Greg (2012) described “school public relations as a management function that establishes and maintains two-way mutual relationships and communication between the school and the community. A careful look at the above definitions shows that school public relations relies on a comprehensive two-way communication process involving both internal publics (students and staff) and external public (parents, government and general public) with a common goal of stimulating a better understanding of the roles, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the school. The purpose of a school public relations programme according to Gorton as cited” by Ibeneme & Okwelle (2008) includes: (a) Selling educational programmes to the community in order to support the schools; (b) Interpreting the educational programmes so that the people will have a better understanding; (c) Encourage the community interest and participation in the school programme.

From the definitions above, it can be deduced that public relations is the management practice that ensures that organisation maintains a cordial relationship with its various publics in order to attract favourable image and outcome.

Coronavirus Pandemic

Coronavirus which started in December, 2019 in Wuhan in China is a disease which is infectious in nature and has spread across the world with over 629 Million confirmed cases with over 6.58 Million confirmed deaths, making it the one of the world’s deadliest diseases in history (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Moore, 2020; Ohia, Bakarey& Ahmad, 2020; Otache, 2020). “The disease is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2; otherwise known as SARS- CoV-2” (Adnan, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir & Siddique, 2020; Harapan, Itoh, Yufika, Winardi, Keam&Mudatsir, 2020; Ohia et al., 2020; Otache, 2020; Poudel, Poudel, Gautam, Phuyal, & Tiwari, 2020). “Its symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, sneezing, among others” (Harapan, Itoh, Yufika, Winardi, Keam, &Mudatsir, 2020; Ohia et al., 2020; Otache, 2020; Unhale et al., 2020). It is a highly communicable disease (Adnan et al., 2020) and its mode of transmission is from person-to-person (Otache, 2020; Unhale et al., 2020). “Transmission occurs among close contacts mostly through respiratory droplets released when the infected person sneezes or coughs” (Harapan, Itoh, Yufika, Winardi, Keam, Te, et al., 2020; Otache, 2020). “While measures such as lockdown, social distancing, self-isolation or self-quarantine and observation of simple hygiene habits such as regular washing of hands, wearing of facemasks and covering the mouth with a handkerchief when coughing or sneezing have been recommended to contain the spread of the disease among people” (Ohia et al., 2020; Otache, 2020) “it is important to note that there is no any known cure or vaccine for the Covid-19 pandemic presently” (Adnan et al., 2020; Otache, 2020).

Impacts of COVID-19 on Tertiary Education in Nigeria

“The impact of COVID-19 pandemic across sectors of the economy, including education is not in doubt. For instance, it has been reported that the Coronavirus deadly disease has resulted to total shutting of schools in about 215 countries all over the world with 91.4% of the total number of enrolled learners in these countries momentarily mandatory out of school” (UNESCO, 2020). “It is accounted that over 1.6 billion students transversely the world which were obliged to stay out of schools as social distancing was enforced locally and regionally around the world in order

to enclose the extend of coronavirus disease” (Olaitan, Abdullahi, Tolorunju, Akinjo&Ogunjemilua, 2020).

“It can be noted that Africa was one of the continents which educational systems have been typically affected by the deadly disease as more than 98% of teaching and learning cannot be performed suitable to country-wide lockdown in this continent. In the shutting of schools across Sub Sahara Africa, including Nigeria of which over 91 percent are primary and secondary school learners” (Olaitan et al, 2020).

“In a short time, COVID-19 has disrupted the landscape of learning in Sub Sahara Africa by limiting how students can access learning across the country. However, apart from the pharmaceutical interventions and other preventive measures like using of facemask, washing of hands, social distancing has been the most effective way of minimizing the spread of COVID-19. The effective implementation of social distancing demands that schools be closed for as long as each government from different countries are certain that the pandemic has been curtailed enough for the safety of learners and teachers before recommence back to the class” (HEDCOM, 2020; Kekić et al. 2016; Ngogi&Mahaye, 2020; Olaitan et al, 2020).

Otache (2020) studied “the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Nigeria’s economy and possible coping strategies and found that jobs losses, a sharp drop in income of the informal workers and the poor, food insecurity, business and school closures, a steep decline in oil revenues and economic uncertainties were some of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, as” (Olaitan et al, 2020) observed, “has affected every sphere of life and may forever change how we have always lived and conducted our businesses, and no one can resist the wind of change that is blowing. Of all the sectors of governance, the educational sector, particularly at the tertiary level, appears to have been most greatly affected and therefore requires a more pragmatic approach to resolution. The impact of the COVID-19, according to Nwafor”, Omoevah&Umuze (2022), has made all schools in Anambra State, both public and private, were asked to abandon the buildings, including tertiary institutions, since this was the only choice left to protect the lives of the state's future generation.

Similarly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has had an impact on the global economy as well as the Nigerian school system. It caused significant gaps in the academic calendars of many academic institutions at all levels (Fadele et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2021).

Public Relations in Tertiary Institutions

Educational institutions in the society are saddled with the task of introducing members of the society into the knowledge, skills and values of the society from one generation to another. This preposition, which enjoys scholarly confirmations by Schofield (1990) and Afangideh (2010), suggests that, educational institutions are vehicles used by societies to keep its past and present alive while also ensuring that, the future is positively predicted, through the works done today. They are therefore agents of socialization for individual and societal development (Okohi&Nath, 2019). This implies that educational institutions are important segment of the society and are crucial in the growth and development of the society in general. It goes to mean therefore that

concerted effort must be made at all time to ensure the effective development of the sector. Such efforts must also include the use of effective communication.

“It is of important to note that tertiary institutions exist with a variety of publics, including: government which includes: federal. State and local government; The Governing Council; Employees including all categories of staff such as retired, current and potential staff; The students’ population including former, current and potential students; Her host community; Parents; Unions; National Commissions” (Igben, 2022). “Public relations, therefore, has potentials to build very healthy relationships with the various publics of the institutions with the consequent capacity for removal of unfavourable rumours and stories that could have negative implications for their growth and stability” (Igben, 2022).

Consequently, previous empirical and theoretical literature has shown a significant correlation between public relations practice and the performance of educational institutions in general and the tertiary institutions in particular. For instance, Wilson & Rahila (2014) found in their study that as fracas between institutions of learning and their host communities has become a reoccurring trend in Nigeria, it is imperative to adopt community. The conclusion of their study was that if properly harnessed, community relations would certainly enhance the performance of institutions in Nigeria. Adelakun (2020) concluded through “a study that no school can exist in isolation of the community and its agencies. In fact the development of the school to a large extent is determined by the relationship that co-exists between the school and the host community. The study recommended for sensitization of the schools and communities on the benefits attached to allowing good relationship to coexist between the school and the community members. It also recommended school leaders to ensure that community leaders and relevant stakeholder are carried along in needed activities of the school to ensure smooth interaction”.

In their study, Okohiand&Nath (2019) found that school-community relations management practices of educational administrators include efficient welfare services to keep school members motivated and the use of social networks for encouraging interpersonal relationship among various stakeholders to ensure environmental safety in schools. Similarly, public relations, as Musa (2016) concluded in a study has indeed improved relationship and has led to mutual collaboration among University libraries and their various publics. Okafor & Nwatu (2018) found that reputation management, customer relations, media relations, social media and corporate social responsibility on achieving educational institution objectives was positively significant respectively. Public Relations, according to Aikins&Adu-Oppong (2015), is useful in educational institutions it serves as a veritable tool managing the flow of both internal and external communication. According to Sietel (2009) “Public Relations Practice is based on two-way communications facilitated through a multimedia approach and is founded on research. The traditional role of the education public Relations specialist has been that of a scribe and paper mover, whose purpose typically was to inform but often to publicize. For the most part, the duties of the educational public relations specialist or practitioner was the recording and publishing of minutes of board meetings, the development of brochures for financial campaigns and even the supervision of the school newspaper when the positions was half rather than full time” (Ojomo et al, 2006).

There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate an increasing interest in the practice of public relations among tertiary institutions across the globe, including Nigeria as they see the practice as useful in the operations and management of the institutions (Pirozek & Heskova, 2003;

Samsup, Brunner & Hon, 2002, DeSanto & Garner, 2001; Grillis, 1997; Henderson, 2001, Hall, 2002; Hall & Baker, 2003; Pabich, 2003; Miroiu, 1998; Neculau, 1997; Stanciulescu, 2002; Coman, 2003; Ugochukwu & Okpala, 2021). To that effect, there is a close link between good public relations practice and effective performance and growth among the organisations (such as schools) which engage in the practice. That is why there are calls from different stakeholders for organisations in general and schools in particular to engage in public relations practice if their performance and growth must be guaranteed in modern business ((Jarrell, 2003; Kaverina, 2003; Muhammad & Adamkolo, 2018; Pirozek & Heskova, 2003; Ross & Lindenmann, 2002; Ross, 2004; Schoenfeld, Wiemer & Lang, 1997; Simpson, 2002). Building a mutual formidable relationship with the internal and external publics; involving public relations in decision making at all levels of management decision and constantly scanning the environment for early detection and handling of crisis of any magnitude to avoid intensification and escalation of such crisis are some of the sure strategies of enhancing the practice of public relations for effective management of organisations.

Role of Public Relations in the Management of tertiary Institutions in the post COVID-19 Lockdown Era

The outbreak of coronavirus pandemic has led to the closedown of institutions, including schools around the world, including Nigeria. However, due to the reduction in the number of infection cases, measures adopted by government and organisations to reduce the chances contracting the virus, economic and social impacts of the long economic lockdown, among others, Nigeria is one among the countries that calls for reopening of the economic activities, including school. Now that the schools have reopened, a deliberate measure for quick recovery and revival remains very crucial and since public relations is part of the management in every organisation, its role in this regard is equally very crucial and should be acknowledged. Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman (2020) acknowledged that “most governments around the world have temporarily closed schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have launched distance learning programs and are beginning to plan for recovery, a phase that involves much more than reopening the gates and readmitting students”. Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman (2020) added that “in this context, education policymaking is particularly difficult but will be strongest when it is: (1) informed by existing rigorous evidence; (2) approached with a long-term perspective that prioritizes flexibility, communication, and trust; and (3) able to be adapted based on new data and information gained from community engagement and monitoring”.

Since tertiary institutions deal with a lot of publics, it become imperative that to make the goal of school reopening, revival and recovery realizable, both segments of the publics must be carried along and the role of Public Relations in realization of the desired objectives remains very crucial. It is observed that no organisation is an Ireland but its survival and sustenance is largely dependent on other parts or components to make it complete. Therefore, in realization that maintaining a harmonious relationship with different parts that make up the organisation is a difficult task it becomes imperative that public relations be employed to always ensure that such harmonious relationship exists between organisation and its various publics (Dozier & Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Ehling, 1992; Grunig, 1992). According to Grunig, Grunig & Ehling, (1992, p. 71), public relations practice helps to “establish and maintain mutually dependent relationships between an organization and the publics with which it interacts.”

Nwafor, Omoevah & Umuze (2022) found in a study that the Anambra State Government, Nigeria used public relations strategies like press releases, press conferences, announcements, townhall meetings with critical stakeholders like the market unions, transport unions, town unions etc. in disseminating appropriate information and behavior that helped in managing the various COVID-19 related crises in Anambra State. Effective use of communication as underscored by Umut, Anil & Ülfet (2020), contributes to the sustainability of universities during the COVID-19 crisis.

In a paper presented, Musabayana (2021) has noted “the use of diversified corporate social responsibility programmes that can engage communities on the new realities, and also contribute to societal well-being; and in the process, help retain confidence in their organisations, which in this case, schools as a sure public relations strategy in the survival of schools in post covid-19 era”. It can be noted that Covid-19 pandemic has introduced a new normal by placing ‘physical distance’ apart publics of organisations, including schools. Reuniting the publics separated by containment measures of the pandemic therefore requires strategic communication that sufficiently engages stakeholders in every stage of the reopening school process and that is where the imperativeness of public relations is in no doubt to successfully achieve the goal.

Challenges in Application of Public Relations in the Management of Tertiary Institutions in the Post COVID-19 Lockdown Era

The use of public relations in achieving success in organisations is without hitches. Certain challenges militate against successful application and use of public relations in achieving the organisations’ success. Previous empirical and theoretical studies have shown that there are challenges in the practice of public relations in tertiary institutions. For instance, Aikins & Adu-Oppong (2015), “in their study found that the University’s public relations department is poorly resourced to perform its functions. Consequently, scarce telecommunication equipment, lack of official means of transportation and lack of trained personnel were found as challenges confronting public relations practice in tertiary institutions in Nigeria”. Ezebuenyi, Ugochukwu & Okpala (2021) reported discrepancies in the practice of Public Relations among universities as they were reported to have engaged Public Relations Officers without recourse to professional standards and career requirements. A study by Igben (2022) similarly reported “some challenges in the use of public relations for the survival of higher institutions as some higher educational institutions use some of the public relations tools as a matter of custom without establishing whether such tools are relevant to addressing their corporate public relations needs. Others try to allow research to precede their selection of the public relations tools of the schools, while some yet do leave their public relations tools in reckless abandon”.

D’Almeida (2003) found out that “the highest functions of Public Relations Officer among others as, receiving visitors and seeing to their wellbeing, seeing of people and welcoming them at the Airport and seeing to funeral matters. According to the study, the staff of UEW however did not know that the Public Relations Officer is the mouthpiece of the University. The researcher recommended that the Public Relations Officer should be involved more in decision making and he should occupy its proper position of a Deputy Registrar in the organizational structure and must report directly to the Vice Chancellor. Again, as part of decision making, the Public Relations Officer must have the capacity to interpret the University’s policies and

programmes as well as coordinate students' activities and be responsible for alumni matters among others". According to Diabour (2000), "public relations executives above the position of head of department level had no problems getting access to management and also being consulted frequently by management on corporate policies. Only few public executive of the status of heads of department and below enjoy that privilege. This was a finding in a study on the attitude of management towards public relations practice in ten organisations in Accra". Cutlip et al (2005) stresses "the great need for improving communication channel in the University". Adam observed in Cutlip et al (2005) that "University administrators have been compelled no more from talking about the need for communication to actually communicate with their publics. Cutlip et al put more emphasis on the need for public relations to solve other equally important problems like those of freedom, funds and freshmen. They add that the university needs private support more than ever because there is an increased demand on government resources".

Theoretical Framework

Stakeholders Management Theory

"Stakeholders Management Theory is very relevant to this paper because the theory as a result of the power of communication in creating an atmosphere that fosters meaningful relationships that are mutually beneficial between organisations (which in this case schools) and their various publics or stakeholders" (Gill, 2014). "Business, as the theory indicates, has become more accountable to society as many nations move to democratic models of government and conduct operations embedded in a macro-environment, which typically involves functioning in a pluralistic society that disperses power among many groups and people" (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). "This has led to the evolution of organizations (and government) being accountable to multiple publics, systems and stakeholders, as opposed to business seeing its primary concern as just looking after shareholders" (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014; Dickie & Dickie, 2011). "Today's businesses seek to obtain a social license to operate in their community, in contrast to the pre-classical management theories that focused on the business maximizing its output from within the environment it existed" (Dickie & Dickie, 2011; KPMG, 2013).

"Many theorists and writers suggest that stakeholder management is a strategic function of public relations" (Doorley & Garcia 2011; Harrison 2011; Johnston & Sheehan, 2014; L'Etang 2008). "But other theorists would also strongly argue that broad management responsibility plays a key role in ensuring stakeholders are engaged, informed and have a sense of importance to an organization" (Audi, 2009; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014; Dickie & Dickie, 2011; KPMG, 2013). "On deeper investigation, both positions are based on the same objective relating to keeping stakeholders in a positive relationship with the organization in an effort to advance outcomes and achieve the organization's goals" (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014).

"Relationship management skills are an interdisciplinary function and form the basis for knowledge transfer between management and staff, with traditional communication responsibilities managed through public relations, either through consultancy or in-house capacity" (Johnston & Sheehan 2014; Audi 2009; L'Etang, 2008). "Many of these stakeholder management roles have evolved into sub-roles for public relations practitioners, and typically include: employee engagement, community engagement, government relations, investor relations, and media relations" (Johnston & Sheehan, 2014; Harrison, 2011; L'Etang, 2008).

Application of the principles of this theory will help tertiary institutions to achieve the desired success in their implementation of the school reopening and recovery programme(s) using public relations.

Excellence Theory

“Excellence Theory of public relations is another theory that is relevant to this study because of its power to explain the value of public relations to organizations and society based on the social responsibility of managerial decisions and the quality of relationships with stakeholder publics. According to the theory, for an organization to be effective, according to the theory, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management (→ Stakeholder Theory). If it does not, stakeholders will either pressure the organization to change or oppose it in ways that add cost and risk to organizational policies and decisions. To behave in socially acceptable ways, organizations must scan their environment to identify publics who are affected by potential organizational decisions or who want organizations to make decisions to solve problems that are important to them. Then, organizations must communicate symmetrically with publics (taking the interests of both the organization and publics into account) to cultivate high-quality, long-term relationships with them” (Grunig, 1992).

Conclusion

The prolonged lockdown occasioned by the outbreak of the COVID-Pandemic around the globe has caused unprecedented setbacks across sectors. In Nigeria, the impact of the lockdown across sectors is unimaginable or better still indescribable. In the educational sector in general and tertiary educational sector in particular, the lockdown has disrupted the teaching, learning and administrative activities, even though they were cases of online academic and administrative activities among tertiary institutions in the country, such cases were very few compared to those that were not privileged to join the online learning process. For instance, a report released by UNESCO indicates that as of 4 September 2020, approximately 1.277 billion learners were affected due to school closures in response to the pandemic, impacting on about 72.9 percent of the world's student population.

Pragmatic steps are needed to be taken to revive the sector which is badly affected by the prolonged COVID-19 lockdown, of which public relations which is an effective communication tool in organizations comes in handy. Subsequently, public relations is used as part of the management to engaging communities in reopening plans; advise the management in targeting resources to where they are most needed; getting children back to school; making school environments safe; and recovering learning loss and building back better, which is a deliberate policy for school reopening and recovery from the COVID-19.

Furthermore, the application of public relations in the recovery process of tertiary institutions from the COVID-19 lockdown is very necessary. However, inadequate involvement of public relations unit in the decision-making process on school recovery, excessive management influence on the operations of the unit, lack of funds for the operations of the unit, lack of

professionals to handle the unit among others can limit the success in the application of public relations in the recovery process among Nigerian tertiary institutions.

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