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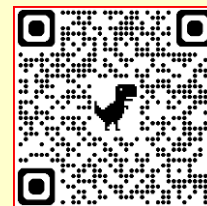
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An Analysis of Public Relations Practices in Crisis Management in Public Universities in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study carried out a comparative analysis of public relations practices in crisis management in Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar, with the aim of examining the tools, strategies, effectiveness, and challenges with public relations in Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar. Anchored on the Two-Way Symmetrical Model, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, and Relationship Management Theory, a mixed methods research design was adopted to provide both statistical evidence and in-depth insights. The population comprised all staff members of the two universities, totalling 9,522. Using the Taro Yamane formula, a sample size of 384 respondents was determined for the quantitative survey and selected through simple random sampling. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was employed to select two public relations officers for interviews. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, and simple linear regression, while qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that both universities utilise similar public relations tools such as meetings, memos, press releases, and social media platforms for crisis communication. The results further indicated that public relations strategies significantly influence crisis management effectiveness ($r = .612$), with regression analysis showing that PR strategies accounted for 37.4% of variations in crisis outcomes. The study concludes that effective public relations practices contribute substantially to institutional stability and recommends improved funding, greater integration of PR units into management decisions and proactive stakeholder engagement to strengthen crisis management in both universities.

KEY WORDS: Analysis, Public Relations, Crisis Management, Akwa Ibom State, Universities.

INTRODUCTION

A growing trend in the corporate world is the creation of an office for corporate communications or Public Relations to facilitate the propagation of an organisation's mission. Quite often, the office has a cross-functional responsibility of maintaining a constant link with the public and with all functional units of an organisation including top management (Obisung, 2021). Its operations vary from one

organisation to another principally because of differences in mission, vision, goals, values, and the products that an organisation is established to offer its customers. It is therefore not surprising that some organisations have public relations departments that operate under just one office, whereas in others, one would find many units within the public relations department. In some institutions, there is a form of decentralisation with a central coordinating body.

Public relations practice, as it is observed today, has developed from press agency and publicity since the turn of the last century. The US academics James Grunig and Todd Hunt consider that 'public relations-like activity' can be traced back to 1800 BC among Greek rhetoricians, but the direct line of descent from the Aegean to today's public relations industry is difficult to detect. It is seen by many as having evolved from the United States, with practitioners claiming descent from Phineas T. Barnum (of Barnum and Bailey Circus fame). More likely, it comes from a governmental base in the major combatant nations during the First World War (Watson & Noble, 2007).

In Nigeria, the earliest accounts of public relations were attributed to the establishment of the War Information Office by the British colonial government in 1943. The department was headed by a Briton named D.C. Fletcher, leading a team that included a public relations officer, an assistant public relations officer, and other personnel (Babaleye, 2021). This office was created to sustain local support for World War II. However, beyond wartime propaganda, it also extended its operations to image-making for the colonial government against independence agitations (Ajala, 2005). At the end of the war, the office was renamed the Public Relations Office, and its responsibilities expanded to include public health campaigns, mass education, and tax awareness (Cutlip, 2013).

Numerous studies on public relations in educational institutions have emphasised the role of PR in university administration (Veena, Dayaneethie, & Zukiswo, 2012). The primary function of PR in universities is to advance institutional objectives by fostering mutual understanding between the institution and its various stakeholders. University management, faculty, and staff all play roles in maintaining the institution's public image, but PR professionals coordinate these efforts to present a holistic institutional identity.

Over the years, Nigerian universities have adopted professional public relations practices due to the increasing complexity of stakeholder engagement. One critical area where PR has proven indispensable is crisis management. Crisis defined as disruptive unexpected events that threaten an organisation's stability are often a recurring feature of institutional life. In the Nigerian university system, crises are particularly prevalent, with issues such as staff strikes, funding shortages, and poor working conditions frequently disrupting academic activities. Universities are expected to deliver on teaching, research, community service, and knowledge dissemination (FRN, 1981). Section 46 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 2004, asserts that Universities (and other tertiary institutions) shall pursue educational goals provided in section 45 through, among others, teaching; research and development; virile staff development programmes; generation and dissemination of knowledge, to mention a few. However, these goals are often challenged by crisis involving administrators, academic and non-academic staff, and students- each with different expectations and interests. When these expectations are unmet, tensions often escalate into crises in the form of strike actions (Alabi, 2010).

Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar have, in recent years, experienced significant crises including frequent strike actions by teaching and non-teaching staff and the students. For instance, at AKSU, the institution has grappled with significant crises stemming from inadequate funding and staff welfare concerns. In early 2024, non-academic staff unions, including the Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) and its affiliates, issued a 14-day ultimatum threatening to shut down the university due to poor funding that adversely affected academic infrastructure and staff

welfare. The grievances highlighted issues such as non-payment of hazard allowances, lack of conducive teaching environments, and insufficient subvention leading to inadequate facilities (Eze & Chukwuemeka, 2024).

Similarly, UNICAL has faced its share of crises. In December 2023, the university announced a 100% increase in tuition fees, prompting widespread student protests that disrupted academic activities and attracted national media attention. Earlier, in August 2023, students from the Faculty of Law protested against the Dean, Prof. Cyril Ndifon, over allegations of sexual harassment. The protests led to investigations by the Public Complaints Commission and calls from rights groups for immediate disciplinary actions and the passage of the Sexual Harassment Bill into law.

There is no doubt that such issues can have serious reputational implications for an institution's image. Hence, there is a need to develop effective public relations strategies to manage crises affecting universities. Public relations play a fundamental role in effective crisis management, as it relies on robust PR strategies that are essential for mitigating the adverse effects of crises and maintaining institutional credibility (Fearn-Banks, 2022). Public Relations (PR) serves as a strategic communication tool through which organisations foster trust, transparency, and goodwill with their stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 2021), while managing stakeholder perceptions and ensuring effective crisis response (Heath & Coombs, 2023).

Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU) and the University of Calabar (UNICAL), like other higher institutions, have experienced challenges that require effective PR interventions to sustain their image and operational stability. This study comparatively analysed the public relations practices of AKSU and UNICAL, with a view to ascertain the PR strategies/tools adopted by the management of both institutions in managing crisis and how effective these have been in managing crisis situations and maintaining a positive public image for both institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Organisations and institutions are constantly confronted with diverse and complex challenges in the course of their daily operations. These challenges may arise from internal or external sources and often threaten operational efficiency, organisational stability, and institutional reputation. When crisis situations are not properly managed, the consequences can be far-reaching. Poor crisis management may lead to low employee morale, reduced job satisfaction, declining productivity, and increased staff turnover. Such conditions ultimately weaken an organisation's ability to fulfil its mandate and sustain the confidence and trust of its stakeholders. Conversely, organisations that adopt proactive and well-structured crisis management strategies are generally better positioned to maintain stability and achieve their objectives even in turbulent periods.

Over the years, studies have consistently shown that public relations strategies play a critical role in supporting organisational stability and reputation management. In the corporate sector, public relations has been widely utilised to build favourable corporate image, manage information flow, and maintain positive stakeholder relationships. Similarly, within tertiary educational institutions, public relations has proven useful in managing strike actions, resolving disputes, and facilitating effective communication between management and stakeholders. Through mechanisms such as stakeholder dialogue, media engagement, internal communication, and timely dissemination of information, public relations helps to

minimise the negative effects of crises and restore order when disruptions occur.

Despite this recognised importance, it appears that the practical application of public relations in crisis management within Nigerian universities has not been sufficiently documented or critically examined, with specific reference to Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar. Limited empirical attention on how these institutions utilise public relations strategies has created a gap in understanding the effectiveness and challenges of PR practice in managing campus crises.

It is against this background that this study examined a comparative analysis of the Public relations strategies and practices adopted by the management of Akwa Ibom University and University of Calabar in addressing crisis situations. By assessing the tools, approaches, effectiveness, and constraints of public relations activities, the study provides a comparative analysis on the role of strategic communication in enhancing crisis management within tertiary institutions.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study were to:

- i. find out PR tools adopted by the management of Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar in fostering positive relationship amongst the university's publics;
- ii. identify the major causes of crises faced by Akwa Ibom State University and the University of Calabar,
- iii. examine the key public relations strategies employed in crises management at Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar;

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide the study:

- i. What are the PR tools utilised by the management of Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar in managing crisis situations in both institutions?
- ii. What are the major causes of crises faced by Akwa Ibom State University and the University of Calabar?
- iii. What are the public relations strategies employed in crisis management at Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar?

Research Hypotheses

H₀₁: Public relations strategies have no significant influence on crisis management effectiveness in Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar.

H₁₁: Public relations strategies significantly influence crisis management effectiveness in Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Concepts

Public Relations (PR)

What is public relations? For many, the simplistic answer is getting their name (company, client, self) into newsprint or on air in a report or article; for others it is publicity that attracts response through

name recognition or rising sales. Governments see it as dispersal of information, for example in a health promotion campaign. Measuring the results of these one-way (outward only) processes is usually done by accumulating press cuttings and broadcast transcripts and giving a value to the mentions (such as advertising equivalent cost), column inches and airtime. These may be descriptions of some everyday public relations activities, but they do not define the public relations process nor explain the meaning of the term 'public relations'.

The World Association of Public Relations Practitioners met in Mexico City in 1978 and formulated a definition of public relations, popularly known as the "Mexican Statement". According to this statement, as cited in Asemah (2011) and Ogande (2015), public relations is defined as the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisational leaders, and implementing a planned programme of action that benefits both an organisation and its publics. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA, 2015) describes public relations as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. Public relation is seen as vital for maintaining an organisation's image and for communicating its message to customers, investors, and the general public. A positive perception of a company or non-profit organisation can increase its sales and improve its bottom line.

Lee (2015) defines public relations as the organised effort to communicate in an organised form and to modify attitude and behaviour towards an organisational needs and aspiration. By organised effort to communicate, public relations aim at using or prepares speeches for corporate officials, organising community activities, producing journals, exhibition, research as well as advising management on internal and external relations. Coombs and Holladay (2015) note that public relations, as a form of public communication, is associated with special responsibilities and the need to practise ethical communication, with an emphasis on two-way dialogue in the public arena. Public relations practitioners may act as communication managers who organise and integrate communication activities, or as writers who craft messages to attract public attention and garner support for the organisation.

Esuh (2012) observes that some of the goals of public relations are to create, maintain, and protect an organisation's reputation, as well as to enhance its prestige and present a favourable image. Image building is essential in the eyes of an organisation's internal and external publics. Skinner (2010) asserts that "in a modern democracy, every organisation survives ultimately only by public consent; as such, public relations enables an organisation to influence public opinion, judgement and behaviour, with the obvious implication that an organisation is dependent on the moral and financial support of its various publics in order to survive". Clearly, public relations is fundamentally about communication; it persuades people to accept an idea, a product, or a company, and to take the necessary actions accordingly. Therefore, how an organisation relates to its publics can make or mar its success.

Crisis

Taneja, Pryor, Sewell and Recuero (2014) define crisis as a series of unforeseen events that launch a group, team or an organisation into a downward spiral that is quick and will have long term effects if the situation is not rapidly handled effectively and efficiently. Hermann (1972) cited in Taneja et al. (2014, p. 78) argues that a crisis is a "situation that incorporates the following three conditions: (a) a surprise (b) a threat to high-priority goals, and (c) a restricted

amount of time available for response". In all types of organisations from the wealthiest empires to the "mom and pop" stores, crises occur and decision makers must be ready to act fast when they occur (Taneja et al., 2014, p. 78).

Crises are inevitable occurrences in the society; virtually all nations of the world are affected by one form of crisis or the other (Asemah, 2023). In a crisis situation, corporate values that are important during times of normalcy and stability may not be as critical. For instance, the normal emphasis on cost saving would no longer be appropriate when it is necessary to take urgent steps to save lives in a natural disaster. Crisis is simply seen as a negative circumstance involving an organisation and its stakeholders, such as employees, customers and investors. A crisis according to Institute of Public Relations (2007), can create three related threats; and these include public safety, financial loss and reputation loss.

Some crises, such as industrial accidents and product harm, can result in injuries and even loss of lives. Crises can create financial loss by disrupting operations, creating a loss of market share/purchase intentions or spawning lawsuits related to the crisis. Crisis refers to sequence of unwanted events at the workplace which lead to disturbances and major unrest amongst the individuals. Crisis generally arises on a short notice and triggers a feeling of threat and fear in the employees. In simpler words crisis leads to uncertainty and causes major harm to the organisation and its employees (Management Study Guide, 2020). It is essential for the employees to sense the early signs of crisis and warn the employees against the negative consequences of the same.

Crisis does not only affect the smooth functioning of the organisation, but also pose a threat to its brand name (Management Study Guide, 2020). A crisis is, therefore, seen as any situation that may result in the loss of public trust, support and legitimacy for businesses, brands and public institutions. The foregoing implies that crisis is an unpredictable major threat that can have a negative effect on an organisation, industry or stakeholders. Crisis is an accidental occurrence or an accident that is never envisaged or planned (Asemah, et al 2018). It generally characterised by the absence of peace and a disruption in an organisation daily routine and procedures. Asemah et al (2018), citing Ubani (1996) explains that crisis is a period of heightened uncertainty that increases the need to plan and a point in time in which external and internal pressure change the objectives and operations of an organisation.

Crisis communication

Little understanding of communication is needed in explaining crisis communication. Communication as defined by (Griffin, 2009) is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response. He emphasized the importance of people in communication, noting that that "words do not mean things; people mean things. This means communication has no value if words are not received and interpreted by people (Griffin, 2009).

In addition, crises communication can be described as communication that is used by organisations before the crisis, during the crisis and after a crisis. It is critical for organisations to ensure they manage their messages, manage and control their communication and manage and control the crises; therefore, it is always dangerous and fatal for any organisation failing to communicate appropriate messages competently during crises (Abu Farha, 2015). Sema (2008) argued that information shared by and between public authorities, the media, organisations, groups and affected individuals before the crisis, during crisis in an organisation are related to the discourse of crisis communication in an

organisation. The ability to communicate before, during and after a crisis occur is required for effective communication during a crisis (Abu Farha, 2015).

Crisis communication is simply seen as the collection, processing and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation. Arthur (2020) notes that it is the dialogue between the organisation and its publics prior to, during and after the negative occurrence. The dialogue details strategies and tactics designed to minimise damage to the image of the organisation. Crisis communications is an aspect of public relations that deals with protecting individuals, companies and organisations facing challenges to their public image and reputation. It is quite different from the traditional public relations, which concentrates on generating and harnessing positive earned media to boost brand awareness and reputation.

Crisis communication is aimed at containing negative earned media by ensuring prompt, honest and informative communication between all parties. This shows that crisis communication is aimed preventing crisis from taking place and in a situation whereby an organisation is already facing a crisis situation, it is aimed at mitigating the effect of the crisis by doling out information that will help to effectively manage the crisis and prevent it from escalating further. There, corporations must continually carry out sound information aimed at managing crisis.

The foregoing implies that crisis communication is a special area which centres on the reputation of the individuals as well as the organisation. The aim is to communicate as frequently as possible so as to create goodwill between an organisation and itself so as to maintain peace. Thus, it is seen as an initiative which aims at protecting the reputation of the organisation and maintaining its public image. Crisis communication specialists, therefore, fight against several challenges which tend to harm the reputation and image of the organisation. Crisis can have a negative effect on brand image. Crisis communication experts are employed to save an organisation's reputation against various threats and unwanted challenges. Brand identity is one of the most valuable assets of an organisation. The main purpose of crisis communication team is to protect the brand identity and maintain the organisation's firm standing within the industry (Management Study Guide, 2020).

Crisis management

Crisis management is one of the most critical aspects of modern communications (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). As Petrovici (2014) crises management represents a set of factors designed particularly to prevent crises and reduce the damage to the organisation and the audiences involved. According to Coombs (2015), crisis management represents a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted. Whereas Ray (2011) states that crisis management is a continuous process of recognizing and responding to factors associated with a potential or actual crisis and its resolution. The fundamental idea or tenet in crisis management is that crises can be managed much more effectively if the company prepares comprehensive strategies and remedies. Therefore, crisis management deals with the analysis of a crisis by looking at some clues or signs, and recommending methods of prevention and involvement.

Caponigro (2000) defines crisis management as the function that works to minimize the impact of a crisis and help the organisation gain control of the situation, while Whitman and Mattord (2003) define crisis management as the actions taken during and after a disaster. As Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006), in terms of image, the

prejudices for the organisation may be extremely serious if the crisis situation is not managed correctly, so as to curb its negative effects. Crisis management becomes, in this case, a strategic imperative, because it is only a matter of time until any company may be affected by an organisational crisis, or a crisis generated by a product, which could threaten its performances or even its future. In this context, it goes without saying that good communication during a crisis can only be beneficial, able to improve and even stop the negative reactions of the public. Crisis management is a challenge any organisation can face and one that many fail. When crisis management fails, stakeholders and organisations suffer. All organisations must become prepared for crises (Coombs, 2015). Organisations, therefore, should either take proactive measure or attempt to lessen the damage if crisis once happened in its existence.

Crisis management has evolved from emergency preparedness and, drawing from that base, comprises a set of four interrelated factors: prevention, preparation, response, and revision. Prevention, also known as mitigation, represents the steps taken to avoid crises. Crisis managers often detect warning signs and then take actions designed to prevent the crisis. Prevention is largely unseen by the public. News stories about crises that did not happen are rare. Preparation is the best-known factor in crisis management because it includes the crisis management plan (CMP). If people know nothing else about crisis management, they know an organisation should have a CMP. The CMP is the tip of the crisis management iceberg. Although people think the CMP is the crisis management process, in actuality most of the process is unseen.

Review of Opinion

The Role of Public Relations in Organisations

Many corporate scandals witnessed around many organisations made abundantly clear, an organisation's reputation is paramount to its success, if not its survival. As a result, corporate credibility is at an all-time low, and public mistrust has spilled over into organisations. This creates a considerable need to restore public faith, and public relations plays a vital role in leading the charge (Kazoleas, 2017).

The recognition and acceptance of public relations as a vital communication tool in the hands of all organisations in all modern societies cannot be overemphasised. As the size and number of both commercial and non-commercial organisations increase with expansion, communication links between members of the different publics is seriously disrupted, complicated and rendered ineffective in most cases. People are, therefore, often unaware of what such organisations do and as a result, goodwill and understanding, which these organisations need is often times difficult to harness. Consequent upon this, sustained public relations communication becomes essential as it enables organisations to explain their actions and policies to the publics in order to secure and maintain enhanced public understanding, acceptance and goodwill.

Public relations is acknowledged to be very vital to the survival of organisations, institutions and individuals. Through its multifaceted functions of evaluating attitudes and executing actions, public relations eliminates suspicion and friction; thereby providing bridges of understanding upon which goodwill reigns between an organisation and the publics that deal with it. As a planned communication, public relations is capable of redeeming an organisation's image (however poor an organisation finds itself) and in its place, restore confidence, goodwill and mutual understanding and patronage that every organisation needs for survival. This all important role of public relations in human endeavour made Nwosu

(2016, p. 8) to assert that:

Public relations touches on all aspects of corporate life and operations of every organisation, but it is also because public relations has to do with managing communications information, public interest, internal and external goodwill or reputation and different relationships all of which every organisation needs to continue to exist. For government in contemporary society, public relations hold the key for mutual understanding between them and their citizens.

The import of Nwosu's assertion is that public relations is needed by every organisation that wishes to survive in the fierce competitive market. It is axiomatic that public relations is the form of communication which principally aims at winning the goodwill and support of the organisation. Public relations is a creator of favourable image, a builder of goodwill between an organisation and its teeming publics. Public relations is such a facilitator and a harmoniser of issues, problems, crises and conflicts.

Commenting on the relevance of public relations in organisations, Gininkawa (2008, p. 626) says "public relations translates into effective communication with one's publics." Public relations, according to Ginikanwa (2008), assists organisations to achieve their goals. Thus, the growing competition and increasing social responsibility has necessitated various managements to engage in more deliberate wooing of staff and customers. Growth minded companies strive to create and sustain cordial relationships and mutual understanding amongst their various publics. Management functions and processes are, therefore, intertwined with public relations. With proper balance, management actions and programmes can easily earn public understanding and acceptance. The import is that organisations must achieve their aims and objectives, whether long-term or short-term.

Public Relations as a Management Tool

Public Relations is the heart of modern management function aimed at making friends for the organisation, retaining these friends and building internal and external goodwill on the reasonable assumption that these are strongly needed for an organisation to remain in whatever business it is engaged in, as well as to grow and prosper in it (Nwosu 2006). The aim of PR practices is generally to achieve good character and responsibility. It means that the job of the Public Relations Officer is to get the management to behave in such a way that they would be seen to have good character and be responsible citizens.

For institutions to achieve their goals, they must develop effective relationship with their publics such as employees, customers, shareholders and other institutions and with the society at large. The management of institutions needs to understand the attitude and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by the external environment. The Public Relations practitioner acts as a counsellor to management, and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and actions.

The Public Relations executive in an organisation should perform management function of directing management and coordinating all activities aimed at creating favourable image to effective management of man and resources of the organisation. In essence, Public Relations activities or programmes whether as a management orientation or social act, are developed in such a way that they will have multiple effects on the company, the staff and the external policy. Public Relations programmes or actions are reciprocal and

have mutually-manifest effects on the parties involved. The strategies used by the PR personnel according Asemah (2023) includes:

1. **Written material:** In order to build a corporate image/reputation, public relations practitioner should also prepare written material to reach and influence their target markets. The materials should include annual report, brochures, articles and organisation's newsletter and magazines:
2. **Corporate identity materials:** These can also help to create a co-operate identity that the publics immediately recognises like logo, stationery, brochures, signs, business forms, business cards (Amaresan, 2019).
3. **News:** One major strategy is news. It is the duty of PR Practitioner to do everything possible to facilitate the flow of news from the organisation and its activities to the notice of the wide publics (Kazoleas, 2017).
4. **Special Events:** Another common PR strategy for corporate image / reputation is special events, ranging from news conference, press tours, grand opening or educational programmes designed to reach and interest target publics (Kazoleas, 2017).
5. **Press conference:** These take the form of a meeting or where a major announcement is made and guests are invited to ask questions. A press conference may be given in preference to a press release, the matter under review merits some explanation, which may not be covered adequately in the press itself (Amaresan, 2019)
6. **Speeches:** This can also create product and organisation publicity. Organisation executives would field questions to the media or give talks at trade associations or sales meeting (Asemah, 2023).

Public Relations Tools

Wells et al (2003) describes three categories; these categories include controlled PR, which is organisations ability to use and control the placement of their public relations tools in designated media. Examples include organisational publications, speakers, photographs, staged events. Controlled PR lies within the domain of the organisation, and it utilizes it for its maximum benefit. On flip side, uncontrolled public relations involve the use and placement of an organisations PR through media that are not in the domain of control of the organisation. Examples include publicity, News release, press conferences they are using uncontrolled channels, By-lined articles, talk and interview show. Finally, semi-controlled PR represents a middle ground for both extremes. It involves public relations activities where some aspects are controlled and initiated by the organization, while other aspects are uncontrolled, because the media for getting the messages out are not within the control of the organization. Examples of semi-controlled PR include special events and sponsorship, interpersonal communication, electronic communication and word of mouth.

In utilising above mentioned tools, PR teams need to work closely other departments in the organisation. For example, PR tends to complement advertising activities, so while advertising is promoting the organisations' image in public, PR should solidify the message with credibility. Organisations such as banks often realise the importance of PR activities, but differ in the manner these are utilised in the marketing mix. (Beaver-Moss, 2001).

Public Relations Tools for Crisis Management

- i. **Financial Supports** – This involves the provision of car, housing, and children's education loan provision for members of staff's benefits.
- ii. **Promotion / upward review of Staff's ranks** – Developmental movement of staff members' ranks upward as when due.
- iii. **Capacity development/training**
- iv. **Provision of medical facilities / Sick Bay**
- v. **Special events** – such as End of the Year Party, CEO Annual Awards for Outstanding Members of Staff (CASA), Members of Staff's Birthday celebrations, Founders' Daycelebration, etc.
- vi. **Town Hall Meetings / Conferences**
- vii. **Work Overtime Incentives** viii. **Labour / Industrial relations.**
- viii. **Crisis communication:** The role of public relations takes on vital significance during crises like an accident, financial scams, bankruptcies, etc. It is the responsibility of public relations to give honest and accurate information to the concerned publics and assure them of remedial measures taken to control the crisis. The Public Relations Department supervises and assesses public attitudes, and maintains mutual relations and understanding between an organisation and its public. It improves channels of communication and institutes new ways of setting up a two-way flow of information and understanding
- ix. **Printed Materials (Newsletter / Informational Bulletins):** An organisation's employees are an extremely important internal public. Corporate public relations people often spend a great deal of time developing employee communication programs, including regular newsletters, informational bulletin boards, and internet postings. Inservice organisations in particular, these kinds of activities can be used to help support brand communication efforts, for example, using the company newsletter to remind employees about the importance of prompt and polite customer service.
- x. **Conflict Resolution among Members of Staff:** Conflict resolution is a social situation where the armed conflicting parties in a (voluntarily) agreement resolve to live peacefully with – and/or dissolve – their basic incompatibilities and henceforth cease to use arms against one another. The "conflicting parties" concerned in this definition are formally or informally organised groups engaged in intrastate or interstate conflict. Basic incompatibility' refers to a severe disagreement between at least two-sides where their demands cannot be met by the same resources at the same time.

Public Relations in Educational Institutions

According to Wherry (1982), no exact records indicate when public relations began in the educational sector, but what exists are historical developments' accounts of educational public relations, which scholars argue began a few years after Bernays first coined the term "public relations counsel" in his 1923 book, titled "Crystallizing Public Opinion." The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) defines educational public relations as a planned and methodical management function that aids in the improvement of an educational organization's programmes and services. According to the National Society of Public Relations Association (NSPRA), educational public relations is based on a comprehensive two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics, with the goal of stimulating a better

understanding of the organization's role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs. Aside from the foregoing, educational public relations programmes aid in the interpretation of public attitudes, the identification and shaping of policies and procedures in the public interest, and the continuation of involvement and information activities that win public understanding and support. Similarly, Cherenson (2017) discusses and advances the following arguments to support the value of public relations in educational institutions:

- I. The media age: Communication requirements have grown in complexity and number. Public relations experts are needed to assist schools in navigating the present chaotic, multi-channel communication landscape and strengthening their reputations, connections, and brands by integrating messaging across the paid/earned/shared/owned media spectrum (PESO)
- II. The Outrage Industry: The outrage business refers to the perennially furious voices in the marketplace of ideas, and they now have a larger, more powerful voice thanks to blogs, forums, and anonymous comment on news websites. Unfortunately, schools fall into the trap of succumbing into the outrage industry, which can only be avoided by implementing good public relations plans and practises.
- III. Communication impacts education: Communication is crucial in determining the type and quality of parent/community involvement. There is a strong link between increased family and community involvement and increased student academic involvement. This is a relationship that can only be established through public relations.

Aside from the aforementioned benefits, public relations help educational institutions improve their brand visibility, making it easier for the target audience to obtain information about the institution without having to make a physical visit, which aids in the creation and maintenance of a favourable image. It also assists these schools in raising finances and soliciting donations, disseminating information about admission cycles, placement seasons, festivals or events, crisis situation management, and other activities. Similarly, public relations aids in the development of international academic collaborations, which are essential for nearly every institution these days, by providing global exposure to institutions and fostering academic collaborations with foreign universities through exchange programmes, international accreditation/degrees, and research partnerships (Business Standard, 2020). Given the foregoing, it is safe to conclude that the value of public relations to educational institutions and the education industry cannot be overstated.

Types of Crisis

There are different types of crisis and each of the crises depends on who was responsible for the crisis and how the crisis affects the reputation of the organisation (Asemah, 2023). The history with the crisis of organisation determines the threat to the organisation's reputation. Below are some of the types of crises:

1. **Victim Crisis:** This type of crisis occurs when the organisation is perceived to be a victim of the crisis. For example, a victim crisis can happen when the organisation is rumoured to be at fault. This event can destroy the physical infrastructure of a company, leaving it with no facility to conduct its business. In cases like these, a victim crisis presents the organisation with little to no

reputational threat because the situation is unavoidable and the company has no way of preventing it (Amarean, 2019).

2. **Accidental Crisis** This type of crisis occurs when the organisation is at fault for the crisis, but its actions were unintentional. An accidental crisis can occur when an organisation faces product or equipment failure like when Samsung had to recall the Galaxy Note 7 in 2016 due to batteries catching on fire and exploding (Amarean, 2019). More so, accidental crises can occur when an accuser challenges the organisation.
3. **Preventable Crisis:** This occurs when the organisation intentionally takes a risk that leads to a negative outcome or event. A preventable crisis is the worst possible threat to an organisation because there is a high reputational threat to the business. In these situations, there is immense pressure placed on the organisation's response as well as their actions moving forward after the crises (Amarean, 2019).

Crisis have also been categorised into personal, organisational, national, international or global. Personal crisis as the name implies, are incidents that happen to an individual's private life. It could be at home, work, relationships and families. Organisational crises are crises that affect corporate institutions and establishments. National crises are crises that affect a country it is a time where a country experience difficulty, uncertainties and threats that is potential destructive to different facet of the country. It could be security, economic, agricultural, health and political aspects of the nation. International crisis is a crisis that occurs between sovereign states. Global crises are crisis that affects the entire world. An example is COVID-19 pandemic that rocked virtually all nations of the world.

Crisis can also be grouped into the known-unknown crisis and the unknown unknown crisis

1. **Known Unknown Crisis:** These are crises that are predictable or a possibility because they are peculiar to certain organisations. For instance, students' protest and unrest is a peculiar crisis in higher institutions. This is the "known" aspect if this crisis. The "unknown" aspect is that there is no definite time when this crisis will occur. Babaleye (2013), citing Black (1998) describes known unknown crisis as the type of misfortune that may occurs because of the nature the business of the corporate organisation is involved. Known Unknown crisis may be fore-shadowed by series of events and may also have some warning signs or indicators before translating to a full-blown crisis. It can be likened to a gathering in the clouds before rain fall.
2. **Unknown Unknown Crisis:** These types of crises are unanticipated and unpredictable. They are usually sudden and not pre-empted. Natural disasters such as earthquake, volcanoes, etc. fall in this category (Babaleye, 2013).

Factors Affecting Crisis

As Ray (2009) described, there are seven factors influencing a crisis. These are:

- a. **Pre-crisis planning:** Management's ability to handle a crisis situation and the potential of a crisis to escalate is often determined by the quality and thoroughness of the company's prior planning.

- b. Organisational perception: The level of uncertainty is often determined by the perceptions of the decision makers.
- c. Stakeholder perception: Stakeholder perceptions of an organisation's credibility influence the perceived effectiveness of that organisation's response in a given situation.
- d. Uncertainty: The absence of needed information is a primary characteristic of a crisis and an influential factor in determining the direction of the crisis.
- e. Stress: A crisis is a manager's worst nightmare. Lost lives, financial devastation, and fear of damaged credibility and legitimacy increase the level of stress associated with a crisis. In the context of a crisis, stress can impact management's ability to effectively communicate and manage the crisis.
- f. Involved groups: A number of individuals and groups may be directly involved. Various parties who are basically unfamiliar with one another must learn to adapt and relate: victims; government authorities; elected officials and politicians; and crisis management teams.
- g. Decision making: A crisis is a situation requiring quick decisions between a limited numbers of options. A lack of action generally results in negative consequences.

Crisis Management Techniques

1. **Risk Management:** This entails monitoring for situations that can trigger a crisis incident and nipping it in the board. Risk management is the process of identifying, controlling and managing a potential threat or situation that may result in a crisis. Risk management focuses on averting a potential crisis situation; the focus here is prevention. It can be compared to managing and treating the symptoms of a disease in this context crisis, instead of the crisis itself (Asemah, 2023).
2. **Crisis Simulation:** Regular crisis simulation exercise will enhance an organisation's ability to handle an actual crisis situation. Crisis simulation is not praying for a crisis, but preparing for a crisis. Every organisation is susceptible to one form of crisis or the another. For instance, an organisation that is susceptible to a fire outbreak due to the nature of their establishment can regularly engage in a fire drill simulation to better equip them for an actual crisis (Asemah, 2023).

Crisis Response Strategies

Organisations not only make sense of, learn from, and communicate about risks, but also communicatively respond to the crisis event and its aftermath. Hasan (2013) is of the opinion that in crisis situation, publicity is the fastest and most credible means of response. Nevertheless, there are 3 general response strategies that can be deployed in crisis situation: Deny Strategy- this is to out rightly deny that the organisation is responsible for the crisis. Diminish Strategy- diminish strategy is to weaken the connection between organisation and the crisis. Deal Strategy- this strategy addresses stakeholders' concern directly, by offering compensation or accepting full responsibility for the crisis.

Dionisopoulos and Vibbert (2013), identified four self-defence strategies of crisis communication: (1) denial, (2) bolstering, (3) differentiation, and (4) transcendence. Corporate apologia paved the way for crisis communication research and practices to concentrate on issues of organisational reputation or image and social legitimacy

(Coombs et al., 2010). Rowland and Jerome's (2004) in their work list the following image maintenance strategies which includes: demonstrating concern for the victims, bolstering organisational values, denying intent to do harm, and preventing recurrence.

Brinson and Benoit (2009) extend corporate apologia research through five image restoration strategies relevant to organisational crisis communication: (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) offensiveness reduction, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification. Three out of the five image restoration strategies are further specified: (a) denial may be simple, denial of responsibility or more complex blame shifting; (b) evasion may include provocation, feasibility, accident, and good intentions; and (c) offensiveness reduction may include bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. Scholars have applied Image Restoration Theory to a number of notable cases, including Texaco's public allegations of racism.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the following theories namely: Two-way symmetrical model, and situational crisis communication theory.

Two-way Symmetrical Model

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

The success of PR campaign lies in two-way communication. It is imperative to the sender of any message to get the reactions of the receiver through the feedback mechanism. Through the feedback, an organization fine-tunes its product or services before they are sold to the (consuming publics). Lindeborg (1994) cited in Asemah (2021), notes that two-way symmetrical public relations "serve as a mechanism by which organisations and publics interact to manage interdependence and conflict for the benefit of all". It infers that everyone involved is equal and that everything can be solved through dialogue, discussion and negotiation. Grunig and Hunt, (1984) cited in Asemah (2024) suggests that by promoting bonds of mutual trust between the organisation and its publics by empowering them to shape and collaborate on organisational goals through feedback, the organisations public relationship is strengthened.

While all the previous models of public relations have their focus in making the organisation look good to the public, the two-way

symmetrical model focuses on the ways and manners of improving relationships between organisations and their publics (Laufer & Wang, 2017). The two-way symmetrical model has been promoted as the first choice of organisations that prefer to practice public relations in an excellent and most professional way. Usually, the model uses a press conference or community and town hall strategy to allow members of the public to be involved in knowledge sharing about their organisation.

This model is considered as the most ethical model of public relations because it uses ethical and dialogue-based communication which always helps to enhance the efficiency and clout of the organisation among public circles (Megan & Noer, 2020). The basic objective of the two-way symmetrical model is to negotiate with publics by providing them accurate information, to resolve conflicts by providing the publics with suitable solutions and to encourage mutual understanding and respect between the organisation and its publics through an open and ethical communication policy.

The Two-way Symmetrical model is of great relevance to the present study. Through two-way communication, AKSU and UNICAL's management can be able to assess the feelings of its various stakeholders on its policies. This can be achieved by creating feedback channels for stakeholders to communicate with management. Also, with reciprocal communication, management can use the feedbacks gotten to adjust its policies and decisions.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was developed by **Coombs in 2007**. The theory provides a framework for understanding how organisations should respond to crises based on public perception and the level of responsibility attributed to the organisation. (Coombs, 2017). SCCT includes strategists for crisis management who should align the strategic crisis response with crisis obligation levels and the reputational challenge presented by a crisis (Coombs, 2017). SCCT components identify crisis outcomes by focusing on a reputational threat, corporate branding, and organisational reputation repair (Coombs, 2017). According to the SCCT, organisation survival depends on the public relations director's ability to obtain critical resources from the external environment for the long term (Almarshoodi, 2020). Crisis response strategies seemingly make it easier for an organisation to categorise and deal with a crisis.

SCCT encompasses applications that researchers use in various psychosocial domains such as educational achievement, health behaviours, organisational management, and affective reactions (Kim, 2017). Marsen (2020) determined that organisational success depends on an organisation's ability to adjust its structure to reduce reliance on others for resources and obtain required external support. Organisational public relations directors use various procedures to reduce uncertainty in resource flow (Sellnow et al., 2017). Consonants to SCCT, establishing inter-organisational relationships are an appropriate procedure to attain organisational resources, maintain dependence, and reduce uncertainty (Elliott & Villegas, 2020). Public relations directors seek to increase organisational support by establishing a collaborative relationship with corporate partners (Coombs, 2017).

Resource dependency guidance is essential for organisations to understand external dependencies' difficulty (Claeys & Coombs, 2019). When a crisis takes an organisation by surprise, the recovery crisis management strategy is necessary to salvage its reputation and financial futures. Public relations directors can use SCCT to

match strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility. SCCT modelling aids in identifying crisis outcomes, including effect, behavioural intentions, and organisational reputation (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019).

SCCT suggested guidelines can help public relations directors employ for reputational protection during a crisis disruption. Not only is SCCT based on a business leader's comprehension of organisational crises, it also anticipates how organisational leaders will react to each type of crisis response. Because SCCT is a model for understanding crisis communication at the strategic level, it does not provide detailed crisis management strategies. Coombs (2020) pointed out that the crisis response effectiveness is influenced by how the organisation's leaders managed the pre-crisis phase (prevention and preparation) and the post-crisis stage (learning from mistakes and successes). In contrast, social media dynamics limit developing a crisis response or preparation phase of a crisis (Coombs, 2017). In correlation with SCCT, public relations directors can articulate the variables.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is grounded in several key principles that guide the development of effective crisis communication strategies. These principles enable organizations to adapt their communication approaches based on the unique characteristics of each crisis situation. The following principles form the foundation of the SCCT according to scholars such as Coombs (1995, 2007), Liu, Zhou, Zhou & Wu (2005):

1. **Tailored Communication:** The SCCT emphasizes the need for tailored crisis communication strategies. It recognizes that each crisis is unique, with different situational factors, stakeholder expectations, and organizational considerations. Therefore, a one-size fits-all approach to crisis communication is ineffective. By tailoring communication to the specific crisis situation, organizations can address the concerns of stakeholders and better manage the impact on their reputation.
2. **Contextual Analysis:** The theory stresses the importance of conducting a thorough analysis of the crisis context. This entails evaluating the crisis history of the organization, its reputation, and the degree of responsibility attributed to the organisation for the crisis. Understanding these contextual elements allows organisations to determine the most appropriate communication strategies and tactics to employ.
3. **Proactive Communication:** The SCCT encourages organisations to be proactive in their crisis communication efforts. It emphasizes the significance of timely and transparent communication to provide stakeholders with accurate information and updates. By taking proactive steps to address concerns and share relevant information, organisations can maintain stakeholder trust and mitigate the potential negative consequences of a crisis.
4. **Reputation Management:** The theory recognizes the critical role of reputation in crisis management. An organization's reputation serves as a foundation of trust and credibility during times of crisis. The SCCT highlights the importance of protecting and preserving a positive reputation through consistent and honest communication. By addressing stakeholder concerns and upholding transparency, organisations can strengthen their reputation and enhance their resilience in the face of a crisis.
5. **Stakeholder Engagement:** The SCCT emphasizes the need for organizations to actively engage with their

stakeholders during a crisis. Engaging stakeholders in dialogue helps organizations understand their concerns, communicate key messages effectively, and ultimately rebuild trust. By fostering open lines of communication and involving stakeholders in the decision-making process, organisations can build stronger relationships and facilitate a more collaborative crisis response.

SCCT has been widely used in crisis communication research and practice, but it has been criticised for its one-size-fits-all approach, as it may not fully consider the unique socio-cultural contexts in which crises unfold (Kim & Sung, 2014). In the context of Nigerian universities, SCCT is relevant in assessing how university administrators respond to crises such as student protests, faculty strikes, or reputational damage from misconduct. Since public perception plays a critical role in shaping the institution's credibility, university PR strategies must align with SCCT's recommendations to maintain trust and mitigate damage effectively.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Kothari (2014), research design refers to the overall plan or structure that guides the process of data collection, measurement, and analysis in a study. It provides a systematic framework that ensures that the research problem is addressed effectively and that the objectives of the study are achieved. This study adopted a mixed methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The choice of a mixed methods design was informed by the need to obtain both numerical evidence and in-depth explanations regarding the application of public relations strategies in managing crises within the universities. While the quantitative component enabled the researcher to gather measurable data from a large number of respondents and statistically test the relationships among variables, the qualitative component provided detailed insights and contextual understanding through interviews with key public relations personnel.

The qualitative method allows for an in-depth exploration of the subject matter through interviews with experts. Creswell (2012) states that qualitative research builds a complex, holistic understanding of the phenomenon by analysing words, incorporating detailed views from informants, and conducting the study in a natural setting. The integration of both approaches enhanced the richness, validity, and reliability of the findings. The quantitative data provided generalisable results, whereas the qualitative data offered deeper interpretation and explanation of those results. This combination was considered appropriate for comprehensively addressing the research questions of the study.

The population of the study comprised all staff members of the two selected universities, namely Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar. Staff members were considered appropriate for this study because they constitute the primary internal stakeholders of the institutions and are directly affected by management decisions, public relations activities, and crisis situations within the university environment. Their experiences and perceptions were therefore essential in assessing the effectiveness of public relations strategies in crisis management.

Official records obtained from the respective institutions indicated that Akwa Ibom State University has a total staff strength of 1,485, (Establishment Unit, AKSU) while the University of Calabar has 8,037 staff members (Establishment Unit, UNICAL). This produced a combined population of 9,522 staff, which formed the target population for the quantitative component of the study

Creswell (2012) defines a sample as a subset of the target population selected for the study to generalize findings. Given the large size of the population, it was impractical to survey all staff members. Consequently, a representative sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, which is widely used for calculating sample sizes in survey research.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n= sample size

N= population (9522)

e =Error limit at 0.05

1 = constant

(Taro Yamani 1967)

$$n = \frac{9522}{1 + 9522(0.05)^2} = \frac{9522}{1 + 9522(0.0025)} = \frac{9522}{9523(0.0025)} = \frac{9522}{23.8075} \approx 399.9$$

Therefore, n = 400.

Different sampling techniques were adopted for the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. For the quantitative aspect, simple random sampling was employed. This technique gave every staff member an equal chance of being selected, thereby reducing selection bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample. Respondents were randomly selected across departments within both institutions. For the qualitative aspect, purposive sampling was used. This technique enabled the researcher to deliberately select participants with specialised knowledge and direct involvement in public relations and crisis communication activities. Initially, eight (8) management and PR personnel were scheduled for interviews. However, due to availability constraints and the unwillingness of some officials to participate, only two (2) key Public Relations Officers were successfully interviewed in both institution. Despite the reduced number, these participants provided rich and relevant information for the study.

Data were collected through both survey and interview methods. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the selected respondents in both universities and retrieved after completion. This enabled the researcher to obtain first-hand quantitative information. For the qualitative data, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the two selected Public Relations Officers in their respective offices. With their consent, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarise respondents' responses. Inferential statistics were employed to test the study hypothesis. Specifically, Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Simple Linear Regression analyses were used to determine the relationship and predictive influence of public relations strategies on crisis management effectiveness.

Qualitative data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The responses were transcribed, coded, and organised into themes and sub-themes to identify recurring patterns and insights that complemented the quantitative findings. The combination of these analytical techniques enabled a comprehensive interpretation of the research data.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this study 400 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, 374

were correctly filled and returned and found useful for the study, giving a return rate of 93.5% and mortality rate of 6.5%¹⁰. This shows a positive response rate.

Table 1: Respondents Institution

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU)	167	44.6
University of Calabar (UNICAL)	207	55.4
Total	374	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by institution, with the Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU) recording 167 responses which was 44.6% of the total responses, while University of Calabar

(UNICAL) recorded 207 responses which was 55.4% of the total responses. This implies that UNICAL had the majority of respondents.

Table 2: PR tools utilised by AKSU and UNICAL in managing Crisis

INSTITUTIONS				
Options	AKSU	Percentage	UNICAL	Percentage
Social media	53	14.1	84	22.4
Memos/circulars	31	8.2	28	7.4
Media interviews	11	2.9	12	3.2
Meetings	47	12.5	39	10.4
Notice boards and bulletin	25	6.6	42	11.2
University Website	0	0	2	1.1
Total	167	100	207	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 shows the PR tools utilised by the management of both institutions in managing crisis situations. Social media recorded 53 responses in AKSU and 84 responses in UNICAL, giving a total of 137 responses representing 36.5%. Meetings recorded 47 responses

in AKSU and 39 responses in UNICAL, making a total of 86 responses representing 22.9%. This implies that majority of respondents 137, (36.5%) 86 (22.9%) representing a total percentage of 59.4% agreed to the use of social media and meetings as the major PR tools utilized by AKSU and UNICAL in managing crisis.

Table 3: Causes of crisis at AKSU and UNICAL

INSTITUTIONS				
Options	AKSU	Percentage	UNICAL	Percentage
Mis-management of resources	4	1.0	10	2.6
School fee increment	20	5.3	26	6.9
Bad administration/leadership	21	5.6	30	7.9
Insensitivity to the needs/aspirations of staff and students	2	0.5	3	0.8
Non-involvement of students/staff in decision making				
Inadequate facilities/ Deterioration of physical infrastructure	16	4.2	20	5.3
Existence of anti-social organisations in school				
Poor remuneration/irregular payment of staff salaries	10	2.6	17	4.5
	18	4.8	20	5.3

	57	15.2	100	27.5
Total	148	100	226	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 shows the various causes of crisis at both AKSU and UNICAL, with poor remuneration and irregular payment of staff salaries emerging as the leading cause with 157 responses, which

was 42.7% of the total responses.

Table 4: Mean rating of responses on the PR Strategies adopted by the management of both institutions in managing crisis

AKSU								UNICAL							
S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total	WMS	Decision	SA	A	D	SD	Total	3.0 WMS	Decision
a	When crisis occurs, the university usually communicates with the public on time.	51	80	30	6	510	3.0	Accepted	90	87	20	10	671	3.24	Accepted
b	The university adopts image-repair strategies to protect its reputation during crises.	59	62	20	266	426	2.55	Accepted	70	90	37	10	634	3.06	Accepted
c	Staff and students are kept informed about what is happening during crisis situations.	54	67	26	20	489	2.92	Accepted	90	60	30	17	617	2.98	Accepted
d	Social media platforms are effectively used to manage and control information during crises.	64	57	26	20	467	2.79	Accepted	100	80	20	7	687	3.31	Accepted
e	The university holds press conferences or issues statements to clarify facts during crises.	100	57	10	0	591	3.53	Accepted	100	80	17	10	684	3.30	Accepted
f	The university often uses negotiation and dialogue with affected groups to resolve crisis situations.	80	60	20	7	542	3.24	Accepted	120	60	17	10	704	3.40	Accepted
g	During crisis, the university emphasises transparency rather than silence and denial.	75	75	10	7	552	3.30	Accepted	100	80	20	7	687	3.31	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4 presents respondents' mean ratings on the public relations strategies adopted by the management of both Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar in managing crises. All seven items recorded mean scores above the benchmark mean of 2.50 on the 4-point Likert scale, indicating general agreement among respondents that the listed strategies are actively adopted and effective. Among the strategies, emphasis on holding press conference on issuing statements to clarifying facts during crises rather than silence and denial during crises recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.53$), suggesting that openness and honest communication are strongly perceived as central to crisis management efforts.

Presentation of Data from Interviews

The interviews were conducted to complement the quantitative data

and provide further insight into public relations practices in crisis management within the selected universities. Specifically, the interviews were intended to:

- identify the public relations tools utilised by the management of the universities during crisis situations;
- determine the major causes of crises within the institution;
- ascertain the public relations strategies adopted in managing crises

Two key public relations personnel were interviewed in the study area. These include KPI 1, the Public Relations Unit of Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU), and KPI 2, the Dean Faculty of Communication and Media Studies University of Calabar (UNICAL). Both respondents provided information based on their professional experience and involvement in crisis communication within their respective institutions.

According to KP11, the common public relations tools used during crisis situations include social media platforms, internal memoranda, press releases, meetings, and town hall sessions. KPI 1 explained that most official information is disseminated through WhatsApp platforms and other social media channels because they enable faster circulation of messages. Similarly, KPI 2 stated that social media is frequently used because it allows management to reach a large number of students and staff within a short period of time.

On the rationale for the use of these tools, KP11 indicated that speed, accessibility, and wide coverage were the main reasons. KPI 2 noted that “in this age and time, social media is very important because that is where you pass your message quickly,” while KPI 1 added that it helps management respond promptly before misinformation spreads.

With regard to the causes of crises within the universities, both

interviewees identified staff welfare issues, salary delays, administrative lapses, and student-related concerns as the major triggers. KPI 1 stated that some crises arise when “staff are employed and not captured on the payroll,” while KPI 2 mentioned that students sometimes react negatively to issues relating to fees, documentation, or policy decisions. KP11 also referred to cases where students expressed dissatisfaction on social media, which later developed into wider institutional concerns.

Testing of Hypotheses

H₀₁: Public relations strategies have no significant influence on crisis management effectiveness in Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar.

H₁₁: Public relations strategies significantly influence crisis management effectiveness.

Table 5 Relationship Between Public Relations Strategies and Crisis Management Effectiveness
Correlations

		Public tools	relations	Crisis management effectiveness
Public Relations Strategies	Pearson correlation	1		.612
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000
	N	374		374
Crisis Management Effectiveness	Pearson Correlation	.612		1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	374		374

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Correlation analysis reveals a strong positive relationship between public relations strategies and crisis management effectiveness ($r = .612$). The significance value of .000 is less than the 0.05 level of significance, indicating that the relationship is statistically

significant. This implies that improvements in public relations strategies are associated with improvements in crisis management effectiveness.

Table 6 Model Summary of Relationship Between Public Relations Strategies and Crisis Management Effectiveness

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.612	.374	.372	1.184

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of Table 6 (Model Summary): The model summary shows the strength of the relationship between public relations strategies and crisis management effectiveness. The correlation coefficient ($R = .612$) indicates a strong positive association between the variables. The coefficient of determination ($R \text{ Square} = .374$) reveals that

public relations strategies explain 37.4% of the variation in crisis management effectiveness. This suggests that a substantial proportion of effectiveness is influenced by the strategies adopted by management, while the remaining percentage may be explained by other factors not included in the model

Table 7: Relationship Between Public Relations Strategies and Crisis Management Effectiveness

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	306.52	1	306.52	218.74	.000
Residual	513.14	372	1.38		
Total	819.66	373			

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of Table 7 (ANOVA): The ANOVA table tests the overall fitness of the regression model. The F-value of 218.74 with a

significance level of .000 indicates that the model is statistically significant. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the regression model reliably predicts crisis management effectiveness. This confirms that public relations strategies collectively have a meaningful influence on effectiveness and that the observed relationship did not occur by chance.

Table 8: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	T	Sig.
(Constant)	1.214	.216		5.62	.000
PR Strategies	.146	.010	.612	14.79	.000

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of Table 8 (Coefficients): The coefficients table shows the individual contribution of public relations strategies to crisis management effectiveness. The unstandardized coefficient ($B = .146$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in public relations strategies, crisis management effectiveness increases by 0.146 units. The standardized beta value (.612) confirms a strong positive effect size. The t-value (14.79) and significance level (.000) show that this influence is statistically significant. This demonstrates that public relations strategies significantly predict and improve crisis management effectiveness.

Decision Rule: Reject the null hypothesis if $p < 0.05$. Since the significance value for the regression model is .000, which is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, public relations strategies significantly influence crisis management effectiveness in the selected universities.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: What are the PR tools utilised by the management of Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar in managing crisis situations in both institutions?

The findings from the quantitative data revealed that both Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar utilised a combination of traditional and digital public relations tools in managing crisis situations. Specifically, Table 2 showed that social media and meetings emerged as the most frequently utilised PR tool, recording a total of 137, 86 responses representing 59.4% of the total responses.

The dominance of social media as a crisis communication tool indicates that both institutions recognise the speed and reach of digital platforms in disseminating information during periods of unrest. This aligns with the position of Cherenon (2017) in the review of opinion, who argued that modern institutions must navigate a complex multi-channel communication landscape in order to maintain reputation and stakeholder engagement. Social media platforms provide immediacy, direct engagement, and the ability to counter misinformation swiftly, especially in environments where crises escalate rapidly through online narratives.

The qualitative data further reinforced these quantitative findings. One of the Public Relations Officers interviewed stated: "Most times when issues arise, the first thing we do is put out an official statement on our social media platforms because students and staff get information faster there than anywhere else." Another interviewee added: "Yes, mostly what I have noticed with respect to the university of Calabar is that most of the information passed have gone through the social media and most times it's the WhatsApp." These responses confirm that while digital tools are prioritised for internal communication,

Several reasons may account for the pattern observed in the findings. One plausible explanation is the changing communication behaviour of university stakeholders. As Smarp (2020) notes, preventing misinformation is a key objective of crisis communication. Therefore, management may prioritise social media to ensure that the institution have control on what information reaches out to the public.

Another reason relates to the nature of crises commonly experienced in Nigerian universities. Many crises stem from industrial disputes, fee increments, or administrative decisions affecting internal stakeholders. In such cases, meetings and memos become indispensable tools because they facilitate direct negotiation and clarification. Nwosu (2016) argue that public relations functions as a bridge of understanding within organisations. Hence, internal communication tools are crucial in preventing escalation. The minimal reliance on university websites (0.3%) may be attributed to limited stakeholder engagement with official websites during crises. Websites are often static information repositories, whereas social media platforms allow real-time updates and interaction. Consequently, management may perceive websites as less effective for urgent crisis communication.

The findings are consistent with the conceptual review which defines public relations as a planned and sustained effort to maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006). Tools such as meetings, memos, press interactions, and social media platforms represent the practical mechanisms through which this mutual understanding is operationalised during crises. Furthermore, Wells et al. (2003) categorised PR tools into controlled, uncontrolled, and semi-controlled channels. Social media and internal memos fall within controlled PR, allowing institutions to frame narratives directly. Media interviews and press coverage represent uncontrolled PR, as message framing may be influenced by journalists.

Empirical studies reviewed in the literature also support these findings. Previous research on crisis communication in tertiary institutions emphasised the increasing reliance on social media for rapid information dissemination and stakeholder engagement. However, such studies equally noted the continued relevance of town hall meetings and stakeholder dialogue, particularly in labour-related crises. This dual reliance is evident in the current findings.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings align strongly with the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. The utilisation of meetings and stakeholder dialogue reflects a two-way communication approach where feedback is encouraged rather than suppressed. Additionally, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) emphasises the importance of selecting appropriate response channels depending on the crisis type. For known-unknown crises such as student protests or staff strikes (which are common in universities), a combination of rapid digital messaging and interpersonal negotiation becomes

essential. Relationship Management Theory also supports these findings, as maintaining long-term relationships with staff and students requires sustained communication beyond one-way announcements.

Research Question Two: What are the major causes of crises in Akwa Ibom State University and the University of Calabar?

The findings from the quantitative data revealed that several factors are responsible for crisis situations in Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar. As presented in Table 3, poor remuneration and irregular payment of staff salaries emerged as the leading cause of crisis, recording 157 responses representing 42.7% of the total responses.

The statistical distribution clearly indicates that economic and welfare-related issues constitute the most dominant triggers of crisis in both institutions. The prominence of poor remuneration and irregular salary payments (28.6%) suggests that labour-related grievances remain central to crisis outbreaks in Nigerian public universities. This finding aligns with Alabi (2010), who noted that unmet expectations among staff often escalate into strike actions within tertiary institutions. It also corroborates the assertion in the background of the study that staff unions frequently resort to ultimata and industrial action when welfare issues are neglected.

The qualitative data further reinforced this quantitative pattern. One of the interviewees (KP11) explained:

“I think the other problem here in the university too, maybe of recent, was when some staff of the university, both teaching and non-teaching, were employed and they were not captured on the payroll. And it affected a lot of people. They had to go to the national assembly, had to go to Abuja until the problem was resolved very, very recently.”

Another respondent KP12 stated: “Students’ protests are usually triggered by policy decisions like fee adjustments or issues relating to campus security.” He added:

I think the major problems we have in the university have really been student-related problems or crises. For instance, here in the Department of Mass Communication, we had an issue where some of our students were asked to change or were asked to drop from year three to year one because of the inability of the university to present the mass communication programme for resource verification. So, because of that, students were affected. We had to look for a way of managing that crisis. It was a huge crisis. We had to look for a way of managing here in our department. Here we could manage it very well, but in some other departments it was not so. At least we decided to distribute our students to two departments, theatre and media studies, and then to the linguistic and communication studies where they had also graduated. That's one issue. Here, currently in the department, the problem we have is that there are some students who came because mass communication was not the JAMB caps. Students were admitted through other departments to feed mass communication departments. So, we have students from maybe linguistics and communication studies who were sent to mass communication departments. Some of them were from ELS and so on and so forth. So now we have graduated two sets of students. We are just about graduating the third one, but none of them from mass

communication have been mobilized for NYSC because they cannot have their original admission letter to read mass communication. So that's where we are. How have we been managing? We have tried to get the management to fill the indemnity form on-behalf of the students. So these are crises. And at the point, the students themselves, the aggrieved students, had to go to the social media to start attacking the university for abandoning them, for training them and making them useless, for keeping them at home for years without being able to get value for their study in the university. And that had been a major problem.

Nwosu (2016) and Ginikanwa (2008) emphasise that organisations must sustain internal goodwill to prevent friction. The high percentage attributed to poor remuneration and administrative leadership suggests that breakdowns in internal relationship management may contribute significantly to crisis development.

Several reasons may account for these findings. One plausible explanation is the structural funding challenges facing public universities in Nigeria. State and federal institutions often depend heavily on government subventions, which may be irregular or insufficient. When funding gaps occur, management may struggle to meet salary obligations or maintain infrastructure. Consequently, staff dissatisfaction increases, leading to strike threats and industrial unrest. Scholars such as Fearn-Banks (2022) argue that financial instability often underlies recurrent institutional crises, particularly in publicly funded organisations.

Research Question Three: What are the public relations strategies employed in crisis management at AKSU and UNICAL?

The findings from the quantitative data indicate that both Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar adopt multiple public relations strategies in managing crisis situations. Table 4 revealed that all the listed strategies recorded mean scores above the benchmark of 2.50 on the 4-point Likert scale, indicating general agreement among respondents that these strategies are actively employed.

Specifically, the strategy of emphasising for holding press conference or issuing statements to clarify facts during crises rather than silence and denial recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.53$). This was followed by use of negotiation and dialogue with affected groups to manage and control information ($M = 3.40$).

The findings demonstrates that press conferences or staatements to clarify facts during crises and the use of negotiation and dialogue with affected groups to manage and control information. The high mean score suggests that respondents strongly perceive press conferences negotiation and development as central to crisis communication efforts. This aligns with Arthur (2020), who argues that crisis communication should involve accurate and timely information dissemination in order to reduce reputational damage. Higher institutions operate within public scrutiny, and crises such as strikes, protests, or allegations can quickly damage institutional image. Consequently, management may deliberately adopt transparency to prevent escalation to protect its reputation. Another probable reason is the historical experience of recurring crises in Nigerian universities. Repeated industrial disputes may have compelled institutions to learn from past communication failures. Over time, management may have recognised that silence and delayed response intensify unrest, while early communication and negotiation reduce hostility. Furthermore, the increasing influence of

digital media likely contributes to the prioritisation of transparency and social media engagement. In the contemporary information environment, stakeholders expect immediate updates. Failure to respond quickly may create space for misinformation, forcing management to adopt proactive disclosure strategies.

The qualitative findings reinforce these quantitative results. KP11 noted: "When a crisis breaks out, management prefers to address the issue openly instead of keeping silent because silence often worsens speculation." Another interviewee who is senior management staff at Unical said:

"We engage union leaders and student representatives directly. Dialogue helps reduce tension before things escalate. Well, most often, we send messages, which we call it internal communication. We send messages, we send the memoranda, or things like that. We use even the social media to react to some of these issues. Like I have said, some students here had to go to the Facebook and to the social media to attack the university. We had to respond to put the records straight and also help them to know that we have not abandoned them. We actually even invited them for a meeting in order to address them. So we had Person-to-person discussion, one-on-one discussion with the affected students. And we also help to guide them on what to do. We've done that. Sometimes too, we use press relations to also reach out to them, maybe by posting. When we do that, we cannot reach them one-on-one. We can put up a message on the social media or even on the traditional media to also reach out to them. These are ways we have also been able to reach out, they are the public relations strategy adopted. But then they also use some of those. They send out a memo. That's also a specific channel that they use in reaching out. Sometimes they can also have town hall meetings, for example, they invite people to a hall and address them, especially when it is urgent.

The findings are consistent with the conceptual review of public relations as a management function aimed at establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006). Strategies such as dialogue, transparency, and image-repair align with this definition because they prioritise mutual understanding rather than unilateral persuasion. From the review of opinion, Nwosu (2016) emphasised that public relations serves as a bridge of understanding between management and stakeholders. The prominence of negotiation and transparency in the findings reflects this bridging role. Similarly, Okafor (2002) argued that organisations must communicate policies clearly and manage complaints effectively to sustain goodwill. The data showing high mean ratings for timely communication (3.14) and press briefings (3.12) demonstrate that both institutions recognise the necessity of proactive information dissemination.

A study by Oluwagbemisiola & Oduold (2018) on crisis management in tertiary institutions have shown that dialogue-based approaches tend to be more effective than authoritarian communication styles. The finding that transparency ranked highest suggests that both institutions may have shifted from traditional one-way communication models toward more interactive strategies. The findings strongly align with the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. The Two-Way Symmetrical Model is clearly reflected in the use of negotiation and stakeholder dialogue. This model advocates balanced communication where feedback is considered and mutual adjustments are made.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) also provides explanatory support. SCCT posits that organisations should match response strategies to crisis type and responsibility attribution. For crises attributed to internal administrative issues or welfare concerns, accommodative strategies such as corrective action, openness, and stakeholder dialogue are recommended. The relatively high mean scores for transparency (3.32) and image-repair strategies (3.05) suggest that both institutions employ accommodative responses rather than denial-based strategies.

Conclusion

This study set out to comparatively examine public relations practices in crisis management at Akwa Ibom State University and University of Calabar, focusing on the tools used, the strategies adopted, their effectiveness, and the challenges faced by the PR units in both institutions. Drawing from both the survey results and the interviews conducted, it is clear that public relations occupy a central and practical position in the way crises are handled within these universities. The findings show that both institutions rely on a mix of digital and traditional communication channels during crisis periods. Social media has become the most dominant tool, reflecting the reality that information now spreads rapidly and stakeholders expect immediate updates. At the same time, the continued use of meetings, memos, press statements, and direct engagement indicates that crisis management is not handled solely online. Rather, management still recognises the value of face-to-face dialogue and formal communication, especially when dealing with staff unions and sensitive internal matters.

The study also makes it evident that many of the crises experienced by the two universities are not accidental or external in nature. Instead, they are largely connected to internal issues such as staff welfare, irregular salary payments, leadership concerns, fee increments, and security challenges. This suggests that crisis in public universities is often rooted in structural and administrative realities. Communication may not prevent every crisis from occurring, but it plays a decisive role in determining whether such situations escalate or are managed effectively. Statistically, the results provide strong support for the relevance of public relations in crisis management. The significant positive relationship between PR strategies and crisis management effectiveness ($r = .612$) confirms that better communication practices are associated with better crisis outcomes. Furthermore, the finding that PR strategies account for 37.4% of the variation in crisis outcomes shows that communication is not just symbolic, it has measurable impact. These results reinforce the core ideas of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model, Situational Crisis Communication Theory all of which stress dialogue, transparency, and relationship-building as foundations for resolving conflict.

Despite these contributions, the study also highlights certain limitations affecting PR performance. Inadequate funding, bureaucratic approval processes, misinformation, and limited managerial integration continue to pose challenges. These factors sometimes slow down response time and reduce the overall effectiveness of communication efforts. It becomes evident that while PR units are making meaningful contributions, their full potential can only be realised when they are adequately supported and strategically positioned within the university's decision-making structure. In conclusion, public relations in both institutions goes beyond routine publicity; it functions as a strategic management tool that helps stabilise the institution, protect its image, and rebuild trust after crises. When properly supported, PR can significantly strengthen crisis preparedness and response in tertiary institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Both universities should strengthen their digital communication systems, especially social media management, while maintaining effective use of meetings, memos, and press briefings to ensure coordinated crisis communication.
- ii. University management and relevant authorities should prioritise timely payment of salaries, improve staff welfare, enhance campus security, and adopt participatory decision-making processes to address the major internal causes of crises.
- iii. Management should institutionalise open and timely communication, and create platforms that encourages dialogue as formal crisis communication policies, supported by regular training and crisis simulation exercises for PR personnel.

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