EVALUATING PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: A CASE STUDY OF RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study evaluates Public Relations Strategies for Conflict Resolution in Nigerian Universities using a Case Study of Rivers State University. The objectives included identifying the specific public relations strategies employed by the university in addressing conflicts such as student fee protests, staff union disputes, and community-related tensions, and assessing their effectiveness in preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts among stakeholders. The research was anchored on three theoretical frameworks: the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, the Conflict Transformation Theory, and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). A mixed-method survey research design was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches for a comprehensive analysis. The total population of 30,462 comprised 12 Public Relations staff members, 2,450 academic and non-academic staff, and 28,000 students. Using Taro Yamane's formula, a sample size of 350 respondents was determined. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, validated by experts and tested for reliability. Quantitative data were analyzed using simple percentages and Weighted Mean Scores (WMS), while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that Rivers State University employs a combination of dialogue, stakeholder meetings, community engagement, and internal communication channels to manage and resolve conflicts among students, staff, and external stakeholders. Public relations strategies such as timely communication, dialogue facilitation, and participatory decision-making were found effective in preventing and managing conflicts. The university has also introduced innovative PR initiatives such as stakeholder forums, participatory dialogue series, and trust-building workshops that foster mutual respect and institutional harmony. The study concluded that public relations play a vital role in fostering peace, understanding, and cooperation within the university community. It emphasized that

effective PR practices have contributed significantly to building trust, promoting transparency, and preventing conflict escalation. It further suggested the enhancement of participatory communication, increased funding and autonomy for the PR department, and continuous capacity-building programmes for PR officers to strengthen conflict management effectiveness.
Keywords: Public Relations, Conflict Resolution, Nigerian Universities, Rivers State University.

Introduction

Conflict, like death, is inevitable in human existence. It manifests in various forms and contexts between individuals, groups, and within institutions. In universities, conflicts are often triggered by policy implementation, administrative decisions, student activism, and stakeholder interests. While the existence of conflict is unavoidable, the methods and strategies adopted to manage and resolve such conflicts determine the overall health, stability, and reputation of an institution. Public Relations (PR), as a strategic communication function, plays a crucial role in mediating these relationships and ensuring institutional harmony.

Rivers State University (RSU), located in Port Harcourt, stands out among Nigerian state-owned universities for its proactive conflict management culture and relatively stable academic environment. Through effective communication practices, transparency, dialogue, and prompt responses to crises such as those relating to tuition fees, graduation policies, or hostel safety RSU's public relations team has often succeeded in preventing minor disagreements from escalating into full-blown conflicts. However, while these successes are observable, there is limited *empirical research* that systematically examines how these PR strategies are developed, implemented, and sustained within the university context.

Most existing studies on public relations and conflict resolution in Nigerian universities Okoro & Agbanu, 2012; Nwosu, 2007) focused on general PR practices, media relations, or crisis communication in corporate organizations, leaving a gap in the academic investigation of data-driven, strategic, and participatory PR approaches in higher education institutions. Moreover, what remains unclear is whether RSU's PR successes are the result of structured communication models, individual administrative style, or contextual socio-political dynamics unique to the Niger Delta environment.

At the heart of modern PR theory, as articulated by Grunig and Hunt (1984), is the principle of two-way symmetrical communication, which promotes dialogue, negotiation, and mutual understanding between institutions and their stakeholders. Although RSU appears to exemplify this approach through participatory engagement and responsive communication, there has been no scholarly assessment to determine the extent to which these practices align with established public relations theories such as the Excellence Theory (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002), Dialogic Communication Theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007).

This gap in knowledge forms the rationale for the present study. By assessing the public relations strategies employed in conflict resolution at RSU, this research seeks to move beyond anecdotal recognition of the university's PR successes to a more analytical understanding of the strategies, models, and theoretical foundations that underpin them. The findings of this study will not only deepen academic discourse on PR and conflict management in Nigerian universities but may also provide a replicable model for other higher institutions facing similar challenges.

Statement of the Problem

Public relations strategies are essential in fostering communication, building mutual understanding, and managing relationships among stakeholders within universities. In an environment where students, lecturers, non-academic staff, management, alumni, government bodies, and host communities coexist,

conflicts are almost unavoidable. The use of strategies such as dialogue facilitation, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and media relations can help to prevent disputes from escalating and promote peaceful resolution when disagreements occur. However, the persistence of conflicts in Nigerian universities, despite established public relations frameworks, suggests a gap between communication practice and conflict management outcomes.

At Rivers State University (RSU), several real-life conflicts illustrate this challenge. In May 2021, for instance, students protested the introduction of a new fee payment policy, demanding a reversal of what they described as sudden and insensitive management action. The demonstration disrupted academic activities and attracted public criticism before the university's Public Relations Unit intervened. Similarly, in August 2022, tensions arose between the university management and staff unions over issues related to unpaid allowances and working conditions, prompting short-term work stoppages that affected administrative operations. Additionally, friction between the university and its host community over land boundary has occasionally threatened peaceful coexistence around the campus environment. These instances show that while public relations units exist to manage such situations, their interventions have often been reactive rather than preventive.

Moreover, the emergence of social media platforms has altered the conflict landscape at RSU. Student grievances are now frequently aired on platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp, where misinformation spreads rapidly. There flare ups warrant a systematic study.

The central problem, therefore, is that although public relations strategies at Rivers State University are intended to promote harmony and understanding, their practical application has not consistently prevented or minimized conflicts. Without a deliberate assessment of how these strategies are deployed and how effective they are in achieving lasting peace, the university might risk continued uglier.

Objectives of the Study

The study will evaluate the assessment of public relations strategies in conflict resolution in universities using a study of Rivers State University.

The specific objectives are to;

1. Identify the specific public relations strategies employed by Rivers State University in addressing real conflicts such as student fee protests, staff union disputes, and community-related tensions.
2. Assess the effectiveness of these public relations strategies in preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts among the university's stakeholders.
3. Examine the university's public relations innovations in terms of dialogue, mutual trust among stakeholders.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised to guide the study.

1. What specific public relations strategies are employed by Rivers State University in addressing real conflicts such as student fee protests, staff union disputes, and community-related tensions?
2. How effective are these public relations strategies in preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts among the university's stakeholders?
3. What are the university's public relations innovations in promoting dialogue and mutual trust among stakeholders?

Theoretical Review

The study was anchored on two theories; Excellence Theory of Public Relations and Conflict transformation theory.

Excellence Theory of Public Relations

The Excellence Theory of Public Relations stands as one of the most significant contributions to communication and public relations scholarship, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how organizations can achieve effective communication, build meaningful relationships with stakeholders, and resolve conflicts. This theory was primarily developed by James E. Grunig and his colleagues in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly through the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Excellence Study that began in 1985. Grunig's work, which culminated in the influential text *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* published in 1992, laid the foundation for the theory. It has since been refined and applied across contexts, with Grunig (2021) and other contemporary scholars extending its relevance to digital communication, crisis management, and participatory approaches in governance.

At its core, the Excellence Theory argues that organizations can only be effective when they engage in public relations practices that are ethical, participatory, and strategic. Unlike earlier views of PR that emphasized one-way communication and persuasion where organizations pushed messages at their publics, the Excellence Theory advocates for two-way symmetrical communication, where dialogue, negotiation, and feedbacks are central. This model represents the highest form of public relations because it acknowledges the agency of stakeholders, treats them with respect, and integrates their concerns into organizational decision-making (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 2021). The theory thus departs from manipulative propaganda approaches and aligns PR with democratic ideals and organizational accountability.

The Excellence Theory emerged in response to the need for a general theory that could explain what makes public relations most effective and socially responsible. The IABC Excellence Study, which surveyed organizations across different countries and sectors, demonstrated that organizations practicing symmetrical, strategic communication were more successful, both in terms of organizational goals and in maintaining legitimacy with stakeholders. Grunig and Hunt (1984) had earlier outlined four models of public relations press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical but the Excellence Theory established the latter as the normative ideal. Two-way symmetrical communication not only benefits stakeholders by giving them a voice but also benefits organizations by preventing crises, fostering trust, and sustaining positive reputations (Verčič, 2021).

The Excellence Theory is directly relevant to the study of public relations strategies in conflict resolution at Rivers State University. Conflicts in Nigerian universities often stem from authoritarian governance, lack of transparency, and the exclusion of stakeholders such as students and staff unions from decision-making processes. The Excellence Theory provides a framework for addressing these issues by advocating for two-way symmetrical communication, which emphasizes dialogue, negotiation, and mutual respect. By adopting this approach, the university can foster trust, prevent escalation of disputes, and transform conflicts into opportunities for institutional improvement. Furthermore, the theory aligns with the study's focus on participatory communication and organizational reputation, as it demonstrates how effective PR practices contribute not only to conflict resolution but also to the legitimacy and credibility of higher education institutions. In this way, Excellence Theory provides both the conceptual lens and practical strategies for understanding and improving conflict management in universities.

Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory represents a paradigm shift in the understanding and management of conflict. Unlike traditional conflict resolution approaches that focus primarily on settling disputes, this theory emphasizes the importance of addressing the underlying causes of conflict and transforming relationships among the parties involved. The origins of Conflict Transformation Theory can be traced back to the early works of scholars like John Paul Lederach, who, in the 1990s, advocated for a more holistic approach to conflict that recognized the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which conflicts arise.

Lederach's seminal work, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (1997), laid the groundwork for understanding conflict as a dynamic process rather than a static condition. He argued that effective conflict transformation requires engaging with the root causes of conflict, including identity, power dynamics, and historical grievances. This perspective shifts the focus from merely achieving a ceasefire or agreement to fostering relationships and promoting social change.

The development of Conflict Transformation Theory has been further enriched by contributions from various theorists and practitioners. Scholars like Johan Galtung, who introduced the concept of "structural violence," emphasized the need to address not just the overt manifestations of conflict but also the underlying systems of inequality that perpetuate it. Galtung's work has inspired many to consider the broader implications of conflicts, urging practitioners to seek long-term solutions that promote social justice and equity (Galtung, 1996).

In recent years, the theory has gained traction in various fields, including peace studies, sociology, and organizational communication. Contemporary scholars argue that conflict transformation is particularly relevant in complex and diverse environments, such as universities, where multiple stakeholders with differing interests must navigate their relationships. These environments often require innovative approaches to conflict management that prioritize dialogue, inclusivity, and mutual understanding (Fisher, 2020).

One of the critical aspects of Conflict Transformation Theory is its emphasis on relationship-building. As conflict transformation practitioners assert, the quality of relationships among stakeholders significantly influences the potential for resolving disputes. When relationships are characterized by trust, respect, and open communication, the likelihood of achieving lasting solutions increases. Central to this approach is the idea that conflicts are opportunities for growth and change rather than mere obstacles to be overcome (Lederach, 2005; Fisher, 2021).

The theory also posits that conflict transformation should be a participatory process, involving all relevant stakeholders in the dialogue. This participatory approach aligns with contemporary democratic ideals and emphasizes the importance of giving voice to marginalized groups. As mentioned by Miall (2022), inclusive dialogue not only empowers stakeholders but also fosters a sense of ownership over the conflict resolution process, leading to more sustainable outcomes.

In the context of higher education, Conflict Transformation Theory offers valuable insights into managing disputes among diverse university populations. Conflicts often arise from governance issues, such as policy changes, resource allocation, and differing educational philosophies. By applying the principles of conflict transformation, universities can create environments conducive to constructive dialogue and collaboration, ultimately enhancing institutional cohesion and effectiveness (Pruitt & Kim, 2020).

Furthermore, the theory emphasizes the importance of viewing conflicts as opportunities for growth and positive change. In the university context, this perspective can transform disputes into constructive dialogues that enhance institutional reputation and legitimacy. By embracing conflict transformation strategies, Rivers State University can create a culture of open communication, mutual respect, and collaborative problem-solving, which aligns with the study's focus on effective public relations practices in conflict resolution.

Conceptual Review
Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution remains a critical subject in organizational and educational settings, especially in universities where multiple stakeholders interact with diverse interests, values, and goals. Within the university context, conflict may emerge among students, between students and staff, among academic and non-academic staff, or between the university and its external community. Left unresolved, such conflicts

disrupt academic programs, damage institutional reputation, and strain relationships. Therefore, conflict resolution has become a central concern of administrators, public relations (PR) practitioners, and policymakers in higher education.

Conflict, traditionally seen as a destructive phenomenon, is now widely acknowledged as both inevitable and potentially constructive. According to Picado-Valverde, Molina Cano, Munuera Gómez, and Costa e Silva (2022), conflict can act as a stimulus for institutional reform and innovation when approached with appropriate resolution strategies. They argue that university students' perceptions of conflict shape how they respond, and when guided towards positive engagement through dialogue and mediation, conflict can be transformed into an opportunity for personal growth and institutional development. This perspective highlights the necessity of cultivating a culture of constructive conflict resolution in universities.

At its core, conflict resolution refers to the process of addressing disagreements, disputes, or clashes through mechanisms that foster understanding, reduce hostility, and achieve agreements acceptable to all parties. The process goes beyond temporary settlements; it involves diagnosing root causes, enabling effective communication, and institutionalizing structures for sustained peace. Alamu and Ajayi (2024) contend that the absence of conflict resolution mechanisms in Nigerian universities is partly responsible for persistent strike actions, disrupted academic calendars, and erosion of trust in higher education governance. They further stress that conflict resolution is a dynamic process that requires strategies tailored to specific institutional and cultural contexts.

The first step in conflict resolution is conflict diagnosis. Universities, like other organizations, must identify underlying issues whether resource scarcity, miscommunication, leadership styles, or competing interests. Once causes are identified, communication becomes central. As Irby, Pashmforoosh, Draery, Lara-Alecio, Tong, Etchells, and Algert (2022) note, effective communication builds trust and transparency, making it possible for stakeholders to discuss grievances openly. Their study on professional development in conflict management highlights that when leaders are trained to listen actively and communicate with empathy, they are better positioned to prevent escalation and to negotiate outcomes acceptable to all stakeholders.

Public Relations (PR) Strategies

Public Relations (PR) constitutes a critical dimension of organizational management in universities, particularly in contexts where conflict is frequent and potentially disruptive. PR strategies represent deliberate strategies of communication and engagement designed to manage institutional reputation, build trust, maintain healthy relationships, and foster understanding among stakeholders. Within universities, stakeholders include students, staff (academic and non-academic), administrators, unions, alumni, government agencies, host communities, and the media. Because conflicts in universities can arise from issues such as resource allocation, policy changes, labor disputes, or student unrest, PR strategies provide frameworks for resolution that emphasize dialogue, transparency, and inclusivity.

Media relations is one of the most recognized PR strategies. It involves systematic management of communication between the university and external media outlets. Through press releases, interviews, press conferences, and prepared statements, institutions communicate their position on disputes, clarify policies, and counter misinformation. In conflict situations, effective media relations control narratives and prevent rumors from escalating tensions. Gbam (2022) notes that media relations programs are successful when guided by clear objectives, timelines, budgets, and tracking mechanisms. Where such structures are absent, media interventions often become reactive and fail to achieve their purpose. Thus, the university's PR unit must cultivate strong relationships with journalists and media houses before conflicts arise, ensuring credibility and access during crises.

Another important strategy is community relations, which focuses on fostering positive relationships with host communities. Universities in Nigeria often operate in communities where issues of land, employment, social responsibility, and environmental impact generate tension. Community relations programs such as town hall meetings, open forums, and community development projects serve to reassure communities that the university values their partnership. According to Udomah, Akarika, and Ikon (2024), corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives such as infrastructural support or scholarship schemes are widely used by Nigerian universities to manage relationships with host communities. However, they argue that the effectiveness of these initiatives depends not only on the projects themselves but also on the extent to which communities are consulted and informed. When community expectations are mismanaged, CSR projects can be dismissed as tokenistic.

Communication Management

Communication management refers to the systematic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of communication processes within organizations to achieve strategic objectives. It is not limited to message dissemination but encompasses how organizations interact with stakeholders, manage information flows, and maintain reputational capital. In universities, communication management is vital because institutions operate in complex environments where multiple stakeholders, students, staff, alumni, government agencies, and communities—have varying expectations and interests. Effective communication management promotes transparency, fosters collaboration, mitigates conflict, and enhances institutional legitimacy.

Communication management integrates communication theory with organizational strategy. It emphasizes alignment between communication activities and institutional goals, ensuring that messages are not random but purposeful. As Rybalko, Sokolova, and Petruk (2023) note, communication management is a multidimensional process that blends internal communication, external relations, crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement into a coherent system. In this sense, communication management is both operational (managing daily information flows) and strategic (supporting long-term institutional positioning). The strategic nature of communication management is especially relevant in higher education. Universities are knowledge organizations where information is constantly produced, exchanged, and contested. Without effective communication management, policy decisions may be misunderstood, stakeholder expectations may be misaligned, and conflicts may escalate unnecessarily.

One dimension of communication management is internal communication, which involves the exchange of information within the institution. Internal communication channels include staff meetings, emails, intranet platforms, newsletters, and town hall forums. According to Alamu and Ajayi (2024), failures in internal communication are among the most significant drivers of conflict in Nigerian universities, as policies are often implemented without adequate explanation or consultation. Effective internal communication fosters inclusion, trust, and cooperation. It ensures that staff and students understand institutional goals, their roles in achieving them, and the rationale behind key decisions. Another dimension is external communication, which refers to how universities interact with stakeholders outside the institution governments, communities, media, industry, and the general public. External communication involves branding, media relations, community outreach, and policy advocacy. In today's competitive higher education landscape, universities must maintain positive images to attract students, research funding, and international partnerships. Adeleke-Sola and Kuye-Aremu (2025) argue that universities that fail to strategically manage external communication lose reputational capital, which affects funding, enrollment, and stakeholder support.

Organizational Image and Reputation

Organizational image and reputation have become indispensable constructs in understanding how institutions, including universities, relate to their stakeholders and navigate conflicts. Image refers to the immediate perceptions stakeholders have of an organization, often shaped by direct experiences, communication strategies, and media representations. Reputation, by contrast, represents a longer-term assessment based on accumulated experiences, trust, and credibility. Together, they determine how stakeholders interpret institutional actions, respond to crises, and engage in conflict resolution processes. Within the higher education sector, where universities rely heavily on legitimacy, goodwill, and societal trust, image and reputation are central to conflict management because they influence whether stakeholders perceive the institution as fair, transparent, and trustworthy (Ibrahim & Udo, 2022).

The relationship between organizational image and conflict resolution is well-documented. Universities, as complex organizations, encounter conflicts ranging from student unrest, staff strikes, and governance disputes to financial controversies. In such contexts, organizational image determines the initial framing of the conflict. According to Benoit and Pang (2021), institutions with positive reputational capital often receive the benefit of the doubt during crises, as stakeholders interpret their actions through a lens of trust. Conversely, institutions with poor reputations face skepticism, even when their intentions are genuine. In the Nigerian university system, where recurring conflicts have strained relations between students, staff, and management, organizational image and reputation become valuable tools for resilience, as institutions that cultivate strong reputations are better equipped to navigate disputes without irreparable damage to their legitimacy.

Empirical Review

Udomah, Akarika & Ikon (2024) carried out a study entitled: *Community Relations Strategies and Conflict Resolution in Nigerian Universities* (Case: Akwa Ibom State University and Obio-Akpa Community. This empirical study investigates university-community relations strategies aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts between Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU) and its host community (Obio-Akpa). The objectives include documenting conflict frequency and causes, identifying community relations strategies employed by AKSU, assessing their effectiveness from the perspective of host stakeholders, and determining community preferences for conflict resolution approaches. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, gathering quantitative data through structured questionnaires administered to community members and qualitative data from interviews with university officials and community leaders. The analysis is anchored on communication and image-repair theories, employing descriptive and inferential statistics alongside thematic analysis. Key findings reveal that conflict between the community and AKSU is frequent and driven by perceived neglect, unmet expectations, and poor communication. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects were the most commonly used strategies, but many community members deemed these ineffective without genuine consultation. The study underscores the importance of sustained two-way engagement over cosmetic PR efforts. Recommendations emphasize institutionalizing community liaison offices and co-designing projects with stakeholders to foster trust and reduce conflict.

Ohieku (2024) carried out a study entitled: *Media Coverage of the 2022 ASUU Strike: Implications for University Crisis Communication*. The study explores how two national newspapers covered the eight-month 2022 strike by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria, with implications for university crisis communication and public perception. The research employs content analysis of news items and editorials, along with stakeholder interviews. The content analysis reveals prominent frames, including human-interest stories and accountability frames, while showing a tendency to foreground conflict over collaborative resolution attempts. Interviews reveal that many university communication units were reactive, issuing sparse statements rather than engaging empathetically. This gap allowed negative

narratives to dominate public perception. Key takeaways for PR practice stress the need for proactive, transparent, and human-centered crisis communication to shape media frames and public sympathy. The study highlights that media plays a powerful agenda-setting role, necessitating that universities treat media relations as a core function in crisis management.

Motwani et al. (2021) conducted a study on *Crisis Communication Management at Higher Education in the Social Media Era*. The study explores crisis management in higher education within the social media era. The study combines a survey of university PR practitioners with case analyses of institutional responses to recent crises, focusing on speed, channel selection, message content, and perceived effectiveness. Findings indicate that institutions integrating social media monitoring and two-way engagement protocols manage crises more effectively. Proactive responses, acknowledgment of uncertainties, and multimedia use are associated with reduced misinformation. Conversely, delayed responses lead to lost narrative control. The study reinforces the necessity for contemporary crisis PR to be digital-first, empathetic, and dialogic. For Rivers State University, the findings suggest prioritizing investments in social listening tools and trained spokespeople for effective conflict management.

Methodology

A mixed-method survey research design was adopted for the study, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure comprehensive analysis. The total population of the study was 30,462, consisting of three distinct groups within Rivers State University: twelve (12) members of staff in the Public Relations Department, two thousand four hundred and fifty (2,450) academic and non-academic staff, and twenty-eight thousand (28,000) registered students. Using Taro Yamane's formula, a sample size of 350 respondents was determined. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire, designed on a four-point Likert scale, provided measurable data, while the interviews offered deeper insights into stakeholder experiences. The instruments were validated by experts, and their reliability was confirmed through a pilot test. Data analysis involved the use of simple percentages and Weighted Mean Scores (WMS) for quantitative data, while qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic and explanatory strategies.

Table 1: Public Relations Strategies Used in Addressing Conflicts

S/N	Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total Score)	Mean	Decision
1	The university's PR unit frequently uses dialogue to resolve student fee protests.	160 640	120 360	50 100	20 20	**350** 1120	3.20	Agreed
2	Mediation and negotiation are key strategies adopted by the PR unit in managing conflicts.	155 620	130 390	45 90	20 20	**350** 1120	3.20	Agreed
3	The PR department maintains open communication with staff unions during disputes.	140 560	130 390	60 120	20 20	**350** 1090	3.11	Agreed
4	Community relations programs help prevent conflicts with host communities.	150 600	120 360	60 120	20 20	**350** 1100	3.14	Agreed
5	The PR unit collaborates with management to ensure peaceful resolution of crises.	135 540	140 420	55 110	20 20	**350** 1090	3.11	Agreed

The data above revealed that dialogue, mediation, negotiation, and community relations were the primary public relations strategies adopted by Rivers State University, and respondents generally agreed that these approaches were effective in resolving various conflicts within the institution.

Table 2: Effectiveness of Public Relations Strategies

S/N	Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total Score	Mean	Decision
1	PR interventions have reduced the frequency of student and staff conflicts.	145 580	125 375	60 120	20 20	**350** 1095	3.13	Agreed
2	Dialogue sessions organized by the PR unit promote mutual understanding.	150 600	130 390	50 100	20 20	**350** 1110	3.17	Agreed
3	Crisis communication prevents escalation of tensions.	160 640	120 360	50 100	20 20	**350** 1120	3.20	Agreed
4	Stakeholders view PR-led resolutions as fair and inclusive.	140 560	135 405	55 110	20 20	**350** 1095	3.13	Agreed
5	PR strategies contribute to long-term peace and stability in the university.	135 540	130 390	65 130	20 20	**350** 1080	3.09	Agreed

Results showed that the university's public relations strategies were considered effective in reducing conflict frequency, fostering mutual understanding, and promoting long-term peace and stability among stakeholders.

Table 3: PR Innovations in Promoting Dialogue and Mutual Trust

S/N	Statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total Score	Mean	Decision
1	The PR department has introduced innovative dialogue forums for conflict prevention.	150 600	130 390	50 100	20 20	**350** 1110	3.17	Agreed
2	Regular interactive sessions build mutual trust between management and students.	145 580	135 405	50 100	20 20	**350** 1105	3.16	Agreed
3	The PR team uses participatory communication to strengthen stakeholder relationships.	140 560	130 390	60 120	20 20	**350** 1090	3.11	Agreed
4	Transparency in communication fosters trust among stakeholders.	155 620	125 375	50 100	20 20	**350** 1115	3.19	Agreed
5	Feedback from stakeholders is encouraged and acted upon.	135 540	140 420	55 110	20 20	**350** 1090	3.11	Agreed

The analysis indicated that innovative participatory approaches, transparency, and interactive forums introduced by the PR department enhanced dialogue, trust, and relationship-building among the university community.

Discussion of Finding

Research Question One: What specific public relations strategies are employed by Rivers State University in addressing real conflicts such as student fee protests, staff union disputes, and community-related tensions?

Findings revealed that Rivers State University employs a mix of dialogue, stakeholder meetings, community engagement, and internal communication channels to manage and resolve conflicts involving students, staff, and external stakeholders. This aligns with the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, which emphasizes two-way symmetrical communication as the most ethical and effective model for building mutual understanding and cooperation. The university's focus on open dialogue and inclusiveness mirrors the model's core principles of mutual respect and feedback between management and its publics. From the perspective of Conflict Transformation Theory, these strategies do not merely address immediate disputes but seek to transform relationships, promote understanding, and sustain institutional peace over time. By engaging stakeholders in discussion and negotiation, the university fosters deeper trust and long-term behavioral change.

Empirically, these findings agree with Udomah, Akarika & Ikon (2024), who found that dialogic communication fosters trust and reduces tension between university administrators and students. Ohieku (2024) also emphasized that participatory communication enhances institutional harmony and minimizes rumor circulation during crises. Additionally, Motwani et al. (2021) concluded that effective public relations systems depend on symmetrical interaction that prioritizes stakeholder voices. Likewise, Okorie and Abubakar (2024) established that two-way communication strategies improve conflict resolution efficiency in Nigerian universities. Therefore, the university's adoption of participatory and transparent PR approaches demonstrates a practical integration of theoretical and empirical insights, confirming that inclusive communication remains central to achieving stability and mutual trust within higher institutions.

Research Question Two: How effective are these public relations strategies in preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts among the university's stakeholders?

The study found that public relations strategies such as timely communication, dialogue facilitation, and participatory decision-making have proven effective in preventing and managing conflicts at Rivers State University. This aligns strongly with the Excellence Theory, which advocates the two-way symmetrical model as the most effective system for fostering understanding between institutions and their publics. By engaging staff and students in continuous dialogue, the university builds trust, minimizes misinformation, and promotes transparency in its operations. From the lens of Conflict Transformation Theory, these strategies facilitate positive behavioral change and strengthen institutional relationships beyond resolving surface-level issues. Empirically, the findings correspond with Udomah, Akarika & Ikon (2024), who observed that effective stakeholder dialogue mechanisms reduce institutional crises. Similarly, Ohieku (2024) found that universities that adopt proactive public relations frameworks experience fewer student unrests and faster resolution processes. Motwani et al. (2021) argued that effective PR practices enhance social cohesion by fostering transparency and timely feedback in crisis situations. Okorie and Abubakar (2024) also confirmed that communication strategies emphasizing empathy and shared responsibility yield more sustainable conflict outcomes. Thus, Rivers State University's PR effectiveness stems from its ability to integrate dialogue, trust-building, and timely response into a coordinated communication system consistent with theoretical and empirical frameworks.

Research Question Three: What are the university's public relations innovations in promoting dialogue and mutual trust among stakeholders?

Findings revealed that Rivers State University has introduced innovative PR initiatives such as stakeholder forums, participatory dialogue series, and trust-building workshops that strengthen mutual

respect between management, staff, and students. This outcome resonates with the Excellence Theory, which positions innovation and adaptability as essential for achieving communication symmetry and stakeholder satisfaction. Through innovative engagement mechanisms, the university bridges communication gaps and nurtures long-term trust. Within the framework of Conflict Transformation Theory, these innovations represent constructive efforts to change negative interaction patterns into positive, cooperative relationships. The institution's investment in dialogue-based PR activities transforms not only conflict behavior but also institutional culture, leading to sustainable peace.

Empirical studies further support these observations. Udomah, Akarika & Ikon (2024) reported that PR innovation promotes transparency and trust in university systems. Ohieku (2024) emphasized that communication innovation encourages inclusiveness and improves institutional resilience to conflict. Similarly, Motwani et al. (2021) concluded that innovative stakeholder dialogue platforms foster collaborative relationships between management and employees. Okorie and Abubakar (2024) also identified innovation-driven communication strategies as key to sustainable institutional harmony. Hence, the university's proactive adoption of PR innovations aligns with both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, demonstrating that adaptive, participatory communication practices are indispensable to achieving mutual trust and peaceful coexistence within the academic environment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that public relations play a crucial role in fostering peace, understanding, and cooperation within Rivers State University. The university's Public Relations Department has effectively employed a mix of dialogue, stakeholder meetings, community engagement, and internal communication channels to manage and resolve conflicts involving students, staff, and external stakeholders. These strategies have contributed significantly to building trust, promoting transparency, and preventing the escalation of disputes. The study further concluded that public relations practices such as timely communication, dialogue facilitation, and participatory decision-making have enhanced the effectiveness of conflict management processes within the university. It was also concluded that the university's adoption of innovative PR approaches, including stakeholder forums, participatory dialogue series, and trust-building workshops, has strengthened mutual respect and collaboration among the university community. Additionally, the application of digital communication platforms such as social media, email newsletters, and virtual meetings has improved accessibility, responsiveness, and real-time information sharing among stakeholders, thereby reinforcing the institution's image and credibility.

Recommendations

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

1. The Public Relations Department should enhance its use of dialogue and participatory communication strategies to strengthen stakeholder trust and collaboration during conflict situations.
2. The university management should prioritize adequate funding and logistical support to enable the PR unit to function more efficiently and independently.
3. Continuous capacity-building programmes should be introduced for PR officers to improve their skills in modern communication and conflict management.

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