Corporate Communications Strategies and Conflict Resolution in Tertiary Institutions: A Focus on UNIPORT 2016 Unrest

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ABSTRACT
This research focused on the corporate communication efforts of the University of Port Harcourt especially during its 2016 students' unrest for which properties worth millions of naira were destroyed and lives lost together with the drawback of the academic calendar of the institution. The study raised four key objectives that ascertained the factors that necessitated the 2016 Uniport students' unrest and the corporate communications strategies utilized by the University of Port Harcourt. Consequently, two theories guided the study being the stakeholder and system theories given their imperativeness to the research. The survey method of research was adopted which necessitated the utilization of the questionnaire as instrument of data collection. Oral interview also contributed to the findings of the study. Moreso, the population of the study being University of Port Harcourt was 30,185, although the sample size amounted to 400 using the Taro Yamane formula; this was backed up by an oral interview of six key members of the Information Protocol and Public Relations staff of the University. The study found that the absence of dialogue and inexperience of corporate communications operational dynamics fueled the ambers of the 2016 Uniport students' unrest. Recommendations made focused on the need for there to be a complete overhaul of the Information Protocol and Public Relations unit of Uniport marked by an intensive training on communications. It was also recommended that a stop be made on the engagement of non-professionals in the business of corporate communications and/or Information Protocol and Public Relations unit so as to avert future reoccurrence.
Keywords: Corporate Communications, Strategies, Conflict, Resolution, IPPR, Unrest, Crisis, Tertiary Institution, Uniport.

INTRODUCTION
The most intractable form of conflict in most universities in Nigeria is students' conflict. In the last decade, hardly did any higher institution completed their academic sessions without an occurrence of violent and conflicts as a result of students' grievances Etadon (2013). In corroborating this position, Alimba (2008) notes that in 1971, the first violent students' protest took place at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria and the violent protest led to the death of one Kunle Adepeju. Several other students' unrest, hostile and devastating in nature, had thereafter been recorded in the developmental process of tertiary education in Nigeria, thereby, making the educational terrain highly uncomfortable for teaching, research, and rendering services to the public. The most worrisome aspect of students 'unrest is the incessant manner in which they occur and their inherent violent nature. Students' conflicts have, therefore, superseded other forms of conflicts in terms of frequency of occurrence, volatility, and severe effects on the universities and the nation as a whole (Aderinto, 1994). There is therefore hardly any administration

in the universities that had not witnessed one form of conflict or the other, whether such conflict is internal or external.

However, new concepts and tools are effectively needed for managing student' unrest and others concerned and for understanding how communication could be strategically employed to meet institutional objectives. Corporate communications is the strategic management function that has since arisen to this end. Within the corporate communications framework, communication to stakeholders (students, staff etc.) is approached and managed in a strategic manner through a central management structure designed for speaking un-behalf of the Institution while systematically putting in perspective concerns and views of the various stakeholders.

A brief background shows that the researcher's case study being University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) was founded in 1975 according to uniport.org., and is a second generation federal university located in Rivers State, the Niger/Delta region of Nigeria with well over thirty thousand students. Formerly known as University College, Port Harcourt, UNIPORT has been ranked amongst the top Universities in Africa and as the first in Nigeria by Times Higher Education (THE); a UK based source for higher education information.

However, things seem not to have remained this way in recent times given frequent outrage of students especially the popular 'Aluu4' imbroglio and the 2016 students' unrest. For the latter which occurred on Monday 11th April 2016; it led to the death of two students allegedly gunned down by security operatives sent to quell the crisis. Universities as higher institutions are places for teaching, learning and research especially as they relate to the problems of societies and the world. The existence of crises and conflict between and or amongst students' and management in tertiary institution is a serious threat to the realization of set objective. It has been observed that crises and conflict between students' and management of universities have led to the death of students and even lecturers on campus as experienced in University of Port Harcourt in 2016 where two students died during students' demonstration over a 'no fee no exam' policy (Nigeria info, 92.3FM. April 2016). Could this have been averted with the aid of strategic corporate communications with a better students/management relationship while enacting the policy?

Again, and indeed recently, tertiary institutions have often witnessed one form of face-off or the other at least once every two sessions between students and management which often lead to the destruction of valuables, death and disruption of the academic calendar. It is therefore imperative to point out that if these ugly trends are not established and solution oriented measures taken, the future role of our tertiary institutions as agents of social change and national development will be seriously threatened.

Consequently, this study is faced with the problem of establishing, the pre and post communication behavior of Uniport management during her 2016 students' unrest to ascertain if the university places premium on the utilization of corporate communications strategies for conflict resolution.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives guided the study:

(i)   Ascertain the factors that led to the 2016uniport students' unrest with a view to aligning them with disposition of students/management of Uniport.

(ii)   Find out the corporate communication strategies adopted by the management of Uniport in the resolution of the 2016 students' unrest crisis so as to establish if it allowed for dialogue

(iii)   Examine the strategy adopted by Uniport management for the resolution of the 2016 students' unrest was perceived to have yielded positive dividends in the light of conflict resolution

(iv)   Streamline the strategy adopted by Uniport management for the resolution of the 2016 students' unrest is in line with international best practices so as to allow for widespread adoption and adaptation by tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The underneath research questions were formulated to guide the study:

(i) What factors necessitated the 2016 Uniport students' unrest and were they aligned with the students'/management disposition of Uniport?

(ii) What corporate communication strategies are adopted by the management of Uniport in the resolution of the 2016 Uniport students' unrest and did it allow for dialogue?

(iii) To what extent was the strategy adopted by Uniport management for the resolution of the 2016 student's unrest perceived to have yielded positive dividends in the light of conflict resolution?

(iv) How are the strategies adopted by Uniport for the resolution of the 2016 students' unrest, in line with international best practices so as to allow for widespread adoption and adaptation by tertiary institutions in Nigeria?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Theoretical Framework
Stakeholders' Theory
Particularly, the purpose of stakeholders' theory according to Freeman (2004) is to create methods to manage the different groups and relationships that resulted in a strategic fashion. Further, Freeman (2004) thinks that the idea of stakeholders' management or approach suggests that managers must formulate the policy and implement processes which satisfy all and only those groups who have a stake in the business. The main task in this process is to manage and integrate the relationships interests of stakeholders in a way to guarantee the long term success of the Institution. A stakeholders approach is much more concerned about active management of the business environment, relationships and the promotion of shared interests in order to develop development strategies.

Deductively therefore, the relationship of this theory to the study is premised on the stakeholders management skills of Uniport management towards building relationships, representing interests and moving the university forward in harmony given the fact that in the university structure, the students are huge stakeholders.

Corporate communication exists as a small specialty in schools of management and communication. Titles use both the singular and plural form of the word: corporate communication (Argenti, 1998; Goodman, 1994; Oliver, 1997) and corporate communications (Gayeski, 1993; Heath, 1994; Dolphin, 1999). Originally, the term was to differentiate communications related to the organization and its environment versus communications about the organization's products or services (Argenti, 1998). As a concept, communication has been explicated extensively, but two major models of communication dominate discussions within professional and academic circles. Both are relevant to strategic communication. First is the transmission model of communication, which conceptualizes communication as the one-way emission of information. Shannon and Weaver's model is a widely cited one-way model of communication focusing on the transmission of signals through a channel with a limited feedback capacity (Shannon & Weaver, 2009). Critics of this model argue that such an approach to communication is too sender oriented and understates or ignores the important role of receivers in the process.

Second is an interactive model of communication that argues that communication involves the creation and exchange of meaning between the parties in a communication activity. This interactive approach has its roots in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 2009; Mead, 2004/2002 as well as in Wiener's (2008) cybernetics theory, which showed how communication processes can be seen in terms of action and reaction. In a similar vein, Bauer (2004) stressed the role of audiences as active processors of information, and Thayer (2008) drew a distinction between synchronic and diachronic views about the concept of communication.

The interactive model is similar to the ritual model of communication. In the ritual model, communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is created, maintained, repaired, and transformed, according to Carey (2009) in Communication as Culture. Bell, Golombisky, and Holtzhausen (2002) succinctly described the differences between the transmission and ritual models of communication: Until late in the 20th century, the transmission model served as the basis for conceptualizing communications activities by organizations. Many managers of organizations thought that superior–subordinate communication was all that was necessary to communicate with employees, who would obediently comply. In part reflecting the powerful effects thinking that predominated media research in the early 20th century, the traditional

advertising model also used a one-way approach that stressed creating awareness and interest, which would lead to desire and action (Strong, 1995) or to decision, trial (implementation), and adoption (confirmation; Rogers, 2003).

Today, most communications researchers agree that communication involves more than one-way transmission. In public relations, for example, Grunig (2006, 2009, 2001; Grunig & Hunt, 2004) differentiated between one-way and two-way communication. Grunig further described his two-way models as symmetrical and asymmetrical, after Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (2010), who described the circular character of communication. Whereas Thayer (2008, 2007) was concerned with the development of meanings in messages over time (diachronic means literally "through time"), Watzlawick and colleagues were concerned with people's socially related behaviors, and more specifically doctor–patient behaviors, when communicating.

According to Grunig, symmetrical public relations means "the use of bargaining, negotiating, and strategies of conflict resolution to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of both the organization and its publics" (Grunig, 2009, p. 29). Symmetrical communication means that each participant in the communication process is equally able to influence the other. In his normative theorizing, Grunig advocated a two-way influence model instead of a (controlled) one-way influence model as the most effective and ethical way to conduct public relations.

By contrast, Grunig (1992a, 2001) claimed that one-way models are always asymmetric, because the sender is only concerned with the transmission of his message and does not take the receiver into account. Although Watzlawick and colleagues used asymmetry in a different way, Dozier and Ehling (1992) defined asymmetry as a communication model in which a one-way, linear causal effect is predicted and evaluated. They stated: "The presupposition is asymmetrical, for it conceives of communication and public relations as something organizations do to rather than with - people". In Grunig's work, however, it is still unclear what is meant by "one-way."

Another important area related to this is the study of communication effects. Duringthe1960s, for example, Bauer (2004) concluded that there are two different views regarding the idea of effects. The first of these, which he described as the social model, is held by the general public and by social scientists when they talk about advertising, and somebody else's propaganda, is one of the exploitation of man by man. It is a model of one-way influence: The communication does something to the audience, while to the communicator is generally attributed considerable latitude and power to do what he pleases to the audience.

PRESENTATION OF QUANTITATIVE DATA
Questionnaire Administration

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Numbers not returned	2	0.5
Numbers returned	398	99.5
Total	**400**	**100**

From the table above, a total of 398 questionnaires were returned and that served as the actual sample size.

Sex Distribution of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	234	58.8
Female	164	41.2
Total	**398**	**100**

The table above shows that male students constituted the most part of the population.

Educational Qualification of Respondents

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
SSCE	246	62.75
BSC/HND	151	37.01
MSC/Ph.D	1	0.25
Total	**398**	**100**

The respondents were mainly undergraduate students of Uniport.

Years in the University

Years	Frequency	Percentage
Below 5 years	246	62.75
5-10 years	151	37.01
10 and above	1	0.25
Total	**398**	**100**

The above table proves that respondents have spent below five years in the University.

Awareness of the 2016 Students' Unrest

Response category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	398	100
No	0	0
Not sure	0	0
Total	**398**	**100**

The table above shows the response of respondents pertaining the awareness of the Uniport students' unrest. Accordingly, 398 respondents said they are aware of the Uniport students' unrest, while none were neither unaware or not sure.

Awareness Pattern

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Mainstream Media	2	0.50
Interaction from friends	9	2.26
Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Whattsapp, Instagram)	387	97.24
All of the above	0	0
Total	**398**	**100**

Information was sought to find out how respondents got to know about the Uniport students' unrest. As indicated in the above table, most of the respondents being 387 or 97.24% said they got to know about the students' unrest through the social media such as twitter, Facebook, Whattsapp or Instagram.

Knowledge of Causative Actions

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	213	53.52
No	185	46.48
Not sure	0	0
Total	**398**	**100**

The data in table above show that 213 respondents representing 53.52% of the respondents know some of the factors that led to the Uniport students' unrest.

Factors that Led to the Unrest (five of the most frequent factors as observed by the respondents)

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Absence of dialogue	302	75.88
Students have no say syndrome	21	5.28
Over zealousness of students	0	0
Poor communication strategy by management	75	18.84
Wrong timing	0	0

The above table unveil that 302 respondents representing 75.88% of the total respondents indicated that

absence of proper dialogue caused the Uniport students unrest in 2016.

"No Fee No Exam" Policy as a Factor in the Crisis

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	347	87.19
No	51	12.81
Not sure	0	
Total	**398**	**100**

The table above reveals the responses of respondents as to whether the 'no fee no exam' policy was a factor in the crisis. Data in the table show that 347 respondents representing 87.19% are of the opinion that the "no fee no exam" policy was a factor in the Uniport students unrest.

Assessment of Corporate Communication Effort of Uniport

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
We are satisfied with management's explanation of issues	75	18.84
Improvement required	302	75.88
Not okay at all	21	5.28
Undecided	0	0
Total	**398**	**100**

According to the data above, 302 of the respondents representing 75.88% say the corporate communication strategies of Uniport require improvement.

Whether the University should continue with its Crisis Communication Strategy

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Improvement required	51	12.81
Not good at all	347	87.19
Undecided	0	0
Total	**398**	**100**

Respondents amounting up to 87.19% (347) do not want the University with its crisis communication strategy.

Corporate Communication Strategy adopted by Uniport during the Crisis Deserve Review

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	312	78.39
No	86	21.61
Not Completely	0	0
Total	**398**	**100**

Respondents insist that the corporate communication strategy adopted by Uniport during the crisis deserve review. This is the view of 78.39% (312) of the total number of respondents.

The University should continue with the way it handles Communication during Crisis

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	59	14.82
To an extent	0	0
No	339	85.18
Total	**398**	**100**

The University according to 85.18% (339) is urged here by respondents not to continue with the way it handles corporate communication during crisis.

Communication should be Feedback Oriented with the Impute of all Parties

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Agreed	267	67.09
Disagreed	32	8.04
Not always	99	24.8
Completely disagree	0	0
Total	**398**	**100**

Research data computed in the table above show the response of the respondents on whether communication should be feedback oriented and all parties have a common understanding and as well reach a point of compromise. For this, 267 respondents mainly agreed.

Friends Perception of Uniport Corporate Posture during Crisis

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Proactice	21	5.3
Reactive	316	79.4
Complascent	18	4.5
Undecided	43	10.8
Total	**398**	**100**

According to 316 respondents representing 79.4% Uniport is mainly reactive according to the table above when issues arise. This is the opinion of the respondents about the view of their friends.

Presentation of Data Generated from Oral Interview
Here, data generated from the oral interview sessions with six selected staff members of the Information, Protocol and Public Relations (IPPR) unit of the University of Port Harcourt who are employees of the university and the once charged with the business of corporate communication were presented. The interview sessions took place differently in their respective offices. Also, in other not to unveil the identities of the audience, so as to foster robust responses from them, the researcher used figures to identify them while the transcribed opinion of the IPPR staff were presented accordingly.

Presentation of Oral Interview Data Generated from Interface with IPPR Staff of Uniport
The views of respondents of IPPR unit in this session came in various dimensions. Particularly, when asked whether respondents think the corporate communications strategy being practiced by Uniport is what a University like Oxford in the UK would have adopted when found in dispute scenario; respondent one said he thinks every society is dynamic and so practices differ. For his part as well, respondent two agreed that what is being done in Uniport could be operational in a University like Oxford in the UK. According to him, the University is currently striving towards best international practices. Quite similar as well were the views of respondent three who insists that Uniport cannot be said to be left behind in the scheme of trends. He said there is nothing special about Oxford, Harvard or any other University that one may wish to cite while stressing that it is only an issue of the mind. Respondent four simply said yes. Also on this lane was respondent five who responded in the affirmative. However, respondent six

expressed discomfort about the comparison of African affairs with the western world, he was frank about his opinion that Uniport is not doing bad in terms of corporate communications and that there is nothing special about Oxford University.

The second oral interview question reflected on the extent at which dialogue is operational when enacting a new policy for University of Port Harcourt. Respondent one said it depends on the context of the policy, that one does not expect management to go negotiating with students after a senate decision. For respondent two, dialogue is an integral part of any forward minded organization and according to him, Uniport is not an exception. He confirmed that dialogue is held in high esteem in the University. Respondent three said dialogue is utilized in Uniport to a large extent and indeed at almost all times. He said the University has its union president (SUG) and so does every constituted body of the University and these representative are constantly engaged by the University. Respondent four only said that Uniport does not joke with dialogue and that the students can testify. Respondent five claimed that the interface the researcher is enjoying with her is a proof that the University is open to dialogue. Respondent six joined bandwagon to say he had been working in the University for over 10 years and that he could attest that there is hardly any stakeholder that is not carried along when enacting a policy.

The third oral interview question sought to know the nature of the corporate communications strategy that is being adopted by management in the resolution of crisis. Respondent one answered with a question on whether corporate communications have types. He said all he knew was that the University's corporate communications is up and doing. Similarly, respondent two admitted that he was not really aware of the types of corporate communications and that he was only transferred from the department of History and diplomacy where he was serving as a secretary.

Respondent four, five and six where as well blank on the concept of corporate communication or its types. However, only respondent three seemed knowledgeable on the types of corporate communication. He said basically there are two types of corporate communications being internal and external. He said that while internal deals with staff, students, contractors, parents etc. external according to respondent three deals with the media, government, banks and the general public. For him, different strategies have to be put in place to reach out to these two segments. He summarily said that there is no one corporate communication that is being utilized by Uniport, stressing that it is context bound.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Field experience show that the respondents of this study is 400 in number although it is actually 398 that returned the questionnaire while six members of staff in the IPPR unit were engaged in an oral interview vis-à-vis the context of the study. The demographic distribution as well showed that 58.8% (234) were males making it the majority while 41.2% (164) were females. The findings showed the highest educational qualification of respondents which was 62.75% (246) for SSCE holders, 37.01% (151) for BSC/HND holders and 0.25% (1) for M.Sc/Ph.D holders.

The researcher observed that 62.75% of respondents had spent below five years in the University of Port Harcourt, 37.01% (151) had spent 5-10 years while 0.25% had spent 10 years and above in the University. On awareness of the Uniport students' unrest, 100% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. However, 0.50% (2) said they got to be aware through mainstream media, 2.26% (9) gained knowledge of the unrest via interaction with friends, while 97.24% (387) say social media was their source of information. The study focused on knowledge of causative actions, here 53.52% (213) said yes, meaning they were aware of what caused the 2016 Uniport students unrest while 46.4% (18) said no.

It was unveiled that 302 respondents representing 75.88% of the total respondents indicated that absence of proper dialogue caused the Uniport students' unrest in 2016. Seventy five respondents constituting 18.84% of the total respondents said poor communication strategy by the University management caused the crisis. Also, 21 respondents being 5.28% are of the opinion that the students "have no say" syndrome is the cause of the crisis. This is in line with the views of Obianyo (2003) who observed that the alarming increase in students' unrest in tertiary institutions have been mostly blamed on heads of institutions because they lack adequate skill and knowledge required for checking and managing students' unrest.

The study reflected on the "no fee no exam" policy, as a factor in the crisis. Here, 87.19% (347) said yes it was a factor while 12.8% (51) said no. This implies it was actually a factor since 87.19% say so. Assessment of corporate communication efforts of Uniport took centre stage where 18.24% (75) said they are satisfied with management's explanation of issues and indeed how they handle corporate communication. Also, 75.88% (302) say it requires improvement while 5.28% (21) say the corporate communication strategy used by Uniport is not good at all.

The study revealed that 59 students being 14.82% of the respondents want the University to continue with the way it handles corporate communication, while (339) students representing 85.18% respondents desire a change in the way and manner communication is handled during crisis. The study also inquired if communication should be feedback oriented with the input of all parties, 267 or 67.09% agreed, 32 or 8.04% disagreed, 99 or 24.8% said not always.

The oral interview here with IPPR staff of Uniport inquired the extent at which dialogue is operational when enacting a new policy for University of Port Harcourt. While respondent1 said it depends on the context of the policy, that management should not be expected to be negotiating with students after a senate decision. Respondent 2 felt dialogue is an integral part of any forward minded organization and Uniport is not an exception. The third respondents as well as all others responded in the affirmative claiming the University practices dialogue.

Following The question inquired about the corporate communication strategy that is being adopted by management in the resolution of crisis, Here, only one respondent was able to mention something meaningful on corporate communication, others either said it is doing fine while some sincerely admitted that they knew nothing about corporate communication and its types. This is in line with the views of Lesencius & Nagy (2015) that suggests communications strategy in crisis situations is beyond a general approach to communication, it belongs to a more complex type of communication that requires specialized trainings and retraining.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, the researcher concludes that the members of staff of the IPPR unit of Uniport are not public relations practitioners. They do not have any basic background in communication studies. The inability of the IPPR unit staff to give an insight on the corporate communication system or strategy the university operates especially during the students' unrest is a serious indictment that should be taken seriously.

Management must work out modalities to ensure majority of students get information first hand from the university either through campus radio or internal-memo. Better still, the university can create an active social media platform and monitor against impersonation.

Again, the university should stop engaging none professionals in the business of its corporate communications and/or IPPR unit as this is perceived based on findings of this study as the mother cause of the 2016 students' unrest. If there had been professionals in the unit, a proper dialogue framework together with other specialized mechanisms would have been operationalized which would have averted the needless loss of life, destruction of valuables worth millions and distortion of the academic calendar of which the university is yet to recover from till date.

Irrespective of how provoked students may seem, the researcher of the opinion that destruction of properties is now an archaic and obsolete means of expressing grievances. Publicly watching the University dirty linens on a global platform like social media would only depreciate the public perception and by extension destroy the University the desire a certificate from. Hence, exhausting the entirety of all internal conflict resolution mechanisms and exhibiting patience, mutual respect, and civility is highly encouraged.

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