ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN MANAGING ITS RELATIONS WITH ASUU

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Abstract

The continued conflict between the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) requires the need for the Federal Government to employ effective public relations (PR) strategie to facilitate conflict resolution. Using an integrative literature review the study explores existing research on PR strategies, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and government media relations in labour disputes. This study examines the PR approaches used by the government during the 2020 nine-month ASUU strike it assesses effectiveness of these PR strategies in managing stakeholder relations, communication transparency, and crisis response. The Findings reveal that government PR strategies are often inconsistent reactive and lacks transparency, that lead to trust deficit and prolonged conflicts. Also, weak stakeholder engagements, ineffective media management, and the absence of a structured crisis communication framework further exacerbate the problem. Applying Conflict Management Theory and Stakeholder Theory the study argues for transparent, proactive, and strategic PR approaches to foster trust and mitigate conflicts. Recommendations include improved government media relations, structured stakeholder engagement, enhanced crisis management planning, and capacity building in PR for government officials. Implementing these strategies can improve FG-ASUU relations, reduce industrial disputes, and contribute to a more stable higher education system in Nigeria.

Key Words: Communication, Conflict resolution, Labour disputes, Strategic stakeholder, Public relations (PR) strategies.

Introduction

ASUU's relationship with the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) has been tense, with conflicts often arising from unmet agreements, as seen in the ninemonth 2020 strike due to unresolved issues related to funding, allowances, and the controversial Integrated Personnel Payroll and Information System (IPPIS), which ASUU opposed in favour of their proposed University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS) (Oluwagbemisola, Oduola & Babarinde, 2018; Lawal, 2021).

These strikes, while highlighting ASUU's push for educational improvement have disrupted academic progress, affecting students, lecturers, and the economy (Gimba, 2022). A critical issue lies in underfunding, which ASUU argues, has led to deteriorating infrastructure and educational quality (Tulla, 2019). The strained FG-ASUU relationship demonstrates the importance of effective communication and public relations (PR) in conflict resolution (Patterson, 2010). Research emphasises the role of transparency, media engagement, and stakeholder feedback as crucial to managing public perceptions and maintaining credibility (Iweama & Nkamnebe, 2021; Smith & Johnson, 2022).

Government agencies, including the Federal Ministry of Education; Federal Ministry of Labour & Employment, and Federal Ministry of Information & National Orientation, playe vital roles in managing this conflict, with coordinated PR strategies needed to ensure clear, unified

communication and prevent misinformation (Tulla, 2019). This study aims to examine the PR strategies employed by the government during the 2020 strike to assess their effectiveness and suggest improvements for future conflict management.

Conceptual Clarification

Reviewing the key concepts relevant to this study is essential to establish a solid contextual foundation for the research.

Public Relations

The field of public relations recognises the important roles of groups and institutions, with both organisations and their publics having shared interests that need safeguarding for the common good. Asemah, Kente, and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2021) define public relations as the practice of understanding an organisation's purpose and its societal relationships, using planned and sustained efforts to build mutual understanding and trust. The British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) similarly describes it as the deliberate effort to foster mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (National Open University of Nigeria [NOUN], 2014).

Holtz (2020) describes public relations as the strategic management of relationships with audiences to influence business outcomes, emphasising the strategic and goal-oriented nature of PR. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) perspective, as cited in Michaelson et al. (2021), frames public relations as the management of information flow to reach specific audience segments. In addition, Stack (2020), cited in Michaelson et'at. 2021), highlights PR's role in managing an organisation's credibility, trust, and public perception.

Among the definitions provided, the study subscribes to Asemah, Kente, and NkwamUwaoma's (2021) definition of public relations as stated below:

Public relations is the practice of understanding an organisation's purpose and its societal relationships, using planned and sustained efforts to build mutual understanding and trust.

The reasons for choosing this definition is because of its holistic approach. The definition captures the essence of PR as not just a communication tool but a comprehensive practice that involves understanding the organisation's core purpose and its role within society. It acknowledges that PR is about relationships, not just messaging. However, since this study is about relationship between the Federal government of Nigeria and ASUU the definition is appropriet.

The definition gives emphasis on mutual understanding and trust. Trust and mutual understanding are foundational to effective public relations. This definition highlights the two-way nature of PR, where both the organisation and its publics share interests and must work together for the common good. This aligns with modern views of PR as relational and ethical. Hence, the relations between Federal Government and ASUU has to have mutual understanding and trust in order to achieve results that is why the study subscribed to this definition. Given the strained relationship between the Federal Government (FG) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), there is a strong need for public relations efforts to restore understanding an trust between the two parties.

Another reason for the study subscribing to the above definition of public relations is that it noted that PR is not a one-off activity but a continuous, strategic process. This reflects the reality that maintaining positive relationships and reputation requires ongoing effort, not just reactive communication as the Federal Government does in the case of it relations with ASUU.

Crisis/Conflict Management

Fink (2021) defines a crisis as an unexpected, disruptive event that threatens an organisation's reputation, operations, and stakeholder well-being. Crises, often requiring immediate attention, are largely perceptual, violate stakeholder expectations, are yet anticipated, pose major risks to performance, and can result in negative consequences. Fink (1986, as cited in Coombs, 2012, in Rose &

McKinley, 2018) describes a crisis lifecycle with four stages: Prodromal (warning signs), Acute (the crisis occurs), Chronic (damage control), and Resolution (crisis ends).

According to Fearn-Banks (2020), crises, such as labour strikes, natural disasters, or product failures, can disrupt normal operations and significantly impact organisations and their stakeholders. While generally negative, crises sometime help organisations address specific issues beneficially. The ongoing crisis between the Federal Government (FG) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) over strike actions exemplifies a crisis that disrupts education, damages reputations, and impacts workforce development.

O'Keefe (1988) in Hart, (2002) emphasise the need for crisis procedures, highlighting the importance of preparedness in managing incidents like fires or boycotts. Johnson (2022) also supports proactive crisis management, urging organisations to recognise their vulnerabilities and prepare comprehensive crisis plans to protect their reputations. Extending this view, Fink (2013) and Coombs (2011), emphasise crisis prevention, suggesting that identifying and mitigating risks early is essential to avoid escalation.

Overall, crisis management has evolved to focus on both reactive measures and proactive strategies to prevent crises, as discussed by Fearn-Banks, O'Keefe, Fink, and Coombs. Organisations are advised to recognise potential threats, anticipate risks, and develop strategies to address them before they become full-blown crises.

Communication

This refers to the deliberate process of exchanging information, messages, and meanings between the government and its publics, particularly in the context of managing relationships and public perceptions. It is a strategic tool used to shape understanding, build trust, and influence attitudes through planned messaging and interaction channels. In public relations, especially government communication, it involves not only disseminating information but also engaging in dialogue to foster mutual understanding and support for government policies and actions.

In this context, communication is central to the federal government's efforts to manage its relationship with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), particularly during crises such as strikes. Effective communication strategies ensure that messages are clear, consistent, and tailored to various stakeholders to maintain credibility and public trust.

Scholarly perspectives emphasise that government communication is more than just media relations; it involves strategic planning, reputation management, and ongoing engagement to build long-term relationships with citizens and interest groups (Canel & Sanders, 2012). A communication strategy outlines what is said, to whom, how, and when, aligning all messaging with broader government goals to ensure coherence and impact (Emmett, 2024).

Moreover, Park, (2009) says, communication in public relations is not just about broadcasting messages but also about listening and responding, which is crucial in crisis situations to maintain positive government-public relationships. Similarly, Bhattacharya (2025) noted that consistency

and clarity in communication help avoid confusion and reinforce the government's position, which is vital in managing contentious relations such as those with ASUU.

Review of Related Literature

The 2021 study by Oyeyemi and Akpan-Obong examined public relations strategies used to manage conflicts between Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government (FG). Using qualitative methods like interviews and document analysis, the study highlighted key strategies such as proactive communication, transparency, mutual understanding, and the crucial role of social media in conflict resolution. It concluded that a proactive, transparent, and collaborative approach is vital and recommended crisis management plans focusing on communication and collaboration. The study suggested future research on social media's role in such conflicts and noted that including more interviewees or perspectives from both parties could enhance comprehensiveness.

In contrast, the ongoing study under investigation employs a mixed-methods design (quantitative followed by qualitative) to assess public relations strategies during the 2020 and 2022 ASUU strikes. Its objectives include identifying strategies used, evaluating their effectiveness, exploring stakeholder perceptions, assessing government reputation, and analysing government media relations. Expected outcomes are detailed insights into these areas, leading to recommendations for improved public relations, media engagement, stakeholder involvement, reputation management, and prioritising dialogue and negotiation.

Both studies show the importance of public relations in managing government-labour disputes. Oyeyemi and Akpan-Obong focus on communication, transparency, and social media's role in ASUU-FG conflicts, while the ongoing study aims to evaluate strategy effectiveness, perceptions, and media relations to enhance government-ASUU interactions. Together, they offer practical insights for better conflict resolution and stakeholder relations in Nigeria's labour disputes.

The 2020 study by Olubor and Akpomi examined public relations strategies in managing conflicts between ASUU and the Federal Government (FG) in Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods approach with surveys and interviews involving ASUU members, FG officials, students, and stakeholders, the study found that dialogue, trust-building, and effective communication were key to conflict resolution. ASUU was perceived as more transparent and communicative than FG during the disputes. The methodology allowed diverse perspectives but relied on self-reported data, which may introduce bias.

The study concluded that fostering dialogue, trust, and stakeholder involvement is crucial for resolving conflicts and recommended enhanced communication efforts by public relations practitioners. It offered practical insights for managing government-labour disputes effectively.

Conversely, the ongoing study adopts a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to assess public relations strategies used by FG during the 2020 and 2022 ASUU strikes. It aims to identify strategies, evaluate their effectiveness, explore stakeholder perceptions, assess government reputation, and examine media relations' impact. Expected outcomes include detailed recommendations to improve communication, conflict resolution, and government-ASUU relations.

In summary, while Olubor and Akpomi's study highlights the

effectiveness of dialogue and trustbuilding, the current research seeks to deepen understanding of specific strategies, perceptions, and media roles to enhance public relations in managing FG-ASUU conflicts.

The 2020 study by Ogunmakin and Fasugba used a qualitative design with interviews and document analysis to explore public relations strategies in resolving ASUU-FG conflicts at Obafemi Awolowo University. The findings highlighted the importance of effective communication, stakeholder engagement, and appropriate conflict resolution mechanisms. The study emphasised that robust communication channels and proactive stakeholder involvement are key to sustainable conflict resolution and recommended integrating public relations strategies into university conflict frameworks.

Similarly, Oludare and Fashagba (2015) employed a qualitative approach using interviews and focus groups to examine public relations in managing ASUU-FG industrial disputes. Their findings underscored proactive communication, mutual understanding, and trust-building as essential for peaceful resolutions. They recommended establishing collaborative platforms, transparent communication, and crisis management plans to improve conflict management and stakeholder relations.

The ongoing study adopts a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to assess public relations strategies used by the Federal Government during the 2020 and 2022 ASUU strikes. It aims to identify strategies, evaluate effectiveness, explore stakeholder perceptions, assess government reputation, and examine media relations. Expected recommendations include prioritising effective communication, stakeholder engagement, media relations, and dialogue.

In summary, while Ogunmakin and Fasugba focus on conflict resolution within a university context using qualitative methods, and Oludare and Fashagba highlight communication and trust in industrial disputes, the ongoing study broadens the scope to government-ASUU relations with a mixed-methods approach. All studies stress the critical role of communication, stakeholder involvement, and strategic public relations in managing ASUU-FG conflicts effectively.

Theoretical Framework

To assess public relations strategies in managing Federal Government (FG) and ASUU relations, two key theories are applied: Stakeholder Theory and Conflict Management Theory.

Stakeholder Theory

The theory Developed by Freeman (1984). This theory emphasises managing relationships between organisations and stakeholders. The theory highlights the need to identify and engage diverse stakeholders (e.g., government entities, academic staff, students, and the public) to address their interests and concerns effectively (Freeman, 2010).

The key Insights of the theory is that, it promotes ethical practices such as transparency and accountability in stakeholder management (Freeman, 2010).It promotes ethical practices such as transparency and accountability in stakeholder management (Harrison & Freeman, 2015). This ethical dimension emphasises fairness, honesty, and social responsibility towards all stakeholders, not just shareholders.

It recognizes the dynamic nature of stakeholder relationships, which require adaptable public relations (PR) strategies to meet evolving demands (Cornelissen et al., 2020; Tang et al., (2021). This highlights the importance of ongoing engagement and

flexibility in managing diverse stakeholder interests.

It encourages a long-term perspective for sustainable conflict resolution and relationship building, fostering enduring value creation and mutual benefit among stakeholders, which supports organisational success and sustainability (TheoryHub, 2020-2025). The theory enables evaluating how PR strategies align stakeholder interests, foster dialogue, and maintain positive relationships.

Conflict Management Theory

This theory was introduced by Thomas and Kilmann (1974). The theory focuses on understanding and resolving conflicts within organisations or between entities. It is relevant to this study as it provides tools for analysing the causes of conflicts in FG-ASUU relations, such as differences in policies or resource allocation (Smith & Johnson, 2020). The main insights of this theory is that it offers strategies like collaboration, compromise, or competition to resolve conflicts effectively (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

It highlights the role of communication techniques like active listening and constructive dialogue in conflict resolution (Wang & Chen, 2021). The theory helps assess how PR strategies like stakeholder engagement and negotiation mitigate tensions and foster productive relationships.

Integrating these frameworks, the study evaluates PR strategies' effectiveness in managing conflicts, promoting ethical practices, adapting to dynamic relationships, and achieving sustainable resolutions.

Methodology

This study utilised an integrative literature review as its research design to provide nsights on the topic by examining relevant existing literature. An integrative literature review is a method that combines previous empirical and theoretical research to create a thorough understanding of a specific phenomenon or crisis issue (Grant & Booth, 2009; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). As noted by Christmal and Gross (2017), the integrative literature review is a nonexperimental method where researchers systematically assess, summarise, and interpret findings by conducting a structured search, organising, and thematically analysing prior qualitative and quantitative research on the topic.

This approach suits this study well, as it allows the researcher to objectively examine both past and current literature in order to assess PR Strategies used by the Federal Government of Nigeria to manage its relationship with ASUU. This objective review aids in highlighting gaps in the existing research and offers potential directions or recommendations for future studies on the topic.

Discussion

The reviewed literature collectively underscores the critical role of public relations (PR) strategies in managing and resolving the protracted conflicts between the Federal Government of Nigeria (FG) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Across various studies, including those by Oyeyemi and Akpan-Obong (2021), Olubor and Akpomi (2020), Ogunmakin and Fasugba (2020), and Oludare and Fashagba (2015), there is a consistent emphasis on proactive communication, transparency, trustbuilding, stakeholder engagement, and effective dialogue as foundational strategies that facilitate conflict resolution and foster mutual understanding between the parties.

The qualitative and mixed-methods approaches employed in these studies enrich the understanding of the dynamics at play, revealing that social media and government media relations have become

increasingly significant in disseminating information and shaping public perceptions during conflicts. These findings highlight the evolving nature of PR strategies in the digital age and the necessity for government agencies to harness these platforms effectively.

Moreover, the literature points to the importance of collaborative platforms and crisis management plans to preempt and manage industrial disputes, suggesting that the absence of such mechanisms contributes to the recurring nature of ASUU-FG conflicts. The studies also reveal that ASUU is often perceived as more transparent and communicative compared to the government, which impacts the government's reputation and stakeholder trust.

Contextual analyses, such as the historical and socio-political examination by Odiagbe (2012), further deepen the understanding by situating these conflicts within broader systemic issues like underfunding, political interference, and institutional weaknesses. This aligns with findings from recent analyses (e.g., the 2015-2024 conflict reviews) that identify funding deficits, failure to honor agreements, and policy disagreements (e.g., IPPIS implementation) as core triggers for strikes.

The ongoing study's mixed-methods design, aiming to assess PR strategies' effectiveness, stakeholder perceptions, government reputation, and media relations, is well positioned to build on these insights. It promises to provide a more comprehensive evaluation that integrates quantitative measures with qualitative depth, potentially addressing limitations noted in earlier studies such as small sample sizes or single-perspective biases.

The findings from the reviewed literature reveal several key insights regarding public relations (PR) strategies in managing the FG-ASUU conflicts:

Proactive communication, transparency, trust-building, and stakeholder engagement are consistently identified as foundational PR strategies that facilitate conflict resolution and foster mutual understanding between ASUU and the Federal Government.

The use of social media and government media relations has become increasingly important for disseminating information and shaping public perceptions during conflicts, reflecting the evolving nature of PR in the digital era.

There is a recognised need for collaborative platforms and crisis management plans to preempt and effectively manage industrial disputes, as the absence of such mechanisms contributes to the recurring nature of ASUU-FG conflicts. ASUU is often perceived as more transparent and communicative compared to the Federal Government, which negatively affects the government's reputation and stakeholder trust.

The conflicts are deeply rooted in systemic issues such as underfunding, political interference, failure to implement agreements, and policy disagreements (e.g., IPPIS), which exacerbate tensions and lead to strikes. Effective conflict resolution requires integrity and honouring of agreements by both parties to build lasting peace and trust.

Different conflict management strategies exist (e.g., avoiding, forcing, compromising, collaborating), but the Nigerian Government often adopts less effective approaches like avoiding or forcing, whereas collaborative strategies are recommended for long-term, mutually beneficial solutions. The studies highlight the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and collective bargaining as key mechanisms for resolving disputes and improving university administration and staff effectiveness.

The ongoing study's mixed-methods design is expected to provide a more comprehensive assessment of PR strategies, stakeholder perceptions, government reputation, and media relations, potentially addressing gaps such as limited sample sizes or single perspective biases found in earlier research.

Finally, the findings emphasise that effective PR strategies, centered on communication, transparency, collaboration, and media engagement, are indispensable for managing and resolving FG-ASUU conflicts, with broader implications for improving government/labour relations in the education sector in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The Federal Government of Nigeria's (FG) public relations (PR) efforts in managing its relationship with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) reveal a complex, ongoing conflict marked by frequent strikes and deep-rooted challenges. Studies show that while PR is vital for shaping perceptions and resolving conflicts, FG's approach has often been inconsistent, reactive, and lacking transparency and coordination. This has led to a significant trust deficit, prolonging disputes and harming Nigeria's higher education.

Key findings stress the need for proactive communication, transparency, trustbuilding, and inclusive stakeholder engagement as essential for effective conflict management. The growing influence of social media and government media relations in shaping public opinion highlights the need for strategic, coordinated communication. The lack of structured crisis communication frameworks and collaborative platforms worsens the cyclical nature of FG-ASUU conflicts.

These conflicts are embedded in broader systemic issues such as underfunding, failure to honour agreements, political interference, and policy disputes (e.g., IPPIS vs. UTAS), which complicate resolution and fuel mistrust. Theoretical frameworks like Stakeholder and Conflict Management Theories offer useful perspectives for developing ethical, adaptive, and sustainable PR strategies.

In conclusion, FG must adopt strategic, transparent, and collaborative PR approaches to manage its relationship with ASUU and reduce industrial disputes. This includes improving media relations, institutionalising stakeholder platforms, creating crisis management plans, and building PR capacity within government agencies. These steps are crucial for restoring trust and fostering a stable, productive higher education sector.

Recommendations

i.   Adopt Collaborative Conflict Resolution: Prioritise collaboration in negotiations to build trust and sustainable solutions addressing root causes rather than temporary fixes.

ii.   Enhance Proactive, Transparent Communication: Maintain consistent, honest communication and use social media strategically to share accurate information and counter misinformation.

iii. Establish Formal Platforms and Crisis Plans: Create continuous dialogue platforms and crisis management frameworks to identify and resolve issues early.

iv.   Strengthen Collective Bargaining and Mediation: Use independent mediators to ensure neutrality and improve negotiation outcomes.

v.   Prioritise Timely Funding for Education: Honour financial commitments to improve university infrastructure and working

conditions, addressing ASUU's core concerns. vi. Promote Integrity and Accountability: Both parties should honour agreements; independent monitoring bodies can oversee implementation to prevent breaches. vii. Engage Stakeholders Inclusively: Involve students, administrators, and the public to foster shared understanding and collective ownership of solutions.

viii.   Regularly Assess Reputation and Media Relations: Invest in evaluating government reputation   and media strategies to identify improvements and adapt communication.

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