



Public Relations Alignment with Host Community Expectations in Employment: Evidence from Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus

Patricia Nse Udofia¹; Philomena Effiong Umoren (Ph.D)² & Mbuk Mboho³

^{1,2&3}Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Communication and Media

Studies, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria.

udofiapatricis2@gmail.com¹; philoumoren12@gmail.com² &

mbuk_mboho@yahoo.com³

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Abstract

Public relations (PR) strategies play a critical role in managing conflicts between universities and their host communities, particularly during employment-related crises. This study examined the extent to which the PR strategies of Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU), Obio Akpa Campus, align with the needs, interests, and expectations of the host community in conflicts arising from the non-employment of community indigenes. Anchored in Excellence Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods research design. A sample of 322 respondents was drawn from the Obio Akpa host community using Philip Meyer's sampling formula. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews and analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings reveal a marked misalignment between institutional PR strategies and host community expectations, particularly in areas of transparency, inclusiveness, and feedback.

Key challenges undermining effective PR implementation include poor communication, trust deficits, political interference, and limited stakeholder participation. The study concludes that without deliberate alignment of PR strategies with host community expectations, employment-related conflicts are likely to persist. It recommends participatory communication frameworks, enhanced policy transparency, and sustained dialogue as pathways to sustainable conflict resolution.

Keywords: Public Relations Strategies, Employment Conflict, Stakeholder Expectations, University–Community Relations, Conflict Resolution.

Introduction

Universities occupy a unique position within their host environments, functioning simultaneously as centres of knowledge production, employment generation, and socio-economic development. Their legitimacy, stability, and effectiveness therefore depend largely on the quality of relationships they maintain with surrounding communities. Central to this relationship is communication, which facilitates mutual understanding, expectation management, and conflict mitigation (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Nwosu, 2017).

In the Nigerian context, host communities often expect universities located within their localities to provide employment opportunities, infrastructural development, and social inclusion (Ekanem & Eyo, 2018). Employment-related issues are particularly sensitive because they directly affect livelihoods and social recognition. When such expectations are unmet or poorly communicated, conflicts frequently emerge, not necessarily because of unfavourable policies but due to deficiencies in communication processes and engagement mechanisms (Obi, 2021).

At Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus, employment-related grievances, especially the non-employment of host community indigenes in the security department, have generated recurring tensions. Although the university has adopted PR strategies such as meetings, consultations, and dialogue with community leaders, persistent conflict suggests a misalignment between institutional communication



strategies and host community expectations. This study therefore investigates whether the university's PR strategies align with community expectations and identifies the challenges limiting their effective implementation.

Statement of the Problem

University–host community relations in Nigeria are often strained when community expectations conflict with institutional policies, particularly regarding employment opportunities. At AKSU, Obio Akpa Campus, the non-employment of host community indigenes in security roles has repeatedly triggered discontent and tension. Despite the presence of PR interventions such as community engagement and outreach programmes, conflicts persist. This situation suggests that existing PR strategies may not adequately reflect host community expectations or address structural and operational barriers to effective implementation. This study therefore interrogates the alignment of PR strategies with host community expectations and the challenges affecting their effectiveness.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To determine whether the university's PR strategies align with the needs, interests, and expectations of the Obio Akpa host community during employment-related crises.
- ii. To examine the key factors affecting the effective implementation of PR strategies in resolving conflicts arising from the non-employment of Obio Akpa indigenes in the security department.

Literature Review

Public Relations and University–Host Community Relations

Public relations is widely conceptualised as a strategic management function that builds and sustains mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics (Cutlip et al., 2019). Within higher education institutions, PR serves as a bridge between universities and their host communities, fostering cooperation, legitimacy, and peaceful coexistence (Aina, 2020).

Studies in Nigeria indicate that host communities evaluate universities not only by academic output but also by their responsiveness to local socio-economic needs,

particularly employment opportunities (Ekanem & Eyo, 2018). Where communication is weak or exclusionary, grievances intensify, as communities perceive institutional silence as neglect (Nwosu, 2017).

Stakeholder Expectations and PR Strategy Alignment

Stakeholder theory posits that organisations must recognise and balance the interests of all groups affected by their operations to maintain legitimacy (Freeman, 1984). Host communities are primary stakeholders, contributing land, security, and social acceptance. Employment expectations, especially for non-academic roles, are therefore central to perceptions of fairness and inclusion (Adewale & Afolabi, 2020).

Effective PR alignment requires two-way communication that enables mutual understanding and adjustment of expectations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Empirical studies indicate that universities adopting participatory communication mechanisms experience reduced conflict intensity (Obi, 2021), whereas one-way or post-decision communication often exacerbates dissatisfaction (Akpan & Ukpong, 2022).

Employment-Related Conflicts

Employment-related conflicts are particularly volatile because they combine economic deprivation with symbolic exclusion. Robbins (2005) defines conflict as a process in which one party perceives that another has negatively affected something it values. In host communities, gaining access to employment signifies not only an economic opportunity but also a form of social recognition.

Poor communication of recruitment criteria, timelines, and constraints often escalates grievances; even when institutional policies are procedurally sound (Edegoh, 2019). Thus, many employment disputes stem from communication failure rather than policy failure (Mullins & Christy, 2013).

Challenges in PR Strategy Implementation

Structural and operational challenges frequently undermine PR effectiveness in Nigerian universities. Bureaucratic rigidity, hierarchical decision-making, weak feedback mechanisms, and cultural disconnects limit stakeholder engagement (Fatile



& Adejuwon, 2011; Asemah, 2020). Trust deficits further erode the credibility of PR efforts, making conflict resolution more difficult (Agbo & Ijeoma, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Excellence Theory

The Excellence Theory of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002) argues that organisations achieve effectiveness when communication is strategic, participatory, and symmetrical. The theory emphasises two-way symmetrical communication as the most ethical and effective model for building mutual understanding between organisations and their publics.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) conceptualises organisations as embedded in networks of interdependent relationships. In PR practice, this implies recognising host communities as critical stakeholders whose expectations must be incorporated into institutional decision-making processes.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey research design complemented by in-depth interviews. The population comprised residents of Obio Akpa Community in Oruk Anam Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, estimated at 2,640 based on the 2006 census. Using Philip Meyer's sample size determination table as cited in Akarika et al. (2021), a sample size of 322 respondents was selected through multistage sampling.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, while interviews provided qualitative insights. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used for data analysis, and chi-square tests examined relationships between variables. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using explanation-building techniques.

Findings

Table 1: Extent to Which the PR Strategies Adopted by the University Have Reduced Tension between the Host Community and the Institution

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total Score	N	3.0 WMS	Decision Rule
1	The PR strategies adopted by the university have reduced tensions between the host community and the institution.	69	157	60	36	903	322	2.80	Negative/ Rejected
2	Conflicts rising from the non-employment of indigenes have been effectively addressed by the university	53	140	68	51	819	322	2.54	Negative/ Rejected
3	The university's PR strategies promote peaceful co-existence with	68	180	44	30	930	322	2.88	Negative/ Rejected

	the host community								
4	Conflicts related to employment significantly in recent years	57	154	62	49	863	322	2.68	Negative/ Rejected
5	The host community trusts the university's conflict resolution approaches	53	158	66	44	862	322	2.67	Negative/ Rejected

Source: Field Survey, 2025

According to Table 1, Statement 1 shows with a WMS of 2.80 that the university's PR strategies have not reduced tensions between the institution and the host community. This result indicates that there are lingering perceptions of unresolved grievances. This implies the university's efforts may not yet have fully addressed employment-related disputes, particularly concerning security recruitment. Statement 2 reveals that with a WMS of 2.54 the university has not effectively resolved conflicts stemming from the non-employment of indigenes. This demonstrates that the non-inclusion of Obio Akpa indigenes in the security department remains a contentious issue, suggesting that existing PR strategies may lack direct responses to community employment demands. A more open hiring policy could make it much easier to settle disputes. Statement 3 illustrates with a WMS of 2.88 that the university's PR strategies do not contribute to peaceful coexistence with the host community. This highlights that, despite the PR-driven engagement mechanism, the overall relationship remains unstable due to some outstanding employment-related groups. Statement 4 reveals with a WMS of 2.68 that employment-related conflicts have not decreased in recent years. This finding suggests

that the non-employment of Obio Akpa indigenes continues to fuel disputes. Finally, Statement 5 revealed, with a WMS of 2.67, respondents' distrust in the university's conflict resolution processes. This highlights a trust deficit between the university and the host community, likely driven by perceived exclusion in employment decisions.

Table 2: Strategies Adopted Aligns With the Needs and Expectations of Community Members Concerning Employment Worsens Conflict

Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total Score	N	3.0 WMS	Decision Rule
The university considers the needs and interests of the Obio Akpa community in employment decision	45	144	76	57	821	322	2.54	Negative/Rejected

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 shows with a WMS of 2.54 respondents disagree the university considers the needs and interests of the Obio Akpa community when making employment decisions.

Table 3: Challenges Affecting the Effective Implementation of PR Strategies in Resolving Conflicts Related to Non-Employment of Obio Akpa Indigenes in the Security Department of AKSU

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Total Score	N	3.0 WMS	Decision Rule
1	Limited funds hinder the implementation	38	51	75	158	613	322	1.90	Negative/Rejected

	of effective PR strategies								
2	Poor communication between the university and the community worsens conflict	112	180	20	110	1,038	322	3.22	Positive/ Accepted
3	Lack of trust between the host community and the university affects conflict resolution	114	176	20	12	1,036	322	3.21	Positive/ Accepted
4	Political interference influences decision on the employment of security personnel	169	110	20	23	1,069	322	3.31	Positive/ Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2025

From the finding in Table 3, Statement 1 reveals with a WMS of 1.90 respondents do not believe that limited funding poses a major challenge to implementing effective PR strategies. Statement 2 indicates with a WMS of 3.22 that poor communication between the university and the host community exacerbates conflicts. This highlights a communication gap in the university's conflict resolution framework. Statement 3 reveals with a WMS of 3.21 that a lack of trust between the university and the host

community hampers conflict resolution efforts. Trust deficiency appears to be a central obstacle in achieving mutually beneficial solutions, especially regarding security staff recruitment. Finally, Statement 4 shows that with a WMS of 3.31, political interference plays a role in determining employment decisions for security personnel. This finding suggests that external political pressures may undermine transparency and fairness in the recruitment process.

Discussion

Alignment of PR Strategies with Community Expectations

Findings indicate that the PR strategies of AKSU, Obio Akpa Campus, do not sufficiently align with the needs and expectations of the host community regarding employment in the security department. The low weighted mean score (2.54) suggests that community members feel excluded from employment-related decision-making processes. Although dialogue exists, it has not translated into perceived fairness or inclusion.

These findings align with Etuk and Ekanem (2021) and Okafor and Umeh (2020), who argue that PR strategies in Nigerian universities often prioritise image management over tangible socio-economic outcomes. The results, however, contradict Eze and Akpan (2019), who suggest that sustained engagement alone is sufficient to align institutional policies with community expectations.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings challenge stakeholder theory, which advocates balancing organisational objectives with stakeholder expectations (Freeman, 1984). The observed misalignment undermines trust and perpetuates conflict.

Challenges Affecting PR Implementation

The study identifies poor communication, trust deficits, and political interference as major constraints. Contrary to popular assumptions, funding was not considered a significant barrier. These findings reinforce the Excellence Theory's emphasis on symmetrical communication and stakeholder participation as prerequisites for effective conflict resolution (Grunig et al., 2002).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that the ongoing employment-related conflicts at AKSU, Obio Akpa campus, stem primarily from a misalignment between PR strategies and the expectations of the host community. Communication efforts that fail to address fundamental socio-economic concerns are inadequate for achieving sustainable conflict resolution. It is therefore recommended that the university should institutionalise participatory communication frameworks, increase transparency in recruitment processes, strengthen feedback mechanisms, and maintain continuous dialogue with host community stakeholders.

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