Communication Strategies for Conflict Management in Select Tertiary Institutions in Edo and Delta States, Nigeria

Kolade Ajilore, PhD
Associate Professor of Communication
Department of Mass Communication
Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria
ajilorekolade@yahoo.com; +2348055134014

Emmanuel E. Akpoveta
Department of Mass Communication
Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria
akposemmeajoma@gmail.com; +2348037424086

Abstract
The study was carried out to determine the conflict communication strategies adopted by Delta State University, Abraka; Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku; University of Benin, Benin-city and Federal Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State. In this study, qualitative research design (in-depth interview) was adopted, while interview guide schedule was used as the instrument of data collection. The data were analysed, using the Yin’s explanation building model. Findings revealed that conflicts in the institutions occur regularly as result of negligence of students’ welfare, poor information network, upward review of tuition fees, delayed response to letters and memo and refusal of management in involving students in decision making, especially on issues that affect them directly. It was recommended that managements or her intermediaries should always adopt good communication strategies in the management of students’ conflicts; welfare of students should be utmost priority and students should be involved in decision making, especially on issues that affect them directly amongst others.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Conflict Communication, Tertiary Institutions, Communication Strategies

Introduction
The tenuous image of the tertiary education sub-system in Nigeria has naturally drawn some perennial concern and debate among stakeholders. The intermittent industrial actions by both academic and non-academic staff together with the occasional, but violent outburst of conflicts between students and management has emasculated the public tertiary institutions and consequently be-smudged of the reputation of Nigerian educational system. Managing conflicts and crises has become synonymous with the operations of public universities and polytechnics in Nigeria. In the views of Akomolafe (2002), conflict is unavoidable in any institution of higher learning. Ajayi & Ayodele (2000) concurred with this view,
as they both described conflictual situations as inevitable. Gillen (2004) buttressed this assertion when he avers that conflict is “normal” and a “usual” component and consequence of man gregarious nature. In light of the foregoing submissions, it could be inferred that no tertiary institution is immune to and can exist without conflict. Garba, Garba & Olarinde (2001) put it succinctly when they observed that conflicts in Nigerian tertiary educational systems have increased since the 1990s.

To Etadon (2013), the target population of universities and by implication polytechnics students and the academic culture create a potentially combustible setting. As youth who are trapped temporarily between puberty and the inception of adulthood, students tend to adopt absolutist principles that are unrestrained by social forces such as career expectations and family pressure (Franzoi, 2000). They are normally prone to protest largely due to their feeling of insecurity and their privileged access to materials that allow them, up close and personal, to experience the imperfections of their immediate community. With considerable energy to dissipate and motivated by an idealistic reformist ideology, students’ resort to violent uprising usually seems a spontaneous option. Motivated by academic freedom, which itself is the hub of freedom of dissent and expression, students see unrest as an extension of their freedom to ventilate their grievances and advance their case for recognition, respect and acceptance by management which then becomes the harbinger for consultation by negotiation with and inclusion in management decision making.

Communication embraces what is referred to as commonality between the source and the receiver (Ajala 2005). It is an interactional and transactional process that adds intellectual value to the participants. Encapsulating facial expression, eye movement, gestures, postures, personal appearance as well as the use of time and space (Ajala, 2005), together with verbal deliveries, communication is usually designed to persuade and usually focuses on attitudinal and behavioural change. Communication strategies used in managing conflicts in tertiary educational institutions are determined to a large extent by particular institution and the nature of the conflict. Just as individuals have their peculiar problems, so also do tertiary educational institutions have their peculiar conflicts. Different tertiary institutions are assumed do employ different strategies in managing student unrest. Communication strategies are designed by an institution’s management based on its resources and interpretation of the situation.

Conflict management is a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflict through constructive solving problems with the resultant effect that behaviour is no longer violent nor attitude hostile (Miller, 2003, p. 8). Francis (2007) contends that conflict management has an ontological basis in human needs and that its denial engenders violent conflicts which can degenerate into violence again. The concept of conflict and its management have led to such
Communication Strategies for Conflict Management in Select Tertiary Institutions in Edo and Delta …

terms as peacemaking, peace enforcement and peace building, peaceful relationship and peaceful co-existence. Therefore, the study investigates the communication strategies employed in managing students-related conflicts in Delta State University, Abraka; University of Benin, Benin-City; Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku and Federal Polytechnic, Auchi.

**Statement of the Problem**

Students’ conflict is a kind of situation in which students are angry and dissatisfied with a particular authority figure and are likely to protest (Tambuwal & Suleiman, 2014). It is characterised by breach of peace and order or understanding between management and students.

Mail, Hugh Ramsbotham, Oliver & Woodhouser (2013) observe that ineffective and poor communication are usually responsible for escalating tension, between students and managements of tertiary educational institutions. In June, 2015, students of the University of Benin went on rampage based on allegation that the governor of the state ordered the demolition of some buildings in Ekenwa Campus of the institution. In February, students of the same University of Benin organised what later escalated into a violent protest over lack of electricity in the institution’s hostel when they were writing their first semester examination. In the neighbouring Delta State, violent conflict erupted in May, 2017 between the management of the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku and students of the institution over management refusal to refund what the students considered to be double payments for JAMB regularisation. And in October 2017, upward review of acceptance fee by management precipitated student unrest that disrupted academic and social activities in Delta State University, Abraka. All these students’ uprising led to the destruction of property and the disruption of normal academic calendar. Conflicts between management and students have always been traced to poor, ineffective and inadequate communication (Ajayi & Ayodele, 2002; Nworgu, 2005; Olaosebikan, 2008; Kurfi, 2008; Oladeinde & Ajibola, 2008). Therefore, this study was motivated by the need to determine the conflict communication strategies employed by University of Benin, Benin-city, Federal Polytechnic, Auchi, Delta State University, Abraka and Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-uku.

**Research Objectives**

The study sought to:

1. Identify the communication strategies employed in managing conflict between managements and students of the select tertiary institutions in Delta and Edo States.
2. Find out the effectiveness of communication strategies employed in managing conflict between managements and students of the select tertiary institutions in Delta and Edo States.

3. Determine the factors that aided the outcome of the communication strategies between managements and students of the select tertiary institutions in Delta and Edo.

4. Ascertaining the extent of information flow between managements and students of the select tertiary institutions in Delta and Edo States.

**Theoretical Framework**

The study employed the frustration-aggressive theory developed by Dollard & Doob in (1939) and was further developed by Miller (1948) and Berkowitz (1969). The theory says that aggression is the result of frustration a person gets when effort to attain a goal fails. Simply put, the theory postulates that once one need are not met, one becomes frustrated and begins to exhibit violence, grievance, aggression and antagonism. Therefore, conflicts between managements and students of tertiary institutions occur when the students’ needs or demands are refused by the management. When expectations of parties in a relationship fail to meet attainment, the tendency is for people to confront one another who they feel or can hold responsible for frustrating their demands. This is in line with part of the findings of the study that conflict between managements and students of tertiary institutions emanates from the inability of an institution’s management to provide basic needs of students such as electricity, water, conducive learning environment, good transportation system within campus, good security system and so on.

**Review of Pertinent Literature**

The place of communication in the management and resolution of conflicts has attracted some deserving scholarly attention. For instance Yusuf (2002) conducted a study using content analysis and concluded that the press, particularly those located in southern Nigeria, reported conflict between management and students of tertiary institutions using a perspective that could escalate tensions. In an attempt to uncover the causes of the conflictual relationship between parties in the university setting, Alabi (2002) was able to use survey research to pinpoint competition for scarce resources, perceived goal incompatibility, struggle for autonomy and academic freedom, management style and differences in value and lifestyles as being responsible for the incessant conflicts plaguing the Nigerian University.

In diagnosing the communication element in conflict situations, Nworgu (2005) concluded that the poor management of communication between school authorities and combative students usually exacerbate relationships during
conflict situations. He concluded based on scientific content analyses of publications and materials exchanged and issued by management and students during student unrest and concluded that such communication strategies were inadequate and ineffective as they left gaps that were filled with rumours and mutual suspicion. The critical role of the mass media in conflict management was again underscored in a study conducted by Kurf, (2008). The study concluded that journalists and media practitioners play a significant role in preventing and managing conflicts between management and students. In a related study, Imoh (2008) concluded based on scientific evidence that media executives trivialise in the coverage the implication of conflicts on the growth and development of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

To determine the adequacy of the public relations mechanism of Nigerian tertiary institutions to conflict management, Igben (2008) carried out an empirical investigation that unfurled findings that suggested many tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria had public relations departments that are ill-equipped to respond to the vagaries of managing conflicts in the ivory towers. This conclusion was further affirmed by the findings of Nwachukwu (2008) that also identified limited human capacity as the bane of public relations in tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria. On the strength of all these, Idowu (2008) admonished parties in tertiary education sub-system to conduct conflict management in a productive manner that would yield mutual satisfaction through the process of persuasion and dialogue to all stakeholders.

Methodology
The study was executed using indepth qualitative interviews. The population of the study was confined to four tertiary educational institutions in Edo and Delta States that experienced students’ uprising between 2015 and the time of the fieldwork. The institutions are University of Benin, Benin City and Federal Polytechnic, Auchi, both in Edo State and Delta State University, Abraka and Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, both in Delta State. Given the limited population and the qualitative approach to the study, total enumeration was used to identify information rich informants in the four institutions.

The informants who were chosen and interviewed, using homogenous sampling technique (Cresswell, 2012) were Deans, student affairs, student affairs officers, public relations officers and the president of the student unions of the institutions with the aid of an interview guide schedule and other recording devices such as tape recorders and a smartphone. The non-numeric data were transcribed for easy content coding and analysis. The transcript was processed through disaggregation and aggregation and the findings are presented below in themes. The data were analysed, using Yin’s (1984) explanation building model.
Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

From the result of the in-depth interview, it is revealed that the management employed different communication strategies in the management of students-related conflicts. For instance, the Dean, Student Affairs of the Federal Polytechnic, Auchi said that the management in most cases use the Student Consultative Welfare Committee (SWAC), the Public Relations Officer of the University of Benin, Benin-City said that the institution employed two ways communication strategies in conflict management between management and students. It is also revealed that managements of the different institutions use circular, letters, memos and social media as communication tools in communicating with the students.

Poor communication, ineffective communication, increase in school fees, negligence of students’ welfare, negative framing of conflict stories in the media amongst others are some of the issues causing conflict between management and students. These findings are in consistent with Nworgu (2005) assertion that that poor management of communication is the cause of conflict between management and student. Students are not allowed to participate in decision-making, especially on issues that affect them. This means that participating in decision making, implementation and evaluation is a proactive approach to conflict management. This finding supports Ineji (2007) argument that management should endeavour to allow students to participate in decision-making, participation in implementation, participation in evaluation and participation in the benefits. Participatory communication as a strategy should be initiated, designed, implemented and evaluated according to the conflict in the particular institution. Based on this, Idowu (2008) however advised management of tertiary institutions to always conduct conflict management in a productive manner in order to give parties in conflict appropriate satisfaction. The findings are in consonance with the theoretical perspective that conflict between management and students of tertiary institutions occur mainly due to neglect of students’ welfare.

The conflicts were managed in different ways by the various institutions managements. The ones that involved lack of water supply and blackout in the hostels were resolved immediately by mobilising water tankers to supply water to the hostels while management ensured that the stand-by plants in the hostels were repaired. As for those who had not paid school fees, management allowed them to write examinations but later separated their booklets pending the payment of school fees. In the case of the conflict involving management and students of Federal Polytechnic, Auchi where the SUG President and Secretary insisted that examination would not hold until elections were held while management insisted that examination must be held before elections, the Institution’s Council in conjunction with Management met and suspended the SUG President and General Secretary. Based on that, the SUG President and
Secretary General petitioned the Ministry of Higher Education, Abuja. The Ministry detailed some of her staff to visit the Institution. When they came to the institution, the Dean of Students’ Affairs tendered the series of letters he wrote to the SUG executive and duly signed for by the Secretary General requesting the union to submit the names of the students to be included in the electoral committee in April in order for elections to be held. Based on the series of evidence tendered by the Dean of Students’ Affairs, the representative of the Federal Ministry of Education reprimanded the SUG President and Secretary General. Their petition was consequently thrown out for lack of merit.

In the case of the conflict in Delta State University, Abraka and its Oleh Campus, the dysfunctional borehole was repaired immediately and electricity was restored by Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN). As for the one regarding increase in school fees by 75 percent, after series of meeting with SUG, the increment was reduced to 43 percent. The conflict involving the management and students of the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku was equally managed effectively. As for the one of CBTE, Management brought Mobile Police men to the Institution and thereafter suspended the CBTE examination for 3 days. The one involving a mobile police man and the Institution which led to the killing of the Rector’s orderly was managed after series of meetings between management, representatives of the Ogwashi-Uku Divisional Police Officer and the deceased’s family. The third one which involved the arrest of a student, whereby the SUG mobilised students to lock students and staff outside, the Commissioner for Higher Education and Management of the institution pleaded with the SUG coupled with the release of the arrested students. The conflict involving management and students of the University of Benin was managed through extensive dialogue spanning into months between management, council representatives and students.

Managements of individual institutions employed different communication strategies to relate with the students. For instance, the University of Benin Management operates an open door policy, a process whereby the SUG Executive meets with management through the office of the Dean of Students’ Affairs on regular basis. According to the public relations officer of the Institution, it has a Facebook page where management relates with students. He cited an issue involving graduating students whose results had problems and the students sent a message to the management through the Facebook page and the issue was rectified.

The Federal Polytechnic, Auchi employed the communication strategies of letter writing, memo and regular meetings with the students from time to time. The essence of the letter writing and memo is for documentation purposes to avoid denial by both parties. The Institution also uses her 94.1 Fm station to disseminate information to the students. According to the SUG President of the Institution, there are speakers mounted in the institution’s hostels through which
information disseminated is received by all the occupants simultaneously. In addition, the management of the institution also employed the use of circular and the Polytechnic Bulletin in relating with the students and the Student Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC).

At the Delta State University, Abraka, the management employs the use of dialogue and diplomacy in relating with the students. In addition, the management uses the Institution’s Bulletin, which usually contains information affecting students’ welfare directly. The information Bulletin which is usually released by the public relations officer of the Institution every Monday is picked up by the Director of Information of SUG. Similarly, the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku management meets with the union leaders regularly. It also uses letter writing, memo, circular and social media. According to the Dean of Students’ Affairs, the Rector of the Institution invites the SUG Executive for a meeting anytime there is an urgent issue that affects the students.

All the respondents said that the communication strategies employed in managing any conflict were determined by the conflict. In order to be acquainted with the communication strategies in managing conflict, the public relations officer of Federal Polytechnic, Auchi said that any time new students union government was elected, the management organises a leadership training for its members. In the same vein, the Dean of Students’ Affairs of the Institution said that as part of strategies in managing conflict, circulars, memos and letters were issued to the students while the Deans and Directors are usually copied to inform students in their Schools and Departments respectively. In addition, the management of the Institution has the phone numbers of the class representatives in case of any emergency.

The public relations officer of the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku said that as part of the communication strategies, the Union leaders have free and easy access to the Chief Executive Office. He further said that they always partner with the management for the smooth and peaceful running of the Institution. In essence, the nature of any conflict determines the communication strategies to be employed. The student affairs officer of Delta State University, Abraka said that the factor that necessitated any communication strategy employed in the institution was always the overriding goal of building and enhancing interactions with the students.

Communication strategies have been able to manage conflicts between management and students effectively. Communication strategies which failed in the past to yield desired results have been modified to achieve better, effective and efficient result. According to the public relations officer of the University of Benin, the Institution always tests her communication strategies before applying them for conflict management. He added that no communication strategy is permanent. Any communication strategy which failed to manage conflict is amended or subjected to change. The students’ affairs officer of Federal
Polytechnic, Auchi said that their communication is very effective. He added that the management did not take a decision on issues affecting the welfare of the students without the input of their representative. The student affairs officer of Delta State University, Abraka said that their communication strategies were able to manage conflicts between Management and students to a reasonable extent.

The institutions employed different means and modes of information dissemination. The officers said that the modes of information dissemination were through the institutions’ bulletins, meetings, circulars, social media, class representatives, institutions’ FM Radio stations, other mass media and so on. All the interviewees said that their management operated open-door policy as far as means and modes of information dissemination were concerned. They all asserted that the means and mode of information dissemination were magnificent. However, the SUG Presidents told the interviewer that at times, the mode or means through which managements disseminate information to the students could be slow due the bureaucratic nature of the information network.

The public relations officer of the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku said that his Institution’s bulletin and DSPG News Magazine which are published monthly coupled with meetings between the Rector, Principal Officers and Union leaders are some of the means or modes through which management relates with the students. On her part, the Students’ Affairs Officer of Federal Polytechnic, Auchi said that major means or modes through which management of her Institution disseminate information to the students were circulars, making announcement in class rooms through class representatives and through the SUG Exco. Similarly, the public relations officer of the Institution said that information was disseminated through the mass media, meetings, circulars and social media. The SUG President of the Delta State University, Abraka asserted that information from management reached the students through the DELSU FM Radio Station domiciled in Mass Communication Department Studio and the Institution’s Bulletin very fast.

Some of the officers said that to a very large extent, students were involved in management decisions, while others, especially the SUG Presidents said that management only involved students in decision-making when the issue affects students directly. For instance, the SUG President of the Delta State University, Abraka said that the management of the Institution did not involve the SUG in decision making on issues which do not affect them directly. On the contrary, the Student Affairs Officer of the Delta State University, Abraka said that students are members of Student Disciplinary Committee. The SUG President of Federal Polytechnic, Auchi said that management of his Institution operated Students’ Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC) where members comprised representatives of Council, Dean of Students’ Affairs, Students’ Affairs Officer, public relations officer and SUG President and Secretary. At SWAC, management and students bring their proposals, deliberate upon them
and at the end decisions are reached. He asserted that such decisions are always beneficial to both parties adding that the SWAC has helped to forestall so many conflicts. The Dean of Students’ Affairs of Federal Polytechnic, Auchi said that students were hardly involved in management decisions adding that management decisions are based on interactions management had with the SUG. However, he said that students were always involved in any discussion with community members as it affects off campus students of the Institution.

All the respondents denied the existence of any barrier to free flow of information between managements and students. The students’ affairs officer of the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku said that though there was no hindrance, there could be slow dissemination of information by some officers. Some of the participants said that the reason for free flow of information between managements and students was based on the fact that if students were not properly informed, there are bound to be conflicts, adding that communication breakdown and ineffective communication were major causes of conflicts between managements and students on campus. On his part, the SUG President of the Delta State University, Abraka said that if the information was urgent, the Dean, Students’ Affairs calls on the SUG President to intimate him with what was happening. The public relations officer of the University of Benin said that sometimes, they encountered some challenges as far as information flow is concerned but such challenges were not insurmountable. He also said at times, the UNIBEN updates which serves as means of information dissemination to the students could be slow and in case of social media, network could fail since network is determined by the network providers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is obvious from the findings that conflicts of different types occur between managements and students of tertiary institutions in Delta and Edo States. These conflicts are aftermath of poor management of communication elements, negligence of students' welfare, poor information network, upward review of tuition fees, lack of involvement in decision-making, inappropriate framing of conflict stories by the media among others. Communication is seen and remains a vital instrument for conflict management between management and students. Based on the the findings, the researchers recommend that:

1. Since all conflicts between the duo revolve round communication, management and all those who act on her behalf should acquaint themselves with the relevant communication strategies in the management and resolution of conflicts between her and the students.

2. Managements should ensure that welfare of students such as electricity, water and so on are given priority at all times. This is because students’
frustration and subsequent display of grievance is based on denial of their needs.

3. Managements should always endeavour to involve students in decision-making, especially on issues that concerned them. It is believed that any decision they take part in will be binding on them as well.

References


