

# ASSESSMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOUTHERN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES AND STUDENTS ON FACEBOOK

AFAMEFUNA CLEMENT ASADU<sup>\*</sup>, JONES GILBERT AYUWO<sup>\*</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This study set out to assess Nigerian universities and students' relationship in the social media age using Facebook Page posts as a means to measure. This study was motivated by the fact that there have been series of protests and demonstrations in the universities in the southern, Nigeria. Three research questions were posed to guide the study. Using the content analysis, data were collected using the coding sheet as the instrument. The purposive sampling method was used to select one university each from the three zones that make up southern, Nigeria. Data were presented in table and mathematical forms. The results show that students comment on the Facebook Page posts of the universities. The study equally found out that the interaction between the students and the university management was poor. Universities used Facebook Page for promotional reasons. It was recommended that the public relations unit every university should post messages that can cause discussion through which the management would know the students' needs and address them early enough.

**KEYWORDS:** Universities, Facebook Page, Relationship Building, Social Media, Public Relations, Engagement.

## BACKGROUND

Every corporate body or organization exists to achieve some set goals and objectives. Some organizations have profit making as their main goal while some are for capacity building (non-profit making) or service provision. At the forefront of organizations with capacity building as their mission is the university. The major goals of a university include teaching, research and development (community service). Through this way, professional workforce which drives the political, social and economic development of any nation is produced and sustained. Redwood-Sawyer (2017) observes that universities exist to

“provide quality education, life-long learning and employable skills so as to contribute to national development and wealth creation” (p.3). Similarly, King (2009) observes that:

University education is seen to be vital for a country's economic competitiveness through improved productiveness, for enhancing social equity, for the sustainability of democratic and citizenship values, and for a nation's social and physical wellbeing while providing individuals with the ability to become upwardly career-mobile and better paid (p.21)

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<sup>\*</sup>Lecturer, Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

**Correspondence E-mail Id:** editor@eurekajournals.com

It is difficult to fathom any nation with a fast growing economy, politics and social order without a firm and strong university educational system. Governments of countries like this spend so much on higher education. Subsequently, universities in these countries have equally undergone some far reaching reforms and changes where universities are positioned as producers and marketers of knowledge through research. In supporting the foregoing, Mulinge, Arasa and Wawire (2017) note that “universities have undergone some transformations including rapid expansions of student enrolments and diversity in the composition of students, a relative decrease in public funding, increasing importance of research and innovation in the knowledge-based economy” (p.43-44).

No university can meet up with these new demands without the cooperation, mutual understanding and harmonious relationship between the university management and the stakeholders—mainly the students. In other words, the university management should build a relationship with students. Organizations build relationship by sharing beneficial and relevant information through open and trustworthy dialogue (Heath and Coombs, 2006). That is, the management should communicate the programmes and policies of the university to the students and the public and at the same time offers them the opportunity of response or reply. This simply means public relations. Simply put, Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron (2000) define public relations as “a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics” (p. 3). Lack of public relations has caused unwarranted crisis and protests which has affected the image and positioning of some Nigerian universities and students both locally and globally.

Conscious of the impact of public relations on organizational image, universities in Nigeria like

other organizations have public relations units. Subsequently, they no longer use only house organs such as newsletters, circulars, hand bills, notice boards or the mass media to pass certain information to the students and public, but have advanced to the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, among others.

The stepping out of many organizations to embrace the social media marks the end of internal circulation of information to a public scale. Agbo and Asadu (2016) observe that one good thing about the use of social media in public relations is that “a person can send messages through any mobile communication device from any part of the world and get (most times) instant response” (p.201).

In their views, Pavlik & Dozier (1996) note that “public relations professionals, journalists, and advertisers use the new technologies to work more effectively, faster, and more efficiently, and reduce costs in the public relations practices” (p.12). It is because of this that many universities in Nigeria operate Facebook page. Facebook Page is distinct from other online communities in that it is, at once, a community of users and the public face (image) of a figure or an organization, enabling that person or group to directly communicate with users (Facebook, 2012). Users can get connected to an organization through Facebook by liking the page. Once that is done, the user gets access to the messages posted by the organization and through the timeline of the organization the user can make contributions or ask questions on any matter the organization can be concerned with.

It is expected that as universities in Nigeria operate Facebook pages there would be reduction in the stress students and prospective ones pass through to get information or clarifications on certain critical issues that could cause crisis. In other words there would be a reduction in the protests and demonstrations in Nigerian universities if the Facebook Page

communication is effective. With the high number of students in Nigerian universities it would be a huge task to address or attend to each student's case in the office. Facebook page, no doubt, has come-in handy in treating student's queries even before some of them are raised, but it would be wrong for an institution to be on an interactive platform such as Facebook and people are finding it difficult to understand some issues; a situation that has led to series of protests in some schools in the recent past. Of what relevance is being on Facebook as a corporation if such corporation would not interact, answer or respond to people's concerns?

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the themes of the posts on Nigerian universities' Facebook pages?
2. To what extent do users comment on the universities Facebook pages?
3. To what extent are the universities Facebook pages engaging?

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs two-way symmetric communication flow model/theory which was developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) in their book: *Managing publicrelations*. The model sees public relations as a two-way practice. Crunig (2001) notes that the model involves "dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviours of both the organization and publics" (p.12).

Symmetrical model provides a common ground for discussion where both the organization and the public are in a position to change attitude and behaviour due to understanding and acceptance of each other's views. The discussion produces balanced effects. Tench and Yeomans (2009) note that two-way symmetric communication "aims to generate mutual understanding –the two-way communication process should lead to changes in

both the public's and the organization's position on an issue" (p.150).

Social media platforms make organizations more visible to a wider public. The interactive nature of the social media allows people to communicate easily and cheaply too with an organization. In other words, two-way symmetrical communication reduces the distance and gap between an organization and its publics. Agbo and Asadu (2016) note that "two-way symmetry does not persuade people to support a programme or show goodwill to a corporation, but it creates an avenue to allow people participate or contribute to how the organization can solve their problems" (p.206).

### SOCIAL MEDIA AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Social media emerged through the upgrade of the internet to web 2.0 which makes it interactive. Motion, Heath and Leitch (2016) note that "social media not only give voice to the voiceless, but also allow corporate, media and governmental organizations the opportunity to 'narrow' cast messages to quite small, but important populations... that could ask questions" (p.8). Social media are platforms which give ordinary people the opportunity to share ideas, information with greater spread and effect. In the views of Wilkinson (2012) "social media have provided greater transparency in politics and current events, giving ordinary people a voice in what is happening around them and in what directly affect their lives" (p4).

The interactive nature of the social media has made it apt for establishing and maintaining a relationship. At the core of public relations activities is relationship building. Before now, relationship building can be very costly as it could involve activities that span from ordinary information dissemination, facility visit to corporate social responsibility. Lipschultz (2015) observes that "emphasis is moving from press

releases and traditional media relations to 'shareable' online content with a relatively new interest in the direct reach of a message" (p.69).

The public relate with an organization in accordance with their perception of such organization. This perception over time culminates in the image, reputation and identity of such organization. Organisations communicate basically to influence public perception. Lowensberg (2009) notes that organizations communicate to "proactively reduce the gap between how the various internal and external publics of organization view it and how the organization would like to be viewed by those publics"(p.239). This communication takes place in many forms. Even when an organization decides not to talk, it is still communication. On this, Lowensberg (2009) argues that "just by their existence, organisations portray and send messages through unintentional elements to their various stakeholders –and it is those messages that influence the stakeholders' perception of the image of the organization" (p.242).

Presence on a social media platform presents an organization in two forms –its office and its personality. While organizations physically exist at a place, social media has reduced the distance between it and its customers or publics. Similarly, it is not likely that a company would behave differently from how it behaves online. Online image translates to offline image. That is why companies use the same name, logos, and address in both offline and online presence. Agbo and Asadu (2016) observe that "corporate image leads to reputation which does not only come from the appreciation of company logos and name, but also the way the organization interacts or communicates with its various publics". Communication is another way to identify an organization. An organization that communicates is easily recognized and patronized by many people.

Social media are the newest opportunity for an organization to connect and communicate with its various publics. The use of social media in public relations goes beyond information dissemination to full interaction with the aim of understanding and treating the request of followers. Ford (2016) observes that "corporations are on social media for visibility in business. New means of communication have arisen which enable companies to more directly tell their stories, show their expertise and passion, listen to those they seek to reach and engage in two-way communication". This type of interaction is what reduces or eliminates misunderstanding between an organization and its various publics.

## **FACEBOOK PAGE AND FANS ENGAGEMENT**

Facebook is the most popular social media platform. There exist sub-communities on Facebook of which Page is one of them. Most organizations and corporations have Facebook Page which represents their image or face. It is where the organization posts all its information to the fans and equally responds to issues raised. Wilson (2012) corroborates this by saying that "Pages are used to engage with fans by publishing interesting and relevant content to their community and engage them in two-way dialogue" (p.61). Two-way dialogue indicates that the organization listens to the people.

Engagement is the interaction generated by the Page administrator which often leads to comments, likes and shares from the fans. Engagement is the degree to which a company succeeds in creating an intimate long-term relationship with the customer or external stakeholder. The term "engagement" is sometimes used to describe customer marketing, loyalty, satisfaction and retention practices. Engagement is also seen as a way to create customer interaction and participation.

(<http://graphics.eiu.com>). Carter (2013) notes that:

‘Likes’ on Facebook Page posts increase fan’s desires to buy a product and equally recommend it to another. As an administrator of that page you lead the conversation, you hear what they like and dislike and you gain intelligence. When you post into people’s news feed every comment and like proves that people still see you and you are still relevant to them. These happy and vocal fans will fight back against critics, creating a fan page immune system that repels brand attacks (p.5-6)

The foregoing shows that engagement is the heart of Facebook Page. Any Page that is not engaging might be creating an image problem for the organization as people would perceive the organization as being arrogant. Facebook Page is actually ‘putting the public back in public relations’ (Solis and Breakenridge) through engagement. Engagement tells you a lot about your audience - which types of content they’re interested in and by default, everyone can comment on and like your public posts, even those not following you ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)).

Wilson (2012) reveals that while “Facebook can be a great way to build and engage communities of advocates, it can also be the source of negative sentiment that damages a brand. People can directly comment on and even attack an organisation’s Facebook page”. (p.67). In other words, an organization can audit itself through the type of comments people drop on their timeline.

McCorkindale (2010) conducted a quantitative content analysis of 2008 Fortune 50 companies Facebook pages to assess how they used Facebook to engage customers. The study analysed 55 Facebook pages to determine what was posted or published about the company. Among other results, the findings from the study indicated that a good number of companies were

using Facebook as a channel for disseminating information. That is, the communication on the Facebook page was generally one-sided, resembled a monologue and thus, neglected the two-way, relationship building potential of Facebook.

Similarly, Charbonnet (2012) in his study titled, “From the Viewbook to Facebook: A content analysis of universities’ Facebook posts”. The main objective was of the study was to measure organization-public relationships. A total of 709 posts of 25 universities were coded. It was found that all the universities were not interactive, but used their Pages for public information mainly.

## **UNIVERSITY AS A BRAND**

Every organization is known with something and for something; that with which a product or an organization is known is its brand. Brand has to do with the name, mark, sign, logo or symbol a product, service or an organization is known with. Beyond the physical marks, an organization can be known by its behaviour or attitude to people or issues. Brand exists in people’s mind and it is always called up each time the name of the product or organization is mentioned. That is why Blackett (2009) contends that “name is the most important element of the brand as its use in language provides a universal reference point” (p.15).

There are different universities providing similar services, but they all exist as different brands in the public minds. As a brand the way each university renders its services and treats its staff, actual and potential students matters. Brand is the impression people hold about a product or an organization and not what an organization does to itself. Students are both the product and consumer of what a university produces. Universities engage in social media to reach numerous people to give information or showcase the programmes of the university. Universities are international brands and as such

any cross border means of communication is encouraged to attract both local and foreign prospective students. Foreign studentship is a huge source of income to many universities in the United Kingdom, Ghana and South Africa.

The ranking of universities has corroborated the fact that universities are brands. The ranking has made universities to behave in certain ways to gain good image and identity which will enhance students' enrolment and gifts from donors. Alessandri, Yang and Kinsey (2006) remind us that "a university's identity is its strategically planned and purposeful presentation of self which includes the university's public behavior in order to gain a positive image in the minds of the public" (p.168). Similarly, employers of labour pay attention to the school image one attended. This impression is not unconnected with the perception of such school by the employers. The way universities respond to and treat their students and general public may have effect on how their products would be regarded and treated by others.

Miller and Miur (2004) argue that brands are judged by actions. Everything a company does has the potential to impact the brand" (p.4) To Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) the most important factor in delivering the values of any university is student satisfaction. Students would ultimately be the marketing tool for any university by providing word-of-mouth recommendations and thus promoting the values of the university as a whole.

## **THE PLACE OF STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE**

University is an institution of higher learning where degrees are awarded to successful students who completed and passed all the courses they offered. The degrees are awarded in character and in learning. The word university is taken from Latin *univeritas magistrorum et scholarium* which is interpreted to mean

community of teachers and scholars (Ponnusamy and Pandurangan, 2014). This community of teachers and scholars are made up of the teaching, non-teaching, administrators and students.

University has a form of governance to guide relationship in the community in order to achieve peace and development. Governance according to the World Bank (2000) "is the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development and includes the capacity of governments to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions" (p.38). Specifically, university governance involves "the framework of rules and practices by which management ensures accountability, fairness and transparency in the institution's relationship with all its stakeholders, such as regulation agencies, students and faculty" (Task Force on University Education and Society 2000).

Involving students in the governance of the university is to reflect the democratic nature of higher institutions. Students are a major stakeholder in the university even though their residency is transient. Protests, according to Luescher-Mamashela (2005) as cited by Mulinge, Arasa and Wawire (2017) is the informal means students employ to participate in university governance. The authors go further to say that "collaborative governance is essential if universities are to attain their visions, missions and goals. For students to effectively participate in the governance of their institutions, student leadership should be involved in all major decisions and policy issues affecting the university" (p.53).

Students make contributions in the university governance through their union/associations or student affairs and services. But today, the emergence of social media has affected students interest in what happens in the university. They have become more interested in what happens

around them and have reduced their trust in their leaders. They now seek information and interpretation from the university's social media platforms instead of their leaders.

### METHODOLOGY

This work adopted a content analysis. Krippendorff (2013) notes that content analysis "entails a systematic reading of a body texts, images, and systematic matter, not necessary from an author's or user's perspective" (p10).

The population of the study was made up of the Facebook Pages of the 13 Federal Government

universities in the southern Nigeria from where one university from the three zones was selected using simple random sampling thus: East, NnamdiAzikiwe University Awka (NAU) with a total likes of 10,828; West, University of Lagos (UNILAG) with a total of 21,013 likes and South-south, University of Port Harcourt (UNIPOINT) with 59,470 likes. Those that had multiple Facebook pages, the one with the highest number of likes which is always indicated as the official Page was selected. Units of analysis were timeline posts and comments. The timeline posts were only generated by the universities' Facebook administrators between January and June 2017.

### RESULTS

**Table 1. The themes of the posts on the Nigerian Universities' Facebook Pages**

	<b>Appointment/promotion</b>	<b>comments</b>	<b>News</b>	<b>Questions</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Ad</b>	<b>Intruders</b>
NAU	0	403	42	31	25	5	15
UNIPOINT	12	123	94	99	2	17	45
UNILAG	3	53	36	3	2	10	26

**APPOINTMENT AND PROMOTION:** New vice-chancellor, dean, staff, head of department or university ranking

**NEWS:** Announcements of events on campus, payment of school fee, inaugural lectures, examination time table, availability of scholarships, etc.

**QUESTIONS:** To find out the implication of some students actions, why delay in result publication, admission issues

**RESPONSES:** Answers to questions raised by the users. Comments from the users and the Page administrator/s

**ADVERTISEMENT:** Part-time, certificate, post-graduate programmes forms for sale.

**INTRUDERS:** Scammers, promoters of personal businesses, admission racketeers

The table above equally shows that people were commenting on the Facebook pages of the universities studied. The comments came in different forms such as questions, condemnations and praises. The figures in the comment and question columns constituted the comments. For NAU we had 434 comments; UNIPOINT had 193 comments while UNILAG had 39 comments between January and June 2017.

Engagement for this study was measured by comments to the page posts by the administrator. Engagement rate is designed to measure the number of users who commented on contents to the percentage of the number of users that were exposed to it. That is, the number of commentators to the number of the people that like the page. Facebook Engagement Megaphone ([www.facebookmarketingpartners.com](http://www.facebookmarketingpartners.com)) was used to calculate the engagement rate thus: engaged users divide by the total users.

For NnamdiAzikiwe University 403 commented and the university had a total of 10,828 Likes. It shows that the school's Facebook Page had 3.72% engagement rate. University of Port Harcourt had 123 comments and the university had a total of 59,470 Likes. This shows that the Facebook Page of school had 0.20% engagement rate. Finally, 53 people commented on the Facebook Page of the University of Lagos while the school had a total of 21,013 Likes. The result shows that the school's Facebook Page had 0.25% engagement rate.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study looked at the relationship that exists between universities and students using Facebook Page posts as a measure. However the findings show that the themes of what was posted on the Facebook Pages of the universities studied reflected information dissemination. Universities, by the themes of discussion within the period of study, created Facebook Pages to pass information to the users/fans. Facebook Pages are used for advertisement of the university's programmes. This is in line with Tan, Hedren, Kiat, Somasundram and Wong (2012) finding in the studied titled, "Asia-Pacific libraries on Facebook: Content analysis on posts and interactions". They found that "the majority of the posts made by universities libraries were for promotional purposes. These posts are of one way communication where the library pushes information to their users"(p.64).

Some universities try to even control user's comments that are not in line with praising or promoting the institution. For instance, universities of Port Harcourt and Lagos used filter on their comment windows to remove some comments not found interesting. Filter is used to remove vulgar or indecorous comments. "If you're an admin of a Page, you can block certain words from appearing on your Page and turn on the profanity filter" (<https://web.facebook.com>). Using filter shows that an organization has been

receiving series of attacks from the fans. Wilson (2012) reveals that while "Facebook can be a great way to build and engage communities of advocates, it can also be the source of negative sentiment that damages a brand.

Similarly, it was equally found that people commented on the Pages of the universities. It has to be stated here that the number of comments is far below the number of likes or followers of such Pages. It is the rate of this comments that culminated in engagement rate which found that NnamdiAzikiwe University had an engagement rate of 3.72%; University of Port Harcourt had 0.20% engagement rate while University of Lagos had 0.25% engagement rate. This finding is consistent with McCorkindale (2010) and Charbonnet (2012) findings that both companies and universities Facebook Pages are not engaging or interactive. One observable thing in these pages is the intruders who use the timeline of the universities to scam unsuspecting public, do admission racketeering and also advertise their personal businesses.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Every organization desires to meet up with its set objectives and goals at the barest cost. The wish of every university is to run a hitch-free academic calendar, but this is not possible without the cooperation and mutual understanding between the management and students. This study has found out that the use of Facebook Page by many universities is not to serve the information needs of the actual and potential students, but to promote itself. Failing to engage students in an interactive manner can cause further crisis in the university system since students can mobilize even without their leaders. Based on this finding, it is recommended that the public relations department of every university should respond to people's comments on their Page timely. The public relations unit should also post messages that can cause discussion through this; the



management would know the students' needs and address them early enough.

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