# A Review of Public Relations as a Potential Tool for Effective University-Student Relationship

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**A R T I C L E   I N F O**

**A B S T R A C T**

Well established and internationally known university would not underestimate the interest, loyalty and satisfaction of their students. Logically, apart from the structural properties of any university, students are the core representative, stakeholders and the consumer (public) to a university. Managing university students, is as managing corporate organizational publics, which is the professional expertise of public relations practitioners, going by the notion that public relations is a professional act of managing relationships between an organization (university) and their publics (student); basically to maintain, assemble, and sustain a sound and flawless relationship between organizations and their publics, it is usually done with different Public relations approach. This study conceptualizes different approaches of public relations such as; student persuasion, university reputation management, and relations with student and examines the effectiveness of these highlighted approaches in building effective university-student relationship. These examinations are done with the use of inferential statistical tools such as; correlation and regressions. We found statistically significant role of the aforementioned approaches of PR in building effective university-student relationship. The implications, recommendations of this research are discuss in details.

## INTRODUCTION

Well-established and internationally renowned university would not underestimate the interest, loyalty and satisfaction of their students. Foreward (1990) asserts that managing university students must be well-planned as university strivesto increase the recognition and their popularitystrength. Apart from the structural properties of any university, students are the core representatives, main stakeholders and the public of a university. Bruning (2002) argued that university students are the main determinant of university's reputation. University students are ideally taken as one of the reliable sources to talk about their university, and what a student says about his/her university is often believed. Thus, negative comments and discouraging words of mouth from a particular university public can be detrimental to the reputation of the university.

Managing university-studentsrelationship is similar to managing corporate organizational publics, which requires professional expertise of public relations practitioners. Newsom *et al.*(2010) stated that public relations is a professional act of managing relationships between an organization (university) and their publics (student); basically to maintain, assemble, and sustain a sound and flawless relationship between organizations and their publics.It is usually done with a strong and constructive communication management. The interpretation of this definition is that for any organization to establisha good relationship with stakeholders, customer loyalty and willingness of being with the organization no matter how small or big is the organization andthe communication strategy of such organization must be managed efficiently. However, many factors such as cultural differences, language barriersand religious diversity have to be put into consideration when designing public relation or communication programs for any organization.This move is essential to successfully promote the organization's products/services and achieve an encouraging patronage from their diverse consumers.

According to Murphy and Dee (1992), public relation increases the effectiveness of an organization by building and enriching the relationship that exists between the stakeholders of the organization in an environment that has the potentials of constraining or alleviating the organizational goals and mission. This role

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includes seeking and disseminating information to and from the public to know how they perceive the organization, and positively change their mind-sets.

In the light of this, new public management approaches are changing the way organization relates with the public. According to Starling (1982), organization continually interacts with different individuals that play different roles in the organization depending on the organizational interest and the role played by the individuals. The development of a well-managed relationship between the staff and students in a university is important to allow the university to respond promptly to the popular demand of their students in order to promote public policy-making (Starling, 1982). It was inferred in the work of Alford (2002) and Starling (1982) that a well-managed relationship between members of an organization helps in building a good organizational reputation. Although, institution of higher learning around the world have been using different approaches to build reputable relationship with and within university staff and students.

The following are the public management approaches employable to manage the university-student relationship:

- Reflections of students' concerns and values in the management processes
- Reliance on students' voice as their main source of feedback
- The role of values, cultures and rites in shaping how students behave in the university.

This paper shall therefore seek answers to the following questions in the course of studying the roles of PR in managing effective university-student relationship:

1. What is the effect of student persuasion in building effective student-university relationship?
2. What is the effect of university reputation management in building effective student-university relationship?
3. What is the effect of relations with the public in building effective student-university relationship?

***Literature Review:***

***Persuasive Approach to Public Relation:***

Messina (2007) in a study titled "public relations, the public interest and persuasion: an ethical approach" takes into consideration whether persuasion is at all related to public relation practices, and found that persuasion is not just related but theoretically included in managing organization public, which is the general aim of public relations, while it is also emphasized that public relation practitioners persuade ethically and not just persuasion to obtain the needed public interest.

Public relations theorists, in their own professional paradigm explained persuasion as a process of communication and interaction directed and designed to influence audience judgment, convince their decision and control their actions. The correctness of this definition is established with the connection between communication and Public relations, both practitioners and theorists believed that public relation is a process of persuading the organizations' public through professional communicative skills and tools (Tymson and Sherman, 1996; and Reddi 2000). Moloney (2000) relates public relations and persuasion with words like "compromising", "bargaining", and "negotiation". These three words are synonymous to persuasion (Newsom, *et al* 2010). Miller (1989) theoretically proved the linkage between persuasion and public relations.Going by the conceptual linkages between persuasion and public relation, Jackson (2010) explained persuasion as one of the approaches in public relation. Amongst all other approaches such as relations with publics, the Grunigian perspective, hype or publicity, persuasion, relational and reputation management; hype and persuasion are found predominant. Persuasion is widely employed in political public relation. Persuasion inthe context of public relations is referred to as eloquently reaching, informing and changing public (student) "audiences'" attitude and behaviours towards their university. Theorists admit that the power of relationships can never be equal (Moloney 2006; and Bimber 1998), but the ability to maintain and manage partners is the professional obligations of public relations approaches and public relations practitioners (Grunig 2002).

Newsom *et al.*, (2010) contended that the persuasive approach in public relations is determinedby the acceptance of information and attitudinal change by the public.The conceptual paradigm of persuasiveness of public relations, Heath (2008) opine that it can only be achieved if and only the communication is based on dialog and loose discourse between the university and their students. More importantly, Perloff (2004) corroboratesthat there are three features that determine the effectiveness of public relations, namely; the messenger character (public relations practitioners of a university), the message content and the audiences' attitude or message reception.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) elucidate that persuasive approach to public relations (informational or strategic) drastically influence the effectiveness of messages and reiterate the role of public relations on the development of a positive organizational reputation. Furthermore, the persuasive approach also controls the power of the university-student relationships (Holtgraves and Lasky, 1999). Notwithstanding the assertion of Gotsi and Wilson (2001) that the focus of any organizational reputation is inclined to the adoption of persuasive approach in relating with their publics in order to shape to the impressions and the opinions of the public towards the organization.

Meanwhile Nicholas (1997) discovered inconsistency in the way people perceived universities reputation, the public and university stakeholders are found to know less or nothing about the character, processes, purposes and value of universities. Reportedly the fault was recorded to be the university negligence of information and persuasion or and the failure of other public relations approaches adopted by universities PR practitioners. The university-students relationship managementbetween the public and stakeholders is recommended to any university that aims of to be recognized either locally or internationally. Scholars like Grunig (1992), Dyson (1988), and Benjamin (1993) affirmed that public relations generally is gaining acceptance as a crucial and pivotal management tool for modern universities.It has also been proven to be one of the main causes of university growth and their managerial survival.

### *Reputation Management Approach to Public Relations:*

Murray and White (2004) highlighted that incurring expenses on public relations is expected to demonstrate a measurable return on the organization by ensuring that the public relations programs contribute to organizational reputation.The success of an organizational reputation has a lot to tell of the entire management of the organizations and the efforts exerted in developing a commendable positive reputation of their organizations in the public. A good public relation approach is by initiating listening, reporting back and acting as the conscience of the organization and informing top management decision-making. Hence it is an indispensable element of the managerial framework in an organization, which has not only remain functional but also contribute massively to the general growth of the organization through image building and reputation management (Murray & White, 2004; Money &Hillenbard, 2006).

Orzekauskas and Smaiziene (2007) stated that the concept of image and reputation is indeed importantin the context of politics and public institutions.However it is also important that institutions follow substantial stages of reputation management from the public relation paradigm. Public relation plays a major role in providing a holistic solution towards driving one's image and reputation of institutions. The emphasis on public relation use could also benefit universities in managing their reputation. Rein *et al.* (1987) described politics and public institutions as an image-intensive sector - a sector where image and reputation building largely dominate and needed. This assertion emphasizes on development of a comprehensive framework for image creation and reputation management, incorporating functions to be implemented using public relations for sustainable image and strong positive reputation (Orzekauskas and Smaiziene, 2007; Murray and White, 2004). Using the Lithuanian practice to manage image and reputation, there must be an integrated action platform between the press agents and public relations department as professional practices with the utmost motive of building good reputation for the institutions (Gray&Balmer, 2002). Reputation managementin Universities is wider and more complex in comparison to corporate organizations as universities usually adopt theoretical positions of management and sustainability as emphasized by public relation theories.Mason & Bearden (1975) summarized the features of image management in universities as follows:image must be created and shaped in line with the organizational aims and objectives;emphasis must be made on the impact of formal and informal communications factors; andan academic study must be done to ascertain the potentials involved in managing the image systematically.

### *Public Relations: A University-Student Relationship Management Tool:*

From the organizational perspective, Smith (2009) asserted that despite the increasing trend in the professional use of integrated communication,organizational coordination of communication function and the activities of the stakeholders, public relation is observed as a negligible managerial tool in spite of massive insight and scholarly opinions that discussed its sensitivity. It is however established from theoretical perspectives and submission of public relations scholars that public relation is a strategic relationship management function (Grunig, 2006; Ledingham, 2006). Childers and Grunig (1999) highlighted that managing relationship, being a strategic management tool via public relation, is applicable to all organizations irrespective of the nature and pattern of organizational activities. The fundamental goal of public relations is building and enhancing both the on-going and long-term relationships within the key constituencies of an organization. Hence, in the University as an academic or educational organization, the students are the key constituency whose relationship with the university must be managed both in the on-going and for long-term purposes. This can be effectively done by employing public relations as the tool.

Grunig (2006), while highlighting the components of the relationship in the organizational context where public relations are needed to be employed for enhancement, mentioned the following:

a. Control mutuality: Parties involved must agree on whom and to what extent one party has power to influence the other. Since being imbalance is natural, healthy relationship requires that the organization and the key constituents must have some degree of control over one another.

b. Trust: trust can be maintained in three different phases namely: Integrity; the belief that the organization is free and just, dependability; the belief that the organization will do anything it says it will do, and competence; the belief that organization has the ability to do what it will do.

c.   Satisfaction: Each party involved must feel favourable toward the other due to the fact that positive expectations about the intra-relationship are reinforced. For any relationship to be satisfying, the benefits must outweigh the costs.

d.   Commitment: This measures the extent each of the party believes and feels about the relationship in terms of the worthiness in energy spending for its maintenance and promotion.

e.   Exchange benefit: Each of the party gives benefits to the other in return of a previous kind gesture exhibited by the other, or in expectation of a future one.

f.   Communal relationship: In this type of relationship, both parties provide benefits to the other with the feelings of concern for their respective welfare, even when the other party is not gaining anything from the other.

In achieving all these features expected to be inherent in the University-Student relationship, persuasion and reputation management are important public relations that can be adopted. However, control mutuality and trust building can be categorized as persuasive methods and reputation management respectively (Gruning, 2006). Plessis (2007) asserted that persuasion and communication in public relations approaches will result in a healthy intra and inter relationship among both the organization and their publics. In the case of University as an organization, persuasion will foster University-Student relationship.In the light of Public relation theories, university-student relationship according to Botan (1993) can be described asusing the traditionally business-oriented perspective especially considering its impact on organization-public relationship. He cited the persuasion theory in this regard and emphasizes its contribution to organizational communication, with the aim of achieving a good and strong relationship among the key components of the organization. This invariably in the context of university-student relationship reiterate that university must apply public relations approaches like reputation management and employing persuasive communication as a constructive means of maintaining a commendable university-student relationship (Plessis, 2007).

*Method:*

This study employs a quantitative research methodology in achieving the research objectives. Alex (2010), Kumar (2011) and Sekeran (2009) contended that the most celebrated motives behind using quantitative research is for generating conclusions, establishing people's perceptions and testing for the relationship between the cause and effect variables. There are scant studies in the annals of literature that are involved in the examination of the direct relationships between the listed approaches of public relations and the effective university-student relationship. However, the literature review overly features excessive studies that are mostly conceptual in regardsto this study variables, it is important to advance those theoretical assertions by providing empirical justifications through quantitative method. Kumar (2011) asserted the quantitative research approach is an explorative method that can be adopted for the extraction and deduction of the nature of the connection between two different variables and also to generate empirical findings on the role of a particular variable on another variable.

*Population and Sampling:*

This study aims at generalizing its conclusion on one of the renowned management university in Malaysia, namely; theUniversiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) as the main population in this study. Kumar (2011) argued that random sampling is the appropriate form of probability sampling; that is for a study that has access to a demarcated and accessible study population. Babbie (2010) affirmed the correctness of random sampling and suggested different ways on how to go about selecting respondent randomly. After assuring the total number of the UUM student from the student affairs department (Unit PerancanganKorporat 2011),it was found that UUM embodies the total number of 31457 students for both undergraduate (26068) and postgraduate (5389) students as at the time of this reasearch. According to the study of Bartlett *et al* (2001) which concluded that any social science study adapting "0.05" as its margin error could aptly employ 119 respondents for the study given that the population is more than 10000. Conclusively, this study surveyed 119 students of UUM both postgraduate and undergraduate and the respondents are selected randomly.

*Research Instrument:*

Questionnaire is a common and efficient tool for gathering data in quantitative research method (Kumar, 2011; and Babbie, 2010). This research uses an open-ended questionnaire to gather data for this research. After an excessive literature review the variables in the study were transformed into continuous variables, while interval items where develop to test them (Kumar, 2010). The questionnaire used in this study is mainly developed from the concept used to explain the variables in the literature review. The questionnaire started with a basic introduction about the study, the important objectives of the study and the variables intended to be tested in this study. The information is followed with an assurance for the respondent to notify them the how crucially their participation and answers would only be used for the purpose of the study (Babbie, 2010). The questionnaire is then parted into six sections according to the variables in this study. Section A is for the

Demographic questions, followed by Section B which entails questions on student persuasion, Section C embodies items on university reputation management. Section D interrogate respondent on relations with the public and lastly Section E is for the effective student-university relationship. Section F allows the respondent to contribute their own opinion on how UUM management can build an effective university-student reputation.

### Pilot Testing:

Pilot testing is conducted basically to give the researcher the confidence to believe that each and every one of the respondent will be able to understanding the content of the questionnaire, and conveniently respond to the question within the limited time. Researchers defined pilot test as the process of improving the quality of the study instrument (questionnaire) from the suggestions, feedbacks and comment of little amount of respondents, the comment may be in a written form, illustration and correction, but preferable in a written form. In this study, thirty (30) UUM students have been given the questionnaire to fill before the main data collection (John, 2008; Babbie 2010). Their response was collected for analysis and check for the reliability of the items in the instrument. The researchers calculate the Cronbach's alpha for the items in the questionnaire using the SPSS version 16. Pallant (2003) contended that social science research of this nature should employ a reliable instrument which attain (0.7) and above cronbach's alpha. The reliability test performed revealed that all the items adapted for this study are reliable and consistent for the purpose of this research. Table 3.1 shows the result of the reliability test and number of items in each construct of the questionnaire.

**Table 3.1:** Reliability Result.

| Variable | Cronbach's Alpha | No of Items |
|---|---|---|
| Student Persuasion | 0.798 | 14 |
| University Reputation Management | 0.732 | 13 |
| Relations with Student | 0.745 | 11 |
| Effective University-Student Relationship | 0.741 | 11 |

### Results:

*H1 Student persuasion has influence in building an effective university-student relationship.*

The hypothesized relationship and influence between student persuasion activities and effective university-student relationship as being a continuous variable in this study was vetted with the use of Pearson product-moment correlation. It is found that there is an high non-directional (not positive and not negative) correlation between student persuasion and effective university-student relationship, the following equation explain the result of the correlation [r—0.791, n-150, p<.05], the result shows that 79% variance in the effective university-student relationship could be explain by 79% changes in the student persuasion variable. The significance is also less than 0.05, which means that the tested hypothesis is accepted.

*H2 University reputation management has influence in building an effective university-student relationship.*

This study's second hypothesis is similarly tested with Pearson product-moment correlation, to confirm the hypothetical stands of the relationship between university reputation management variable with building university-student relationship. The correlation result (Table 4.8) revealed that there is a high relationship between university reputation management and effective university-student relationship, [r—0.793, n-150, p<.05]. This interpretatively means that the 79% variance in effective university-student relationship could be explained by 79% variances in the university reputation management variable.

*H3 Relations with Student has effect on building effective university-student relationship.*

This study third hypothesis is tested with Pearson product-moment correlation. The result of the correlation is presented in Table 4.9, which shows that there a high correlation coefficient between relations with student and university-student relationship, the result can be explained with the following correlation equation [r—0.741, n-150, p<0.05]. This shows that 74% variances in effective university-student relationship could be explain by 74% variances in the relations with student variable.

### Conclusions:

### The effect of Student Persuasion on building an effective university-student relationship:

As revealed in the study findings, there is a statistical significance between student persuasion and building effective university-student relationship. So far as we know, this study happens to be the first or the little that try to measure the effect of persuading students and how beneficial it could be to a university management. This hypothesis was generated mostly from the conceptual arguments and conclusions of studies like; (Messina, 2007; Moloney, 2000; and Miller, 1989). The aforementioned studies provide gaps and basis for this study. The interpretation of this find is that to maintain an effective university-student relationship, the management of the university must employ extensive approach for persuading their students. Different persuasive communication approach should be used to attract and develop students' loyalty and love for their university. This implies that effectively persuaded students will be willing to interact and hold a healthy relationship with the university management.

***The effect of university reputation management on building an effective university-student relationship:***

This study found corroborative findings on the effect of university reputation management on building an effective university-student management. Murray and White (2004), Money and Hillenbard (2006), Orrzekauskas and Smaiziene (2007), and Gray and Balmar (2002) and many more theorist have found beneficial effects of managing reputation as an approach of public relations on the prevalence of the organization. This study specifies and operationalizes this notion as a public relation approach to manage university student, and to build and effective relationship between the university management and their students. University-based public relations practitioners must indulge in aggressive development of a positive and attractive reputation of the university. The implication of this finding is that the reputation of the university in the mind of their students influences students' relationship towards the university management.

***The effect of relations with student on building an effective university-student relationship:***

Though few study argued about relations with the public as an approach to the public, but the arguments of Tymson and Sherman (1996) and Reddi (2000) was tailored to the judgment and findings of this research. The findings reported in this study revealed that relations with study will foster an effective university-student relationship. This implies that universities strive to relate with their students, dialogue, deliberate and discuss issues with them instead of just being a one way communication with them in other to gain a managerial power. The problems and needs of the students must be put into consideration before the university managerial boards or decision makers decide on policies that affect their students directly. The interpretation of this research findings also connote that if university students are being left-out and not contacted or related with, the students could lost their loyalty for the university and that would certainly obstruct the image of the university to the larger publics.

***Discussions:***

With the induction from rigor literature review, this study conclusively charge future research to embark on the possible contributions and amendment that public relations could add on the improvement and the management of university image and particularly their relations with their students. This study has academically contributed to the interpretations of some of the public relations theory, most especially to the communication management theory, and as well uniquely viewed the university student as a stakeholder that ought to be recognized and maintain a solid and effective relationship with; most relevantly from the university public relations practitioners, the entire university non-academic staffs, and the academic staffs as interpretatively in accordance to the public relations theoretical views.

This study recommends future study to examine the effects and the relationship between these outlined public relations approaches on building effective customer (student) relationship with a larger sample size that would allow validating the instrument suitable for studying the variables featured in this study. Future study should also work on conceptualizing the concepts in university based public relations approaches.

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