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INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION: UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTION OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S MESSAGES DURING THE 2022 ASUU STRIKE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined undergraduates' perception of the Federal Government's communication during the 2022 strike by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Guided by Source Credibility Theory and Audience Reception Theory, the study adopted a quantitative survey approach. The research population was undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. A sample of 300 was selected, while data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire. Findings revealed that 67.3% of respondents had been exposed to Federal Government communication concerning the strike, while 50.3% encountered such communication many times and 27.2% encountered it very frequently. The Minister for Labour was the dominant source of government communication, identified by 72.7% of respondents, followed by the Minister for Education (18.7%). The internet was the leading channel of exposure (43.5%), followed by television (19.3%) and radio (14.2%), indicating the growing importance of digital platforms in reaching young audiences. Regarding believability, 51.3% of respondents believed Federal Government messages to some extent and 32.6% to a large extent. Trust was highest in messages concerning efforts to end the strike, while messages about the consequences of the strike attracted the greatest distrust. Government communication also influenced respondents' perceptions of responsibility for and causes of the strike, although its influence was weaker regarding the government's willingness to end the strike and prevent future industrial actions. The study concludes that high exposure did not necessarily translate into strong persuasive influence, as respondents selectively accepted and questioned government messages. The findings support Source Credibility Theory by demonstrating the importance of perceived trustworthiness and institutional authority, while also supporting Audience Reception Theory through evidence of negotiated interpretation of official messages. The study recommended, among others, more transparent, consistent, participatory and digitally oriented government

communication, supported by demonstrable action towards resolving and preventing recurrent industrial disputes.

Keywords: Federal Government communication, ASUU strike, undergraduates, exposure, believability, influence, source credibility, audience reception.

Introduction

Industrial disputes constitute one of the most recurrent forms of organisational and societal crises, arising from disagreements between employers and employees over issues such as remuneration, working conditions, welfare, institutional policies and contractual obligations. These disputes may manifest through negotiations, protests, picketing, work-to-rule actions and strikes (Ajewole & Olaifa, 2018). Among these, strikes represent the most disruptive form of industrial conflict because they interrupt normal institutional operations, affect productivity and often generate widespread economic and social consequences (Addo et al., 2025). As crises, industrial disputes require effective crisis communication to manage stakeholders' expectations, minimise uncertainty, sustain public confidence and facilitate conflict resolution (Chile & Ogbu, 2021).

In Nigeria, the recurring industrial actions embarked upon by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) have become one of the country's most persistent higher education crises. Between 1999 and 2022, ASUU embarked on 17 nationwide strikes, resulting in approximately 63 months (over five years) of lost academic activities across public universities (Onyirioha, 2022). These repeated disruptions have adversely affected students' academic progression, institutional stability and the international reputation of Nigeria's university system. The prolonged interruptions have also generated widespread public debate regarding the commitment of both the Federal Government and ASUU to resolving the underlying issues (Abubakar et al., 2025; Ugbo & Duru, 2025).

The 2022 ASUU strike, which commenced on 14 February and ended on 14 October 2022, was the longest major industrial action after the 2020 strike, lasting about eight months (Erunke, 2022). Throughout the dispute, the Federal Government employed various crisis communication strategies to convince the public that it was making genuine efforts to address ASUU's demands. Government officials, particularly the then Minister of Labour and Employment, Dr Chris Ngige, frequently addressed the media, defended government actions and, at times, portrayed ASUU as responsible for the prolonged deadlock. These exchanges resulted in sustained verbal confrontations between government representatives and ASUU officials, with competing narratives dominating both traditional and social media. At the height of the crisis, the then Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, publicly urged students to hold ASUU responsible for the prolonged closure of public universities, illustrating the government's deliberate effort to shape public opinion during the dispute.

Although the strike eventually ended following a court judgment directing lecturers to resume work, disagreements between the Federal Government and ASUU have persisted, leaving the possibility of future industrial actions unresolved. This underscores the importance of crisis communication as a continuous strategy for managing industrial disputes, influencing stakeholder perceptions and preventing conflicts from escalating into prolonged strikes.

Certainly. The Adamu Adamu example is a strong illustration because it concretely demonstrates how the Federal Government attempted to influence students' perceptions during the crisis. It fits best in the paragraph that justifies why undergraduates are the focus of the study.

One way of evaluating the effectiveness of the Federal Government's crisis communication during industrial disputes is to examine how its messages were perceived by key stakeholders. Undergraduate students constitute one of the most important audiences because they bear the immediate consequences of prolonged strikes through disrupted academic calendars, delayed graduation and the associated social and economic costs. Their perception of the Federal Government's communication is particularly significant because it reflects the extent to which official messages were regarded as credible, persuasive and capable of shaping public understanding of the crisis. This importance is evident in the efforts of both the Federal Government and ASUU to influence students' perceptions throughout the dispute. For instance, at the height of the 2022 strike, the then Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, urged students to hold ASUU responsible for the prolonged closure of public universities, illustrating the government's deliberate attempt to shape students' interpretation of the crisis and win public support for its position.

Against this backdrop, this study examined undergraduates' perception of the Federal Government's messages during the 2022 ASUU strike with a view to assessing the effectiveness of crisis communication in managing industrial disputes within Nigeria's public university system. The study focused on Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The recurring industrial disputes between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) have become one of the greatest challenges confronting public university education in the country. Beyond disrupting academic activities and delaying students' graduation, these disputes have generated competing narratives as both parties seek to justify their positions and influence public opinion. During the 2022 ASUU strike, which lasted from February to October, the Federal Government consistently communicated its position through press briefings, interviews, official statements and other media platforms, with the aim of convincing stakeholders that it was

committed to resolving the crisis. As the principal victims of the prolonged strike, undergraduate students constituted a key audience of these messages.

Despite the strategic communication efforts deployed by the Federal Government, it remains unclear whether undergraduate students were sufficiently exposed to these messages, the channels through which they received them, the extent to which they considered them credible and whether the messages influenced their perception of the strike. Existing studies on the 2022 ASUU strike have largely focused on its causes, consequences and the industrial relations dimension, while relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of the Federal Government's crisis communication from the perspective of students, who were directly affected by the industrial action.

This knowledge gap limits understanding of how government communication performs during industrial crises and whether it succeeds in shaping stakeholder perceptions. Against this backdrop, this study investigated the perception of Nnamdi Azikiwe University undergraduates regarding the Federal Government's communication during the 2022 ASUU strike, with a view to determining their level of exposure, the communication channels through which they received the messages, the extent to which they believed the messages and the degree to which the communication influenced their perception of the strike.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the perception of undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University on the federal government's communication during the 2022 ASUU strike. The following objectives were pursued in particular:

1. To determine the level of exposure to the federal government's communication among the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University during the strike.
2. To identify the channels through which the undergraduates were exposed to the federal government's communication.
3. To assess the extent to which the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University believed the federal government's communication.
4. To examine the degree of influence of the federal government's communication on the undergraduates' perception of the strike.

Literature Review

Existing literature presents industrial conflict in universities as a multidimensional problem in which underlying material grievances and communication failures interact to sustain disputes (Akinwotu, 2019; Albert, 2015; Anugwom, 2014). Studies on Nigerian universities identify issues such as poor funding, delayed salaries, pensions and gratuities, promotion irregularities, weak institutional autonomy and management interference in union affairs as major triggers of industrial action (Ogbette, 2017; Nwafor et

al., 2023). However, the studies collectively suggest that the existence of these grievances alone does not necessarily explain the persistence or escalation of conflict. Rather, conflicts become more protracted where stakeholders lack effective channels for expressing concerns, management responds reactively, or agreements and negotiations are poorly managed. Thus, the structural causes of industrial disputes identified by both Ogbette et al. (2017) and Nwafor et al. (2023) connect directly with Abubakar et al.'s (2025) finding that inconsistent, reactive and non-transparent government communication contributes to distrust and prolonged FG-ASUU conflicts.

Against this background, several studies converge on two-way communication and stakeholder participation as the link between grievance management and industrial harmony. Adaja et al. (2024) found that participatory decision-making, free flow of information, persuasive negotiation and proactive monitoring of workers' concerns can reduce industrial conflict and improve productivity. Similarly, Ogunjimi et al. (2018) identified dialogue, collective bargaining and effective communication as useful conflict-management strategies, while Anyanwu and Okinono (2016) argue that industrial peace depends on management-worker cooperation and the availability of channels through which employees can express concerns. Collectively, these findings suggest that public relations is most effective not as a crisis-response mechanism but as a continuous process of engagement through which emerging grievances can be identified and addressed before they develop into industrial action.

This argument is reinforced by evidence from the FG-ASUU conflict and the South African labour context (Maake-Malatji et al., 2026; Ugwuona, 2016). Abubakar et al. (2025) found weak stakeholder engagement, ineffective media management, and the absence of a structured crisis communication framework in the management of the 2020 ASUU strike, while Maake-Malatji et al. (2026) found that poor communication can obstruct negotiations and intensify labour disputes. Conversely, the South African evidence shows that effective communication, negotiation skills, media engagement and strategic public communication can facilitate more constructive outcomes. These findings broaden the Nigerian evidence by showing that communication competence is required not only from management or government but also from labour unions. Industrial harmony, therefore, appears to depend on the communication capacities and willingness of both parties to engage constructively.

Literature further indicates that industrial disputes are shaped not only by communication between the disputing parties but also by the public discourse surrounding the conflict. Ugwuona (2016) found ideological and manipulative uses of language in the discourse surrounding the 2013 ASUU strike, suggesting that the manner in which issues are communicated may obscure rather than clarify the basis of the dispute. This connects with Abimbola et

al.'s (2015) finding of variations in the framing and prominence of newspaper coverage of the strike. Flynn's (2005) study extends this relationship by showing that media attention is selective and influenced by characteristics such as the size, duration and disruptiveness of strikes, while increased media attention may also be associated with longer strike duration. Together, the above findings show that the media are not merely passive observers of industrial conflict but are implicated in its ideological colourations. Secondly, the nature, intensity and framing of coverage may shape public understanding and potentially influence the behaviour of the parties involved.

Generally, extant literature reveals a relationship between the causes of industrial conflict, the management of stakeholder relationships and the communication environment within which disputes unfold. Material and institutional grievances may initiate conflict, but inadequate dialogue, weak stakeholder engagement, poor negotiation and problematic public communication can deepen and prolong it. Conversely, participatory decision-making, transparent information flow, collective bargaining, proactive monitoring and strategic communication can help prevent escalation and facilitate resolution. The literature, therefore, positions public relations as a strategic mechanism for managing relationships and communication throughout the conflict cycle – from identifying grievances and preventing escalation to negotiating resolution and managing public perceptions. However, while existing studies have separately examined public relations strategies, industrial conflict, FG-ASUU relations and media coverage of strikes, there remains a need to examine how these communication and public relations practices collectively shape the management and resolution of the FG-ASUU conflict.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in the Source Credibility Theory and the Audience Reception Theory. The Source Credibility Theory proposes that the credibility of the source is a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness and acceptance of a message. According to this theory, individuals are more likely to be persuaded by messages from sources that are perceived as trustworthy, credible, and knowledgeable in the relevant domain (Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Ohanian, 1990). The theory has been widely applied in public relations, particularly in marketing, advertising, and crisis communication, to understand the influence of source credibility on message persuasiveness.

Stated differently, Source Credibility Theory explains how the perceived credibility of a message source influences audience acceptance of information. The theory is relevant to this study because students' responses to government messages during the 2022 ASUU strike may have depended on how credible they considered the Federal Government. Credibility is largely associated with perceived expertise, trustworthiness, accuracy and reliability (Hovland et al.,

1953). During the strike, undergraduates encountered government explanations and updates through various media channels. Where government communication was perceived as credible, students were more likely to accept its messages; low credibility, on the other hand, could encourage scepticism, rejection or alternative interpretations.

Furthermore, Audience Reception Theory was based on the Encoding-Decoding Model of Paul Stuart Hall in 1973 (Hall, 1973). The theory focuses on how audience interprets content, regardless of the form of media, such as newspapers, television/radios, or games. According to the theory, while a message may not have inherent meaning, the audience who watches or engages with it imbues it with meaning. The audience comes to an understanding of the content of the text or screen, and the meaning of the message can vary according to the audience's social context (Hall, 1980, 1973).

Hall (1973) identified three ways through which audiences may decode (read) media messages. The dominant reading occurs when audiences accept the preferred meaning encoded by the producer. The negotiated reading occurs when audiences broadly accept the dominant meaning but modify or qualify it based on their personal experiences and circumstances. The oppositional reading occurs when audiences understand the intended meaning but reject it and interpret the message from an alternative perspective (Hall, 1973).

The theory is particularly relevant to audience studies because it recognises audiences as active participants in meaning-making. It suggests that exposure to the same media content does not necessarily produce identical interpretations, as audiences' social, cultural and ideological backgrounds influence how messages are understood. Thus, the theory provides a useful framework for examining how audiences accept, negotiate or resist media messages.

Consequently, Audience Reception Theory is relevant to an inquiry into how undergraduates perceived the Federal Government's messages during the 2022 ASUU Strike. This is particularly so given the theory's assumption that audiences actively interpret media messages based on their social experiences, beliefs, interests and circumstances. In the context of the ASUU strike, undergraduates could accept the Federal Government's explanations of the dispute (dominant reading), negotiate the messages by accepting some aspects while questioning others (negotiated reading), or reject the government's position entirely (oppositional reading).

Thus, the two theories – Source Credibility and Audience Reception – provide a robust framework for viewing students' perceptions of the messages of the Federal Government during an industrial dispute. While Source Credibility Theory explains how the perceived expertise, trustworthiness and reliability of the government as a message source may influence students' acceptance or rejection of its messages, Audience

Reception Theory recognises students as active audiences who interpret such messages based on their experiences, interests, social contexts and prior knowledge.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative survey design to examine Nnamdi Azikiwe University undergraduates' exposure to, perceptions of, and responses to the Federal Government's communication during the 2022 ASUU industrial dispute. The study was conducted across the campuses of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Anambra State, Nigeria, with a population of 38, 917 undergraduate students. A sample of 300 respondents was considered adequate based on Comrey and Lee's (1992) sampling adequacy scale. A multistage sampling procedure was employed. Five faculties were randomly selected, followed by the random selection of two departments from each selected faculty. Respondents were subsequently selected from the sampled departments, while proportional allocation was used to distribute the sample across the relevant strata according to their population sizes.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure exposure to government communication, channels of exposure, perceived believability, and the influence of such communication on students' views of the strike. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation through expert assessment and pretested among 20 respondents outside the main sample. A test–retest procedure was used to assess its consistency, and ambiguities identified during the pretest were corrected. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, and presented in tables to answer the research questions.

Results and Discussion

A total of 300 questionnaires were administered to undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Of this number, 294 questionnaires were completed, returned and found usable for analysis, representing a response rate of 98%. Only six questionnaires, representing 2%, were not returned. The high response rate provided an adequate basis for the subsequent analysis of the study.

Of the 294 respondents, 120 (40.9%) were aged between 16 and 20 years, while 148 (50.3%) were between 21 and 25 years. The remaining 26 respondents, representing 8.8%, were aged between 26 and 30 years. This indicates that the majority of the respondents were within the 21–25 age category.

In terms of gender, 175 respondents (59.5%) were male, while 119 (40.5%) were female. Regarding level of study, 126 respondents (42.8%) were in 100 level, 50 (17.0%) were in 200 level, 48 (16.3%) were in 300 level, 40 (13.6%) were in 400 level, and 30 (10.2%) were in 500 level. Overall, the respondents were drawn from different age groups, genders and levels of study.

Exposure to Federal Government Communication

The findings show that 198 respondents, representing 67.3%, had read, seen or heard communication from the Federal Government concerning the 2022 ASUU strike. Conversely, 96 respondents (32.6%) indicated that they had not been exposed to such communication. This suggests that a majority of the undergraduate respondents were exposed to Federal Government messages relating to the industrial dispute.

Regarding the frequency of exposure, 148 respondents (50.3%) reported encountering Federal Government communication about the ASUU strike many times. Another 80 respondents (27.2%) indicated that they encountered it so many times, while 66 respondents (22.4%) reported being exposed only a few times. The findings therefore indicate a relatively high frequency of exposure among the respondents.

The Minister for Labour was the most frequently identified source of Federal Government communication on the 2022 ASUU strike, as indicated by 214 respondents (72.7%). This was followed by the Minister for Education, identified by 55 respondents (18.7%). Only 17 respondents (5.7%) identified the President as their source of information, while eight respondents (2.7%) identified the Minister for Information. The findings indicate that the Minister for Labour was the dominant official associated with government communication during the dispute.

The above is instructive given the finding by Abubakar et al. (2025) that government media relations is a central component of managing the Federal Government-ASUU conflict. The prominence of the Minister for Labour in the communication process may be explained by his direct responsibility for labour relations and negotiations between the Federal Government and ASUU (Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, n.d). As the dispute was fundamentally an industrial conflict involving demands, negotiations, agreements and the conditions for ending the strike, communication from the Labour Ministry was likely to attract greater attention and be perceived as more directly relevant to the resolution of the dispute. This finding therefore suggests that the visibility of government communication was partly shaped by the institutional role of the spokesperson and the nature of the issues being communicated. On the other hand, the relatively low identification of the President and Minister for Information suggests that communication about the strike was not perceived primarily as a general government-information function, but rather as a specialised labour-relations communication process. This concentration of communication around the Minister for Labour could enhance message clarity and source identification, but it may also limit the diversity of government voices available to explain the broader political, educational and socioeconomic dimensions of the dispute.

Channels of Exposure to Federal Government Communication

The internet was the most common channel through which respondents encountered Federal Government communication about the strike, accounting for 128 respondents (43.5%). Television followed with 57 respondents (19.3%), while 42 respondents (14.2%) received the communication through radio. Print media, including newspapers and magazines, accounted for 35 respondents (11.9%), while 32 respondents (10.8%) identified other channels. These findings suggest that online platforms constituted the principal channel through which students encountered government communication concerning the strike.

The predominance of the internet as a channel of exposure can be attributed to the communication culture prevailing among young people (including undergraduates) whereby the Internet (including social media) has emerged as the major channel of news and information consumption (Robertson et al., 2026; Adeyemo, 2025; Newman et al., 2025). Despite the fact that major social issues like industrial disputes are regularly reported by traditional media – for instance, Abimbola et al. (2015) found that newspapers frequently reported the 2013 ASUU strike – new media platforms remain a powerful alternative for reaching young demographics such as undergraduate students. This perspective is reaffirmed by Uzuegbunam et al. (2015) who observe that the Internet is increasingly becoming central to the contemporary public relations practice, underlining the need for practitioners in Nigeria to key into the new culture to remain relevant.

Believability of Exposure to Federal Government Communication

The findings reveal a moderate level of belief in Federal Government communication during the strike. While 51.3% of respondents believed the messages to some extent and 32.6% to a large extent, only 15.9% believed them to a little extent, with none indicating complete disbelief. Trust was strongest in messages concerning government efforts to end the strike (47.2%), followed by messages on its causes (24.4%) and consequences (23.1%). Conversely, communication about the consequences of the strike attracted the greatest distrust (37%), whereas messages on efforts to resolve the dispute were least distrusted (17.3%).

Consistent with these perceptions, respondents generally relied on government communication to understand issues surrounding the strike, with 41.1% depending on it to some extent and 33.6% to a large extent. Altogether, the findings suggest that although students did not accept all aspects of Federal Government communication uncritically, they generally considered it a credible and important source of information, particularly regarding efforts to resolve the industrial dispute. Thus, viewed through the lens of the Source Credibility Theory, the finding suggests that the undergraduates, at least within the context of the industrial dispute, perceived the federal government as trustworthy, credible, and knowledgeable in

the relevant domain (Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Ohanian, 1990).

Nonetheless. the tendency to distrust some aspects of government communication by the students is consistent with the finding by Abubakar et al. (2025) that government communication has been marked by inconsistent and non-transparent patterns resulting to a trust deficit that has hampered dispute resolution. However, the fact that the undergraduates did not disbelief all messages by the government but indeed rusted some aspects of them suggests a negotiated reading of the messages as per the Audience Perception Theory (Hall, 2025). Such negotiated reading may have protected the audience against the "ideological and manipulative" use of language as found by Ugwuona (2016) as characterizing discourses during an earlier ASUU strike in 2013. The present findings suggest that students were not simply passive recipients of government messages; rather, they differentiated between aspects of the communication they considered more or less credible. The relatively high reliance on government communication for understanding the dispute nevertheless indicates that such messages remained an important component of students' information environment – at least within the context of the strike.

Influence of Federal Government Communication

Federal Government communication exerted varying degrees of influence on respondents' perceptions of the strike. Regarding responsibility for the strike and its causes, the pattern was identical: 33.6% reported little influence, 30.6% some influence, 27.8% substantial influence, and 7.8% no influence. This indicates that government messages contributed to shaping students' understanding of both responsibility and the causes of the dispute, although their influence was not uniform. Again, this points to negotiated reading on the part of the students.

A similar but weaker pattern emerged regarding the government's willingness to end the strike, with 38.0% reporting little influence, 28.2% some influence, 24.1% substantial influence, and 9.5% no influence. The influence was weakest regarding views on preventing future strikes, as 59.8% reported little influence, compared with 17.6% substantial influence, 14.2% some influence, and 8.1% no influence. In all, the findings suggest that Federal Government communication had a moderate influence on students' perceptions of the responsibility and causes of the strike, but a more limited influence on their views of the government's willingness to resolve the dispute and prevent future industrial actions. This pattern can easily be attributable to the citizens' experience over the years of recurring industrial conflicts in the public universities (Onyirioha, 2022; Erunke, 2022), such that they are likely to be suspicious of any government's claim of being able to prevent future re-occurrence. In fact, this finding strongly indicate that the government communication has been insufficient to persuade students that the underlying conditions responsible for industrial disputes have been adequately addressed.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is concluded that Federal Government communication constituted an important component of undergraduates' information environment during the 2022 ASUU strike. Although exposure was relatively high, with two-thirds of respondents encountering government messages, the findings reveal that communication reach did not necessarily translate into uniform acceptance or strong persuasive influence. The dominance of the internet further underlines the changing media environment and culture among young Nigerians, pointing to the reality that government crisis communication must increasingly prioritise digital platforms while maintaining the credibility and reach of traditional media. The prominence of the Minister for Labour as a source of government messages also emphasises the importance of institutional relevance and authoritative sources in communicating during industrial disputes.

The findings have important implications for society. Effective communication during industrial conflicts is not merely an exercise in disseminating information; it can shape public understanding, trust and perceptions of governmental responsibility. The moderate level of belief recorded in the study suggests that students were willing to engage with government messages but did not accept them uncritically. More importantly, the relatively limited influence of government communication on perceptions of the government's willingness to end the strike and prevent future strikes indicates a credibility gap between official messaging and citizens' lived experience of recurrent industrial disputes. Ayomipo et al. (2025) found that citizens' distrust in government owing to past experiences negatively affected the believability of its health messages during the COVID-19 pandemic. The foregoing underscores the need for government communication to always move beyond reactive explanations and place greater emphasis on transparency, evidence, stakeholder engagement and demonstrable actions as a way of strengthening public trust and achieving more constructive management of future labour disputes.

Lastly, the findings provide support for both Source Credibility Theory and Audience Reception Theory. The relatively high level of trust accorded to some government messages confirms the importance of institutional authority in shaping communication outcomes. At the same time, the skepticism that greeted some aspects of the messages indicates that audiences actively interpret, evaluate and selectively accept official messages rather than responding uniformly to them. The findings therefore reinforce Hall's idea of negotiated reading, in which audiences may accept certain elements of a dominant message while questioning or resisting others. Thus, in summary, the study suggests that communication effectiveness in industrial crises depends not simply on exposure, but on the interaction among source credibility, audience interpretation, institutional trust and the perceived authenticity of government action.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Federal Government should strengthen and institutionalise its communication mechanisms during industrial disputes to ensure that information reaches a wider proportion of affected students. Communication should be timely, consistent and coordinated across relevant ministries, particularly the Ministries of Labour and Employment and Education, with clear identification of official sources and regular updates on the progress of negotiations.

2. Given the finding that the internet was the predominant channel through which undergraduates encountered government communication, the Federal Government should prioritise digital and social media platforms in disseminating information during industrial disputes. Official messages should be adapted to formats suitable for young audiences, including concise social media updates, infographics, short videos and interactive online briefings, while traditional media should be retained to ensure broader audience reach.

3. The Federal Government should improve the credibility of its communication by providing timely, transparent and verifiable information, particularly on contentious issues such as the causes and consequences of industrial disputes. Similarly, government spokespersons should avoid contradictory statements, exaggeration and unsubstantiated claims, while clearly distinguishing between confirmed developments, ongoing negotiations and proposed solutions. This would help strengthen public trust and reduce selective distrust of government messages.

4. Government communication should move beyond explaining the causes and immediate circumstances of industrial disputes to demonstrate concrete actions toward their resolution and prevention. In particular, communication concerning the government's willingness to end strikes and prevent future occurrences should be supported by visible progress in negotiations, implementation of agreements and sustained stakeholder engagement with ASUU and other relevant actors. This would help bridge the gap between official messages and students' experiences of recurrent industrial disputes, thus increasing the capacity of government communication to influence perceptions of conflict resolution.

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