



## BBC Sex-for-Grades-Report: Nigeria Tertiary Institutions 'Crisis Management Strategies and Stakeholders' Reactions

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### Abstract

*Studies have already acknowledged sexual scandals as public relations nightmares of higher learning institutions. Therefore, we examined the crisis management strategies of Nigerian tertiary institutions and stakeholders' reactions after the British Broadcasting Corporation's sex-for-grades report. Adopting qualitative research, we analyzed 13 available press releases of institutions retrieved from some institutions' websites and sampled the opinions of 20 stakeholders comprising parents, students, and lecturers through a depth interviews. We used Coombs' theory of crisis response strategies: denial, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering as thematic categories. We discovered that the institutions mostly used denial with diminished response strategy to blame societal decadence and scapegoat female students for and downplayed the severity of sexual harassment incidence by the institutions. More so, all the stakeholders distrust the local media's credibility in reporting sexual harassment cases. However, female students feel aggrieved that school administrations and the national government neglected them for failing to outlaw sexual harassment and severely punish offenders. Therefore, we recommend that considering stakeholders' perception of sexual harassment in Nigerian ivory towers, Nigerian higher educational institutions should not adopt a denial response strategy for sex scandal cases.*

**Keywords:** crisis, sexual harassment, Nigerian, situational

### Abstrak

*Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa skandal seksual merupakan mimpi buruk bagi hubungan masyarakat pada institusi pendidikan tinggi. Oleh karena itu, kami melihat kembali strategi manajemen krisis pada institusi tersier di Nigeria dan melihat reaksi para pemangku kepentingan setelah adanya laporan sex-for-grade British Broadcasting Corporation. Dengan mengadopsi penelitian kualitatif, kami menganalisis 13 siaran pers yang tersedia dari lembaga yang diambil dari situs web beberapa lembaga dan mengambil sampel pendapat dari 20 pemangku kepentingan yang terdiri dari orang tua, mahasiswa, dan dosen melalui wawancara mendalam. Kami menggunakan teori strategi respons krisis Coombs: penolakan, pengurangan, pembangunan kembali, dan penguatan*

*kategori tematis. Kami menemukan bahwa kebanyakan lembaga menggunakan penolakan dengan strategi respons yang berkurang untuk menyalahkan kemerosotan sosial, dengan mengkambing hitamkan siswa perempuan dan meremehkan parahnya insiden pelecehan seksual oleh institusi. Terlebih lagi, semua pemangku kepentingan kurang mempercayai kredibilitas media lokal dalam liputan kasus pelecehan seksual. Siswa perempuan merasa sedih karena sekolah dan pemerintah nasional mengabaikan mereka karena gagal mencegah pelecehan seksual dan menghukum para pelanggar berat. Oleh karena itu, kami merekomendasikan bahwa dengan mempertimbangkan persepsi pemangku kepentingan tentang insiden pelecehan seksual di menara gading Nigeria, lembaga pendidikan tinggi Nigeria tidak boleh mengadopsi strategi tanggapan penolakan untuk kasus skandal seks.*

**Kata kunci:** krisis, pelecehan seksual, Nigeria, situasional

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 13-minute viral video on sex exploitation involving the BBC reporter Kiki Mordi (who camouflaged as a 17-year-old admission seeker) and a senior lecturer, Boniface Igbeneghu, on the campus of the University of Lagos, Nigeria, further stressed the existing problems of inherently malignant sexual assaults (Nwadike 2007) that pervade the higher education system with its continuously battered image over this systemic failure. Again, the report exposed many cases of reported and unreported sexual harassment involving mainly male lecturers and female students. Such cases have rarely been reported to have involved female lecturers and male students. Though, Akinbode and Ayodeji (Akinbode and Ayodeji 2018) rightly established that men and women victims in selected higher institutions in Lagos State who experienced public sexual harassment incidents had high psychological stress. They concluded that female students experienced more physical, verbal, non-verbal, and quid pro quo sexual harassment than their male counterparts (Oni, Tshitangano, Takalani, and Akinsola 2019). We assume this conclusion may be based on the fact that females are still seen as the only marginalized gender in society, though at the expense of their male colleagues. It is no wonder (Haberland and Rogow 2014) further reinforce this perception that equipping marginalized gender with sexual education helps girls' sexual health especially.

Similarly, Menon pointed out the deficit in knowledge about sexual harassment acts among academic Staff, non-teaching Staff, and students (Menon, Sanjobo, Watula, Kumbula, Zgambo, Musepa, and Ngoma 2014). Yet, as much as

sexual harassment still prevails in higher learning institutions, we cannot agree more with this assertion. The knowledge of the consequences on female students will surely open sundry's eyes to its enormity. The physical and psychological effects of sexual assaults on women become telling, considering the toll on individuals and institutions in terms of cost. For example, (Ferrara, Franceschini, Villani, and Corsello 2019) brought to the fore the effects of violence against under 18 years old that teachers, among other factors, perpetrated, which may lead to some negative habits. Researchers indicated that interpersonal difficulties with teachers and teacher-pupil relationships constitute sources of stress for academic students (Reddy, Menon, and Thattil 2018). Other scholars, however, have attributed the perpetuation of sexual harassment incidents in the ivory tower to endemic institutional support (Sundaram and Jackson 2018), conflict of interest in policy and implementation formulation and practices (Franklin, Taylor, and Beytagh 2017), and under-reporting of sexual harassment cases (Yung 2015). It is an incontrovertible argument that human societal cultures and traditions have empowered existing communication media to often discriminate against the female gender; yet, there have been significant improvements in ensuring gender equality and equity in some institutions through female empowerment.

Moreover, when (Keplinger, Johnson, Kirk, and Barnes 2019) determined if there was any behavioral change in sexual harassment against women in their workplaces, considering the public effects of the #MeToo movement and #TimesUp movement between 2017 and 2018, they discovered that unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion got reduced. Though, sexual harassment increased in 2018. However, they attributed these changes to increased scrutiny on the topic and the fact that women felt better supported and empowered and were not ashamed to speak up about sexual harassment. Therefore, the issue of sexual harassment incidents in institutions in human society, especially its negative effects on the female gender, remains a challenge despite some victories recorded already (Shaw, Hegewisch, and Hess 2018).

With the unbridled nature of sexual harassment incidents in higher learning institutions worldwide, these institutions have had to maintain a favorable image before the society, community, government, students, and parents. This can be almost impossible where sexual harassment in any setting has become the norm or intractable. Thus, this is a public relations nightmare for the

respective educational institutions caught in the act. Using Columbia University as a case study, Kolk prescribed both internal and external response strategies for ameliorating reputational damage when an institution experiences sexual scandals (Kolk 2016). While he encouraged educational institutions to be proactive and flexible and listen to their internal public, he wanted them to be timely, tell the truth and ensure easy access to information. Therefore, we reason that applying these principles in an African educational institution could be daunting, especially where the cultural ethos of communalism or collectivism has proven to be a barrier to practicing public relations the way it is done in the West (Freitag and Stokes 2009). However, Elmasry and Chaudhri (Chaudhri 2010) posit that collectivism can be an advantage or a way to achieve cultural repairs when an individual damages the communal reputation. Therefore, if it appears that there is a widespread sexual assault in African higher education institutions, it can be assumed that the various attempts at tackling it fail because of a culture that encourages saving face first, at the expense of individual travails.

On the other hand, Downes advises educational institutions to stipulate structural changes, institutional policies and procedures, fines, termination, and sanctions to tackle their public relations problems on sexual scandals (Downes 2017). These are the submissions of some studies on managing sex scandals in higher learning institutions. Unfortunately, they cannot be considered to be effective insofar as there still exists the Prevalence of sexual assaults on female students. Also, these measures may be jeopardized where a conflict of interests exists within the management of higher learning institutions. Of course, regarding the institutions of higher learning about managing sex scandals in Nigeria (Egbegi, Ajah, and Onyejebu 2019), not many scholarly studies have devoted much attention to the issue. Truly, online and offline news stories and commentaries from various newspapers and magazines have committed space to it (*Sexual harassment in academia in 2018*) Yet, there is a dearth of empirical research on this issue.

Meanwhile, considering these submissions about the pervasive sexual assaults in higher institutions of learning and the attendant reputation issue they often create, this study specifically examines crisis response strategies adopted by

some Nigerian tertiary institutions in their press releases in countering the damaging narratives about them that emerged from the BBC sex-for-grades report on the University of Lagos. It also affirms that public opinion is capable of influencing how people view the reputational image of an institution Mancini (Mancini, Pickett, Call, McDougale, Brubaker, and Brownstein 2017). Based on this assumption, the study also considers the response of students, parents, and lecturers about the incidence of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions (Ismail, Chee, and Bhee 2007).

The recent BBC Sex-for-Grades reports on the University of Lagos, Nigeria, and the University of Legon, Accra, Ghana, have revealed some propriety-censored relationships between male lecturers and female students in African higher institutions. Also, the development has rekindled the discussion on the Prevalence of sexual harassment in higher learning institutions in Nigeria. Sexual harassment in any organization has unsavory consequences, especially to the disadvantage of female victims (Witkowska and Menckel 2005).

Mezey and Rubenstein understandably capture this thus:

Sexual harassment in the workplace has a significant effect on women's employment and women's psychological health in employment. The costs are considerable both in terms of individual suffering and also in terms of economic cost to the workplace. Although primarily affecting women, it is not simply a 'women's issue'. It must be seen as a concern and unacceptable to men and women who work alongside the victims of sexual harassment and are responsible for their protection and safety within the workplace (Mezey and Rubenstein 2008).

The cost of sexual harassment is all-encompassing, traumatically affecting the victims as much as those directly or indirectly linked to them. Acknowledging the fact that sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual violence have become hyper-visible in recent times, even to the extent that convicts of these crimes have been framed as monsters and sex pests and as deviant humans, Sundaram and Jackson contended that the university contexts in which these crimes are perpetrated give their stamps to their persistence (Sundaram and Jackson 2018). Through interviews with Staff working in universities, they discovered how sexual harassment is misperceived, justified, and minimized by practices that pervade the university contexts and how the notion of the 'problematic individual' prevails in favor of a structural, gendered analysis of harassment and violence (Stafstr 2018).

They complained that universities focused more on the individual perpetrators rather than taking a whole-institution approach to tackling these practices. Again, Fitzgerald further exposed the societal complicity in the perpetuation of sexual harassment against women thus: "This stubborn and pernicious persistence rests largely on (1) a pervasive system of attitudes and beliefs, accruing over centuries and embedded in a variety of cultural institutions, that denies and rationalizes systemic abuse of women; and (2), the organizational and institutional actors that serve to maintain this system, a phenomenon that has come to be known as an institutional betrayal" (Fitzgerald 2017).

In the same vein, exploring the existence and perception of sexual harassment in a university community (University of Zambia), Menon collected data from 1107 respondents comprising students, Academic Staff, and non-teaching Staff through a questionnaire. In terms of knowledge of sexual harassment, 54.1% of them indicated they knew about sexual harassment on campus, while female non-academic Staff (65.2%) knew about it better than their male counterparts (55.3%) (Menon et al. 2014). Though the authors affirm that there were no significant gender differences in knowledge among the 3 participant categories, they could only show the disaggregated data of non-teaching respondents. Also, findings reveal their knowledge of sexual harassment centers on unwelcome sexual remarks or perceptual sexual relation activities. This implies using one's power over others to gain sexual favors, any act of sex which is against a person's will, behavior towards people that makes them feel that their sexual rights are invaded, and using unconventional means like fear, duress or force to achieve one's sexual means. Regarding respondents' understanding of sexual harassment, Menon further discovered that academic Staff understood sexual harassment better than students and non-teaching Staff through the identification of sexual harassment acts. In the end, recognizing the confidential nature of their study, they submitted their findings could not be generalized to explain the scope of sexual harassment in other higher institutions (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012).

In light of the failure of higher learning institutions to effectively handle rape and sexual abuse incidents in the last twenty years, Franklin, Taylor, and

Beytagh contended that the problem of campus sexual violence was a result of inherent conflicts of interest. They identified conflicts of interest in sexual violence policies, procedures, and practices. Institutions studied were reported to view conflicts of interest as acceptable, manageable, and inconsequential (Jahya 2014). However, their findings also reveal that conflicts of interest in a university setting can increase the temptation to commit misconduct; increase the risk of unintentional bias. Therefore, they believed the university administrators woefully failed in their obligations concerning sexual assault. Consequently, the authors submit thus:

Higher education institutions stand at a critical crossroads in addressing sexual assault on campus. If campus sexual assault is as pervasive as the U.S. Department of Justice claims, widespread policy failures exist on college campuses. Widespread failures often lead to widespread liability, and widespread liability for this failure could well bankrupt many institutions. (Franklin et al. 2017)

Moreover, the authors added that college management needed to work with the Clery Act and Title IX compliance, as the laws would serve their respective institutions' humanitarian and educational missions.

In the same vein, Yung tested whether universities in the U.S. undercounted sexual harassment by comparing the data they submitted while being audited for Clery Act violations with the data from years before and after such audits. The author argued that if they reported higher rates of sexual assault during times of higher regulatory audits, this would support the conclusion that universities were failing to accurately tally incidents of sexual assault during other periods (Yung 2015). Clery Act requires in the U.S. that, among other mandates, higher education institutions must submit yearly data to the Department of Education regarding designated crimes on campuses. Sadly, it was found that university reports of sexual harassment increased by roughly 44.0% during the audit period and dropped drastically after the sexual harassment audit. This finding supports her initial proposition that the studied universities undercut sexual harassment figures during the audit. Also, evidence shows that the audits had no long-term effect on the reported levels of sexual assault, which is supported even in instances when fines are issued for noncompliance. Therefore, she concludes that greater financial and personnel resources should be allocated commensurate with the severity of the problem and not solely on university reports of sexual assault levels. Then, she advised an increase in the frequency of

auditing statutorily, and capped fines should be raised to deter transgressors from continuing to undercount sexual violence.

Viewing sexual harassment as a major public health problem, whose Prevalence is hidden in most institutions, examined sexual harassment and victimization of students in a higher institution in South Africa by sampling the opinions of 342 students through a questionnaire. They discovered that 17.3% of the male and 25.5% of the female respondents had personally experienced unwanted touching. In short, their findings indicate that both male and female students are experiencing sexual harassment on campus and that some students claim to have been raped or personally experienced attempted rape and unwanted kissing. Of note is that the authors grouped sexual harassment acts into four different areas: physical harassment, verbal harassment, non-verbal harassment, and quid pro quo harassment. These studies establish the pervasiveness of sexual scandals in institutions of higher learning and their psychological and physical effects on both males and females and the institutions' reputational image.

Maintaining a favorable public image or reputation is as vital to higher education institutions as any organization anywhere. After all, the world is a market place and everyone and entity battles to take a profitable chunk of it. It is no wonder that ensuring the public has good perceptions of anyone and any organization is often strategically carried. In the case of higher educational institutions, they must maintain enviable goodwill and image before hosting communities, nations, parents, governments, Staff, and students. This goal may become tasking when faced with a situational crisis such as a sex scandal. Relying on case studies of some universities, Downes (Downes 2017) reviewed the notable university scandals in the U.S. with their implication for university reputation and came up with the following image problems: sex scandals, drugs, cheating, hazing, admissions and diplomas, on-the-job consumption, athletics, and murder. For universities to solve these public relations problems, he suggested structural changes, institutional policies and procedures, fines, terminations, and sanctions. Specifically, on sex scandals, he proposed sexual harassment awareness campaigns involving faculty, Staff, and students and online training that would help define teacher/student and supervisor/subordinate relationships.



Similarly, Carlton (Carlton 2015) explained how the Pennsylvania State University sex scandal involving a minor influenced the image of different levels of educational institutions in the U.S. He states that "The scandal involved individuals in authoritative positions—such as coaches and campus administrators—who did not report known abuse or did not take steps to stop it. The Penn State scandal exposed a lack of protection in school policies and laws for victims of abuse". This is a serious indictment on school administrators which led to reputational issues for the University.

Specifically, exploring the role of public relations in sexual assault scandals at Columbia University, Kolk proposed three overarching recommendations for crisis communication in both internal and external environments at the collegiate level (Kolk 2016). Gleaned from Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), she suggested that internally, higher learning institutions' administrations should be prepared, flexible, and listen when handling sexual harassment issues. Externally, she admonished institutions to be timely, to tell the truth, and make information easily accessible. Considering the public interest that college sex crimes have aroused and the institutional accountability mechanism such as mandatory reporting, investigated public perceptions of campus sex assault procedures (Mancini et al. 2017). They argued that public opinion could directly or indirectly shape crime policy in a divisive polity. Gathering data from 806 Virginian respondents through a telephone survey, findings reveal that 64.0% of them believed that college administrators could significantly decrease the occurrence of sexual assaults, though the researchers felt sexual assaults would happen regardless of actions taken by administrators. However, nearly all the respondents (93.0%) approved of mandatory reporting in higher educational institutions.

As a result, we believe that when educational institutions are faced with problems like sexual harassment scandals, their solving such problems depends on their understanding and application of crisis communication management. According to Coombs, crisis management involves a set of factors designed to combat crises and lessen the actual damages inflicted (Coombs and Holladay 2010). He explains further that this is done when an organization seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and, thereby, protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage. The crisis management process is said

to consist of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. In the case of Nigerian educational institutions' reaction to the BBC sex-for-grades report, this paper focuses on the post-crisis management of the issue. Crisis communication, on the other hand, is defined "as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Elmasry and Chaudhri 2010). Narrowing it down to post-crisis communication, he says, involves dissecting the crisis management effort, communicating necessary changes to individuals, and providing follow-up crisis messages as needed. Consequently, this study's focus is on the press releases available on the websites of some Nigerian higher educational institutions where the messages of their post-crisis management can be accessed.

Appraising the Nigerian higher educational institutions' framing of responses to the BBC sex-for-grades report requires examining the communication strategies employed by various schools to salvage the reputations of their respective institutions in the face of this known intractable scandal. In this case, situational crisis communication theory offers the opportunity to unravel the adopted strategies. According to Coombs, "SCCT posits that the situation heavily influences the choices crisis managers to make about crisis response strategies" (Coombs 2013). The BBC's sex-for-grades report, which caused ripple effects in Nigerian higher learning institutions, provides the situation. Starting to take shape in the eighties, crisis communication was first viewed as a corporate apology, which describes how crisis managers used crisis response strategies to repair corporate institutions' image. In order to connect crisis response strategies to crisis situations, SCCT relied on attribution theory, which posits that people look for causes of negative events and choose causal attribution that appears most satisfying to them. Also, a key feature of attribution theory is responsible for the event or crisis. Therefore, SCCT uses responsibility to link the crisis situation and crisis response strategies. Based on this reasoning, we deem responding to sexual harassment incidence as a responsibility of Nigerian higher institutions. For instance, Coombs says:

A crisis situation is a constellation of factors that shape attributions of crisis responsibility. It is by anticipating how stakeholders are making attributions of crisis responsibility that crisis managers

select the appropriate crisis response strategies for maximizing reputational protection. (Coombs 2013)

In this instance, the crisis situation for Nigerian higher learning institutions is the incidence of sexual harassment involving female students and male lecturers on campuses, exemplified by a recent BBC sex-for-grade report. Moreover, Coombs identified three variables that influence the attribution of crisis responsibility. Crisis type is the frame used to define the crisis, which is often influenced by media and society (Commission 2013). Its types include victim, accidental and intentional crisis.

The novelty of this research is that crisis type is no doubt as it concerns sexual harassment involving male lecturers and female students in higher institutions of learning. Crisis history determines if an organization has had similar crises in the past, while performance history refers to how well or poorly the organization has treated stakeholders in the past. As a matter of fact, literature has already established the crisis and performance history of this case type. As the last variable, crisis response strategy comprises denial, diminish, rebuilding, and bolstering crisis response strategies. Denial response strategies involve the use of denying, attacking the accuser and scapegoating, while diminished response strategies utilize excuse and justification. Also, compensation and apology are used in the rebuild response strategy, while reminder, ingratiation, and victimage constitute bolstering response strategy.

## **METHODS**

We adopted a qualitative approach to examining how Nigerian higher institutions of learning framed their reactions to the BBC's report on Sex-for-Grade and the responses of stakeholders: parents, students, and lecturers to the media report. All the tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, and colleges) in the country constituted the population for the study, while we based our sample on those institutions which issued press releases about the report and made them available to the public. In the end, we collected 13 press releases which were either issued by the institutions' Public Relations Officers or Vice Chancellors to analyze. Specifically, we applied qualitative content analysis tools to analyze press releases of these educational institutions on the said incident from their respective institutional websites. In order to ascertain

the institutions' crisis response strategies, we developed content categories based on Coomb's crisis response strategies: denial, diminish, rebuild, and bolstering. We also identified suggested communication tools employed by the institutions in tackling sexual assaults involving male lecturers and female students. In addition, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 respondents comprising parents, students, and lecturers. Results are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1

S/N	Institution	Communication Response Strategy	Suggested Communication Tool
1	Tai SolarinUnivers, city of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State	Bolstering with reminder	Proposed Sexual Harassment Policy Document
2	Crescent University, Abeokuta	Bolstering with a reminder; dismissal of erring lecturer	Orientation lectures on drug abuse and sex-for-mark-related issues
3	MoshoodAbiola Polytechnic, Abeokuta	Bolstering with reminder	Social media platforms; discussion
4	Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State	Rebuild with compensation	Forums, sensitization programs, jingles and talk on university radio, theatre and drama, telephone lines and medial social networks, university handbook for Staff and students
5	Ogun College of Health Tech., Ilese-Ijebu, Ogun State	Denial with scapegoat	Student unionism, periodic campaigns for Staff and students, tackling indecent dressing
6	D.S. Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic, Itori, Ogun State	Denial with scapegoat; Bolstering with a reminder	sessions of academic conferences; staff capacity building workshops
7	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State	Denial with attack and scapegoat; Diminish with the excuse	Nothing
8	Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Ogun State	Denial	Whistle-blowing by the students
9	The Bells University, Ota, Ogun State	Denial; Bolstering with a reminder	quality assurance unit, questionnaire
10	Kogi State University	Diminish with justification	Legal framework
11	Ekiti State University	Bolstering with reminder	Legal framework with fair hearing and justice
12	University of Nigeria, Asuka	Denial with denial and attack; Diminish with the excuse	Legal framework
13	Nasarawa State University	Bolstering with reminder	Legal framework

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1 findings reveal that the sampled higher educational institutions in Nigeria employed mostly bolstering, diminishing, and denial crisis response strategies in their press releases in reaction to the BBC's sex-for-grades report to protect their own unique institutional reputations. The yeast employed is a rebuild response strategy, though, in some institutions' press releases, there was a combination of, especially, denial and diminish or denial and bolstering strategies. Specifically, when utilizing the bolstering strategy, the educational institutions did more reminder and ingratiation; when using the denial strategy, they utilized scapegoat, attack, or deny. For diminish strategy, they used excuses or justification, while they applied for compensation when using the rebuild strategy. Moreover, the educational institutions, in their press releases, espoused sexual harassment policy, a handbook for Staff and students, orientation, campaign programs, student unionism, conferences, workshops, and legal framework as measures they had taken or would take to combat sex scandals on their campuses. In addition, they suggested the use of social media networks, radio jingles, theatre, and drama as avenues through which these preventive measures could be carried out (Mushtaq, Sultana, and Imtiaz 2015). Meanwhile, further explanations are given below.

Tacit Denial. Coombs believes that the denial response strategy is used by organizations to establish that they do not have a crisis or are not responsible for the crisis that exists. Most of the sampled Nigerian higher educational institutions employed this strategy in their press releases to distance themselves, first, from the BBC's sex-for-grade report of the University of Lagos and to imply that sexual assaults hardly happened in their institutions. For example, statements such as these: "sex for marks is not a common practice in FUNAAB" and "the cases of sex for marks had not happened in Bells University" show different implied forms of denial to maintain the respective institutional reputations. Other institutions even brazenly or subtly used scapegoat and attack response strategies of denial in their press releases to claim that someone else and something else is responsible for sexual harassment cases on campuses. See the following: "The

decay in our moral training is alarming. Parents no longer correct their wards where they go wrong. Children are now the ones controlling their parents. Some of these students are over-pampered."; "Female students should dress well to avoid sexual harassment as provocative dressing most times lead to sexual harassment. The reason why your parents sent you to school is to read so as to graduate with good results and not to seduce men with indecent dressing." Evidently, in order to protect their reputation, these institutions shifted the responsibility of the sexual harassment crisis on campuses to moral decadence, female students, and their parents.

**Diminish.** When a diminished crisis strategy is employed, Coombs indicates that organizations are trying to minimize the gravity of crisis responsibility to protect their corporate image. He explains that they do this through a sub-strategy of excuse by confirming that their organization did not have control over the crisis or did not intend to create any harmful situation. In the case of the sampled Nigerian higher educational institutions' press releases, it appears that they were merely reacting to a systemic crisis whose significance was further re-established by the BBC report. For instance, an excerpt from an institution's press release reads thus "Although no cases of sexual harassment had been reported in the institution in recent times, Management was determined to monitor situations on campus very keenly, with the view to dealing appropriately with any attempt by staff to sexually harass, intimidate, and/or extort students." Invariably, this response tries to diminish the effects of the recent revelation by claiming that sexual assault generally is an unusual occurrence in its institution. Even those institutions that expressed outright denial of sexual harassment later tacitly used diminished strategy to downplay it for their reputational advantage. An example is the following: "Since we don't have the right to restrict the liberties given to the students by the system, we put in place measures that would protect them".

**Bolstering.** This crisis response strategy is said to be employed when organizations highlight positive things they do during a crisis so as to remind stakeholders about their enviable corporate reputation. Particularly, Coombs warns against using this strategy solely as it connotes organizations may be trying to distract attention from the real cause of the crisis by focusing deliberately on other factors. Unfortunately, nearly all the sampled Nigerian educational

institutions fell into this trap. In the majority of their press releases, they solely deployed a bolstering response strategy and further used reminders. Worse still, others utilized this as a supplement to the denial strategy. Examples of those excerpts in which only the bolstering strategy is used are the following. As a reminder, "Ours, as Islam-oriented University, frowns on such practice emanating either from a lecturer or the student. Erring lecturers have been sacked in the past after being found guilty of sexually harassing their students". Another one is this, "Against the backdrop of allegations of sexual harassment and other forms of intimidation in the nation's tertiary education sector, authorities of the Tai Solarin University of Education, TASUED, Ogun State, Nigeria have adopted proactive measures to contain the menace before it rears its head in the institution. Towards this end, the University's Centre for Human Rights and Gender Education has been mandated to prepare a policy document on the issue". Still, an example of where an institution supplements denial with bolstering strategy is this "The menace of sex for marks in Nigeria's institutions has always been with us. It's only recently that assumed scandalous dimensions...My institution is proactive about the issue of sex for marks. Even before the menace got escalated, lecturers and even non-academic Staff of the Polytechnic have always been routinely reminded about their basic roles as 'loco parents to the students." A similar example reads thus, "The management of the Bells University always print out a questionnaire at the end of each semester, which would be given to the students to judge their lecturers...the cases of sex for marks had not happened in Bells University as the institution management used this method to check the excesses of both parties."

Rebuild. Coombs posits that the rebuild response strategy is used to repair reputational damage. Organizations employ this in the form of compensation and apology. It is, however, warned against being misused as the public can misinterpret this during a crisis situation when there is no or minimal responsibility for a crisis. It means this could be an admission of guilt. Here, only one of the sampled educational institutions attempted to use this strategy in its reaction to the BBC's report on sexual assaults. In its press release, it says, "The University Radio Station has done a lot of sensitization programs, jingles, talks and etc. on the issue of sex-for-marks and encouraging victims to be bold to



report. The Theatre/ Drama Department staged plays and shows to create awareness among female students that it is their right to report any such incident. Most importantly, dedicated phone lines have been released to the students via their various WhatsApp platforms to call such lines mainly to report sexual harassment by any lecturer. Also, the attention of Staff has been drawn to study the Rules and Regulations Governing the activities of Staff in the University, especially as it relates to Staff - Students (female) relationships". So, all these attempts are meant to rebuild the image of Nigerian tertiary institutions using their institution as a point.

It is relevantly important that we sample the opinions of groups of stakeholders that are directly or indirectly affected by this report about Nigerian higher institutions of learning. So, the stakeholders of higher institutions of learning focused on: are students, parents/guardians, and lecturers. Some relevant excerpts of their opinions are presented below.

Parents. For instance, some parents' attributions of the occurrence of sexual harassment on campuses include a lack of disciplined parenting and a loss of societal values. These are exemplified in the excerpts below.

"We cannot replace anything with the word, Discipline; hence, raising disciplined children with good morals can further reduce this menace in our institution".

"This expresses one of the symptoms of exploitations pervading our society. As exploitative as it is, so is it inhuman and debasing for men in the ivory towers to engage in such activities".

Other parents allude to the lack of laws regulating behavioral tendencies, for instance.

"Measures should be put in place, just like advanced countries vis-à-vis laws".  
"I support all legal measures against this dastard act".

Also, there are some that believe that lack of credibility in local media reportage and under-reporting of sexual harassment are the causes.

"Sex-for-grade has existed for decades. Why has the matter not been treated with seriousness all the while, or are we saying we are not aware of any problem? My issue with this issue is that why did Nigerians have to wait for BBC to speak up before various indigenous media platforms could begin to hype and talk about this issue?"

However, some parents blame sexual harassment on female students harassing their lecturers.

“These lecturers are human and not spirit”. “On the other hands, we should also talk about indolent female students who constitute themselves as lay about, seducing lecturers to get undue advantage...So we should not turn the heat on male lecturers, young female students who seek undue favour also abounds”.

Some students clamour for victims’ protection and public trial of the male lecturer:

“Victims’ protection is one thing that should also be looked into. Many abused or exploited students are not really afraid of reporting but are afraid of the aftermath from the perpetrator(s) and unconcerned parties. For example, if a student reports, his/her identity should be kept secret and be assured of justice and zero backlashes from other lecturers. I know some cases where if you have a problem with a certain lecturer, you have automatically become enemies to a group of other lecturers. Absolute power corrupts absolutely; I believe certain lecturers have too much power to determine the fate of students. Victims’ identities should be kept a top secret; they only need to tell their stories while the alleged lecturers should then come forward to defend themselves. Suspected lecturers’ families should be made to be aware of whatever they have done”.

Likewise, some of them blame lack of academic freedom and distinct law for fighting sexual harassments:

"The root cause of sex-for-grades in Nigerian Universities is not far-fetched. It is basically due to epileptic structures and a lack of distinct laws. Epileptic laws in the sense that many, if not all, educational institutions in Nigeria, lack academic freedom. Another solution is to spell out, clearly, a universal or national policy on student-lecturer relations which should be strictly enforced...."

Others lament the government's silence on the pervasive nature of sexual harassment issues on higher institutions' campuses:

"Government is being unfair to female students because since this scenario of sex-for-grades has started, no strong pronouncement from policymakers in the education sector".

Lecturers. While some lecturers call for punishments for erring male lecturers and female students:

"It is morally and ethically wrong for anyone to take advantage of a defendant in whatever form in order to grant a legitimate entitlement. It is the lowest state of depravity for the culprit, and whoever is caught should be made to face the full wrath of the law. Meanwhile, any student caught making unwholesome advances or seducing lecturers too, should be expelled".

Others blame Nigerian society generally for allowing this culture of silence, thus canvassing for spiritual and moral training:

"In the first instance, there is the issue of sexual exploitation in every sphere of society, and this is not peculiar to academia alone. Secondly, how many cases have been reported and whoever that is facing such should use the mechanism available in the school to report, but the culture of silence from students is flabbergasting".

"Above all, our children should be given adequate moral and spiritual training to respond accordingly to unwelcomed advances from the opposite sex".

A BBC report on Sex-for-grade in one of Nigerian higher institutions of learning is not only a nightmare for the spotlighted institution but also other institutions in the country based on association and being in the same industry. It makes public relations to be a daunting task for practitioners in these educational institutions when they are faced with redeeming their organizational crisis image. They must reassure their stakeholders: students, parents/guardians, governments, and even lecturers that they would proffer lasting solutions to it. However, from the analysis of some selected press releases from the backlash of the sex scandal, the Nigerian higher educational institutions' crisis response strategies to the report range from subtle denial to diminishing, bolstering, and rebuilding, or sometimes a combination of the denial and diminish strategies. It is significant to note that nearly half of the sampled institutions employed a denial strategy or a combination with diminished strategy in their communication/press release. (Wulantari and Armansyah 2018). They did this by blaming society and scapegoating female students who were fond of donning sexy attires to harass male lecturers. Indirectly, they give excuses for the perpetration of the crime, even in their own institutions, whenever such happens again; as a matter of fact, where some institutions deployed a diminished response strategy by downplaying the gravity of sexual harassment in their institutions. They claimed it was not a frequent occurrence and hardly could they restrict the students' liberties to express themselves, and if they fell victim, they were on their own. Studies have already confirmed the under-reporting of sexual harassment cases on campuses with the institutional support of the harassment. Claiming not having the power to limit students' freedom is invariably legitimizing sexual harassment. Evidently, the use of these two crisis response strategies may be more injurious to the image the institutions were trying to repair as regards curbing the spate of sexual harassment acts on campuses. On the other hand, faith-based institutions used a bolstering response strategy by citing that their religious inclination does not allow such crime in their institutions, trying to distance themselves from being tainted

because their belief system does not condone such. This also may not be effective as Nigerian public perceptions of higher institutions generally are not favorable (Sapiro 2018).

Also, they proclaimed they would hand swift punishment to any lecturer caught in the act. At the same time, those that utilized the rebuild response strategy claimed that they had drawn up sexual harassment policy documents to tackle the menace in their institutions; that they had organized sensitization programs using different mass media to enlighten their Staff and students about the plague. It should be noted that their press releases did not deny that sexual harassment was strange to their institutions. Yet, while highlighting positive things about an institution using a bolstering response strategy in the aftermath of a sex scandal report may be reasonable and believable to an extent, in the long run, it may look as if such an institution is overreaching. In the case of Nigerian higher educational institutions, the best response strategy may be the rebuild one. So many socio-cultural and economic factors point to the fact that the incidence of sexual harassment is highly inevitable in Nigerian tertiary institutions, not discountenancing very many mass media reports on sexual harassment which have been received by the Nigerian public without being given due attention by the relevant authorities in the society (Burn 2019).

Moreover, the impressions of stakeholders-students, parents, and lecturers who are directly affected by the shameful report are vital in this circumstance. They are the ones that public relations practitioners in these institutions must consider before drafting and releasing their responses. While some parents and lecturers accused the local media of underreporting sexual harassment cases and lacking the credibility to have reported on the issue before BBC had come up with the sex scandal report, some other parents blamed lack of parenting discipline and societal tendencies for exploitation while some lecturers reasoned it was due to lack of spiritual and moral training. Both parents and lecturers lay the blame on some amorous female students who dress to harass hapless male lecturers. Obviously, their submission on the coverage of sexual harassment cases in Nigerian higher institutions of learning shows they do not trust the Nigerian mass media. This attitude could pose some constraints for the

educational institutions trying to reach out to their stakeholders in the wake of the BBC report. It is even daunting to change the preconceived notions these stakeholders have had about the treatment of sexual harassment cases. In addition, interviewed students saw themselves at the mercy of the system as a matter of fact. From believing that they have been neglected by their institutions and the national government in giving them the protection they require against sexual harassment incidence, they may be the hardest to sway by any strategic response of the higher educational institutions in the face of this pandemic issue.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the Nigerian tertiary institutions' crisis management response strategies and stakeholders' reactions after the BBC's sex for grades report. Based on the findings, we submit that the majority of Nigerian higher institutions of learning did not consider sexual harassment incidence as a problem enough to warrant their condemnation by releasing official documents to that effect. We also conclude that most of the sampled institutions did not deploy appropriate crisis response strategies in their press releases in the wake of a pervasive incidence of sexual harassment scandals in our educational institutions. Therefore, they need to understand the context before issuing any communication first. When it comes to sexual harassment as the one occurring in Nigerian higher institutions of learning, because people have high expectations of them and entrust their wards to them, being associated with sex scandals will, no doubt, draw a lot of criticism. Therefore, the higher educational institutions' communication approach to the reported sex scandal should have been rebuilt, tinged with bolstering strategies. Already, they do not have an enviable reputation in relation to sexual harassment incidence. This means they cannot deny it. More interestingly, the mass media they might rely upon is glaringly distrusted by the majority of their stakeholders. So, they need to find more intimate channels of communicating with them as some stakeholders still have some sympathy for them. More sadly, though, they would need to try harder to convince their students, especially the females who are perennially the victims of this plague in their institutions. They do not trust even the mass media let alone its contents.

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