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## Operational Dynamics of Internal Communication in Nigerian Public Universities: A Case Study of Administrative Staff in Owerri, Imo State

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores internal communication in Nigerian public universities, focusing on administrative staff in Owerri, Imo State. It aims to investigate how the flow and processes of internal communication influence the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative staff in public universities. Challenges of internal communication in public universities in Nigeria are primarily attributed to reliance on traditional communication methods, fragmented channels, insufficient ICT infrastructure, limited capacity building, resistance to changes in practice and imposed communications. These challenges lead to delays, miscommunication, and inefficiencies that hinder effective administrative operations. The study employed a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews with 20 informants purposively selected to collect data on internal communication and its effect on their work efficiency. Interview questions were developed based on a literature review and the Equity Theory framework to guide the process. Findings from the study revealed that a structured, top-down communication approach limited feedback opportunities and resulted in delays, disengagement and inefficiencies. Similarly, multi-layered processes and passive communication created rigid processes, leading to poor responses to the university's operational demands. The study highlights the importance of upgrading digital communication infrastructure to enable two-way engagement and advocates for staff training on ICT tools to enhance internal communication. It recommends implementing policies that allow regular staff feedback to mitigate communication gaps and improve internal communication practices. These processes will promote inclusiveness, responsiveness, and efficiency, ultimately enhancing administrative productivity and adaptability to change in Nigerian public universities.

**Keywords:** internal communication, organisational communication, communication channels, operational dynamics, administrative staff

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### Introduction

Effective internal communication is crucial for organisations to operate smoothly and efficiently. Scholars interchangeably refer to internal communication as internal Relations, Employee Communication, Staff Communication, Administrative Communication, and Operational Communication (Verghese, 2017). Regardless of the various descriptions and references of internal

communication, most scholars, including Welch (2015) and Verghese (2017), affirm that internal communication involves deliberate efforts to establish and manage relationships and interactions with relevant stakeholders, principally employees at various levels of the organisation. Research study affirms that internal communication enhances employees' engagement, alignment, and understanding of the organisation's needs and thus leads to organisational success (Ali et al., 2021).

Dada et al. (2021) noted that in public institutions like public universities, internal communication fosters a sense of belonging and cohesion among staff employees. Effective information and communication flows ensure faculty and staff members are aligned with the institution's goals. In an environment with complex administrative structures like Nigeria, plagued by poor funding in the education system, academic pressures and expectations, effective internal communication is pertinent to performance operational efficiency (Jacob & Musa, 2020; Olugbo et al., 2023). Hence, responsive internal communication systems increase operational efficiency and employee engagement and satisfaction, which are important for organisational success (Kehinde et al., 2022; Omotayo et al., 2019).

Furthermore, research studies emphasise the important role of university administrative staff, often referred to as non-academic staff in the Nigerian academic sphere due to their operational and management support functions (Badau, 2018; Uzoh, 2020). Similarly, research studies like Jacob et al. (2020) identify persistent internal communication challenges in Nigerian universities. These challenges include limited access to effective communication tools, segmented communication channels, and resistance to modern practices and infrastructure (AbdulKareem et al., 2020; Albasu & Nyameh, 2017; Umar et al., 2022). These challenges are more pronounced in Owerri, Imo State in Nigeria, where universities are confronted with additional barriers in terms of resources and staff training (Ayoko et al., 2023). Although Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has shown the potential to strengthen communication processes (Alabi & Mutula, 2020), its adoption and implementation are still limited, which further hampers the operational efficiency of administrators of public universities in the country (Jacob et al., 2020).

In addition, most public universities in Nigeria continuously rely on conventional paper-based communication methods such as memo dispatches, publicly posted notices, and face-to-face meetings (Alabi & Mutula, 2020). Therefore, the lack of clearly defined communication guidelines and protocols of strategic communication in most Nigerian public universities is detrimental to their internal communication processes. As such, the continuous usage of this obsolete communication method results in delays, poor information tracking, and incoherent communication flow, which subsequently affect effective decision-making (Jacob et al., 2021a; Ogunode et al., 2023). As such, Asiyai (2013), Enakrire (2021) and Adegbore and Sadiku (2024) noted that such a system fails to meet real-time demands of modern administration, thereby creating bottlenecks that disrupt institutional operations, affecting the reliability and transparency of information flow across administrative levels and departments.

Likewise, Iyiommo (2014) found that federal universities in Nigeria outperform state universities in information management, particularly in data availability, retrieval, processing and analysis through technological tools. However, internal conflicts persist due to delayed salaries, abrupt policy changes, lack of employee consultation, poor amenities, denial of employee rights, communication gaps, managerial high-handedness, unfulfilled agreements with unions, mismanagement, and inconsistent regulations (Umar et al., 2022).

In addition, financial and logistical constraints restrict ICT adoption and usage (Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2024), compelling staff to rely on inefficient manual processes (Oyedipe & Popoola, 2019), along with a lack of training which limits effective use of digital tools (Adejare et al., 2020; Jacob et al., 2021b). Additionally, studies by Nkenchor (2017), Akarika et al. (2017), Ahmed (2022), and Umar et al. (2022) observed that different departments within public universities in Nigeria often operate independently without standardised communication protocols, which lead to inconsistency in information dissemination and duplication of efforts. Likewise, the hierarchical structure and nature of Nigerian organisations empower leadership rigidity (Akanji et al., 2020; Eze et al., 2013). Consequently, Ajayi et al. (2024) found that 70% of non-academic staff in Southwestern Nigerian universities rated their

working conditions as moderately favourable, indicating dissatisfaction and limited employee voice in negotiations.

Despite the importance of internal communication, public universities in Nigeria still struggle with inefficient communication systems, particularly in their administrative frameworks (Aiwuyo et al., 2020); (Adejare et al., 2020). These inefficiencies hinder routine and urgent administrative tasks and the overall efficiency of the institution (Aithal & Maiya, 2023; Barreto, 2020). As such, this paper's core objective is to explore the structure and impact of internal communication to uncover specific operational dynamics, reasons for existing processes, and their effectiveness.

Hence, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the operational dynamics of internal communication influence the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative staff in public universities in Owerri, Imo State?
2. How are internal communication processes structured for administrative staff in public universities in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Operational Dynamics of Internal Communication***

While communication is the blood of any organisation, internal communication ensures the smooth coordination of functions essential for achieving organisational excellence (Emwinromwankhoe & Ekhareafo, 2022). According to Maiwada and Oshionebo (2024), the operational dynamics of internal communication anchor the structural setup that facilitates information exchange within an organisation. As such, how information is shared, received, and interpreted directly influences productivity and decision-making in an organisation (Abubakar et al., 2019).

Consequently, the operational dynamics of internal communication rely heavily on channel effectiveness, which involves utilising appropriate tools or platforms that ensure clarity and accessibility of information and communication (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Thus, effective channels streamline information flow, minimise misunderstandings, and enable employees to access and share critical updates promptly, fostering transparency and operational efficiency (Obinna et al., 2024).

Furthermore, human elements play a vital role in activating communication processes, as unprocessed communication functions remain dormant until organisational actors act on them (Bucăța & Rizescu, 2017). As a result, aligning communication functions with organisational goals is critical for fostering cohesion, unifying teams or workforce toward shared objectives, and ensuring that all messages and directives contribute meaningfully to the organisation's strategic direction (Eyo, 2025; Zerfass & Volk, 2020).

Equally, as a critical aspect of communication, adaptability denotes flexible communication systems that enable organisations to respond swiftly to crises, shift priorities, and evolve operational demands, ensuring organisational resilience and continuity (Kim, 2021). Similarly, feedback mechanisms further enhance internal communication by facilitating two-way interactions that improve collaboration and decision-making. Such mechanisms are designed to preclude information silos and interruptions while fostering creativity and trust, thereby encouraging employees to share ideas, voice concerns, and provide input, transforming communication into a dynamic and reciprocal process (Lee & Kim, 2021).

### ***Process Of Internal Communication***

In a working context, internal communication begins with the development and encoding of messages that are clear, concise, and tailored to specific or targeted recipients. This entails organising messages with clarity to meet the needs of their recipients and using appropriate mediums (e.g. memos, emails, and in-person), which are essential to getting the desired messages across (Siciliano, 2020). Appropriate encoding of messages minimises the chances of ambiguity and facilitates a great degree of clarity to meet communication objectives. Research study reveals that poor encoding of messages leads to misinterpretation, which reduces productivity levels (Subre, 2023; Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). This

reinforces the notion that creating precise messages catered to the audience is vital to the operational effectiveness of entities.

The decoding and interpretation of messages are equally essential in internal communication. This process involves incorporating existing structures and shared understanding for effective design of communication framework. In decoding, the intended recipient's successful processing of the message is imperative to avoid interpretations arising from poor use of language, tone, or context, which leads to potential confusion or mistakes (Fiset et al., 2024). Therefore, having a structure in the flow of information, whether it is top-down, bottom-up, or horizontal, is also significant. Top-down communication ensures that key decisions and directives from top management are effectively communicated to employees.

In contrast, bottom-up communication provides a means for employees to provide feedback and engage with management, while horizontal communication promotes cross-departmental collaboration (Akarika et al., 2022). Research conducted by Abah et al. (2018) and Kadarisman (2020) demonstrates that having clear hierarchies in communication helps minimise delays and better coordination of tasks. However, hierarchical structures also have the potential to inhibit communication flow due to bureaucratic delays that can slow the decision-making process and productivity (Bakare, 2021).

Furthermore, incorporating cultural context into communication design helps align messages with organisational norms, values, and expectations, leading to greater employee trust and decreased resistance to change (Yue et al., 2021). A study conducted by Abduraimi et al. (2023) found that alignment of communication patterns with organisational culture heightens employee engagement, while Dhital (2023) also noted that culturally aligned communication bridges knowledge gaps and fortifies unity in the workplace.

### ***Theoretical Underpinning of Equity Theory and Framework***

Equity Theory, developed by John Stacey Adams in 1963, is a foundational theory in organisational psychology which helps explain how the perception of fairness influences employees' motivation, satisfaction, and behaviour in the workplace (Adams, 1963). According to the theory, employees are apt to compare their inputs (experience, efforts, skills, time and loyalty) and their outcomes (rewards, pay raises, recognition, promotion and benefits) to others in similar positions to ascertain if they are fairly treated in comparison to their peers and counterparts (Emmanuel & Nwuzor, 2021). This type of comparison forms a perceived "equality" or "inequality" notion, which can have serious effects on job satisfaction and output of employees (Mensah et al., 2020; Phang, 2015).

In other words, if employees perceive equity, they remain motivated and engaged. If they perceive inequity, such as receiving inadequate rewards for their efforts, it can lead to dissatisfaction, reduced commitment, and lower productivity (Memon et al., 2020). Given the critical role internal communication plays in organisational success, the need for equity restoration in a work setting is geared to address perceived inequities (Alam et al., 2020). As such, this cannot be visible without communication, as transparent feedback, fair reward systems, and open dialogue help maintain perceptions of equity and employee motivation in the workplace.

Consequently, organisational communication, which is the organisation's response to equity restoration, underscores the dynamic and interactive nature of internal communication in perceived fairness within the workplace. Khemissi and Chebbi (2022) noted that perceived inequities in an organisational setting could lead to adverse behaviours, decreased productivity, reduced engagement, reduced employee satisfaction and retention and even turnover. The applicability of the theory in the context of this study is geared at accessing internal communication operations and processes in public universities in Imo State, Nigeria, as well as understanding how the absence of regular and constructive feedback can lead to perceived inequity given that employees (administrative/non-academic staffs) in Nigerian public universities often feel that their efforts are not being recognised proportionately (Ayodele et al., 2022; Jacob et al., 2021a).

As such, in today's workplace, where diversity in roles and responsibilities can create varied perceptions of fairness and as such, Equity Theory offers valuable insight into how internal communication shapes

employee behaviour and perceptions. Thus, by addressing equity through rewards, recognition, and open communication, organisations like public universities in Nigeria can create a balanced and inclusive work environment that supports employee motivation and productivity through communication. Consequently, applying Equity Theory can assist managers, policymakers, and administrators in exhibiting or creating a workplace culture based on open communication in which employees' work is valued by proactively identifying, recognising, and addressing challenges and difficulties through strategic communication to enhance inclusive internal communication.

## **Methods**

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the experiences of administrative staff of public universities in relation to the practice of internal communication processes in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to obtain data and gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' views and experiences of internal communication and its effect on work efficiency. The researcher also employed a structured interview guide in the study to keep participants focused on the topical discussion, respond to key topics and not stray off the focus and topic of discussion while also allowing flexibility to probe questions and uncover deeper insights and perspectives (Naz et al., 2022). To enhance and ensure the clarity and trustworthiness of the interview questions, a pilot study was conducted with five non-academic staff from the college of education in Owerri who did not participate in the main study (Gani et al., 2020).

The study sample consisted of 18 participants (7 women and 11 men, aged 30-65, with 6-30 years of work experience, who were purposively sampled from two universities: Imo State University (IMSU) and the Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO). Owerri was the chosen site of study due to its nature as an educational hub in the southeast region of Nigeria, with six universities, three of which are in Owerri. Participants were sampled from the principal units of the university, which include the Vice Chancellor's office, the Registrar, the Bursar, the Librarian, the Director of Works (Transportation and Maintenance), Student Affairs and Security. These units are important to the day-to-day administration of the university, given their roles in the internal communication process (Meenyanikor & Eme, 2016).

The study used purposive sampling to select participants with experience and adequate knowledge of internal communications processes and practices. This sampling technique facilitated the collection of raw, rich, focused and contextually relevant data to achieve the paper's objectives. Thus, by targeting and sampling the administrative staff of public universities, the study offers insight into the internal communication processes across departments, thereby allowing for meaningful comparison and analysis.

As an important concept in qualitative studies, data saturation was attained following an interview with 15 participants with no new information emerging. However, three additional interviews were conducted to ensure thoroughness, robustness, confirmability, rigour, and depth, bringing the total number of participants to 18. Hence, this process of enhancing robustness and confirmability highlights the sufficiency of data collated (Guest et al., 2020).

Before the interviews, all participants were given a consent form, which they were required to sign to indicate their agreement to participate in the study. The interview lasted 20–40 minutes over two months. It was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim to include verbal and non-verbal cues to capture the essence and depth of participants' actual words and expressions, thus providing trustworthy data for analysis. Therefore, it was important to include non-verbal cues such as “mmh”, “um”, “hmm”, timing, and giggles in the data transcription, as these purposeful expressions added depth to the participants' perspectives.

Hill et al. (2022) noted that verbatim transcripts authenticate data, while non-verbal cues, such as pauses and voice tone during conversation, provide rich context to a participant's opinions. Motulsky (2021) recommends data validation of a participant's views to enhance the credibility of research findings in qualitative studies. Hence, in this study, the transcribed data were sent back to all participants to verify the accuracy of their views and opinions and ensure that their actual or intended views were reflected

in the transcript. The initial coding phase involved line-by-line (open) coding in which data was broken into small portions and labels assigned to them. Consequently, data for the study was coded and thematically analysed via Atlas.ti 8 software. Related codes were grouped into categories with connections between them. Related or similar codes were merged while identifying overarching themes that align with the research objectives (Coding, see appendix). Thematic analysis of central themes provided a nuanced understanding of staff experiences with internal communication, highlighting how communication dynamics influence administrative efficiency, communication access and processes in public universities in Nigeria.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Respondents in the Study*

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Department/Unit/Division</b>
<b>Group 1 Imo State University (IMSU)</b>					
Key Informant 1	50	Male	Bachelors	8 Years	Library
Key Informant 2	44	Male	Masters	12 Years	Bursary (Finance/Account)
Key Informant 3	38	Female	Bachelors	8 Years	Student Affairs
Key Informant 4	60	Male	Masters	20 Years	Vice Chancellor
Key Informant 5	36	Female	Bachelor	10 Years	Registrar
Key Informant 6	52	Female	PGD	15 Years	Director of Works (Maintenance)
Key Informant 7	35	Male	Bachelor	10 Years	Director of Works (Transport)
Key Informant 8	32	Male	Masters	8 Years	Security And Safety
<b>Informant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Department/Unit/Division</b>
<b>Group 2 Federal University (FUTO)</b>					
Key Informant 9	30	Male	WACE	8 Years	Security And Safety
Key Informant 10	45	Female	Masters	10 Years	Vice-Chancellor
Key Informant 11	40	Male	Masters	18 Years	Registry/Admissions
Key Informant 12	35	Male	Bachelor	10 Years	Director of Works (Transportation)
Key Informant 13	28	Female	Bachelor	6 Years	Director of Works (Maintenance)
Key Informant 14	65	Male	Masters	30 Years	Library
Key Informant 15	40	Male	WAEC	15 Years	Student Affairs Division
Key Informant 16	40	Female	Masters	9 Years	Bursary (Finance/Account)
Key Informant 17	38	Male	Bachelor	6 Years	Registrar (Exams and Records)
Key Informant 18	32	Female	Bachelor	10 Years	Student Affairs Division (Sport & Recreation)

## Results

### **Objective 1: Operational Dynamics of Internal Communication**

The first research question explored how operational dynamics of internal communication influence the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative staff in public universities. The analysis identified two main themes describing the operational dynamics of internal communication, namely linear information flow and traditional communication methods, respectively.

#### **Linear Information Flow**

All 18 participants in the study affirmed that communication within their department or unit was linear, often emanating from the top down to administrative staff (non-academic staff) as they are widely known in the Nigerian university system. Based on the premise that communication is anchored in information flow and interactions, internal communication involves how employees share, receive, and respond to messages to coordinate and perform tasks while maintaining working relationships with their superiors and achieving organisational goals. According to participants in the study, internal communication, as operated in their respective units, was hierarchical and followed the university's chain of command, where information moves up and down through specific layers of the organisational structure.

According to Key informant (KI-4),

*“For instance, the Vice Chancellor's personnel assistant or secretary is responsible for drafting messages that move from department heads to faculties, department, and if relevant, to students. If the message involves policy implementation, such as allowing only registered students into the library, the librarian is tasked with enforcing this directive. My role is simply to ensure the information reaches its intended recipients; I do not decide when or how it is sent.”*

Similarly, the key informant (KI-8) affirms the notion of lineal communication, stating thus:

*“Here information flows directly from the Director or HOD to us, with clear instructions on what is expected of us, and if we have feedback or concerns, we have to pass through the unit head...Ahh...so our efficiency and effectiveness as administrative staff depend on how well we manage tasks and respond to job demands with limited opportunity for direct feedback or adjustments along the way.”*

Thus, based on respondents' views, as stated above, the hierarchical communication setup system helps maintain order and direct the flow of information, as each level requires approval or adaptation before passing the message along. Notably, the structured communication approach ensures clarity in delivering organisational goals, policies, and expectations and supports consistency and alignment across all levels. However, it limits feedback from lower levels (administrative staff), potentially reducing responsiveness to on-the-ground challenges.

This is evident in key informant (KI-12) views:

*“For example, if our director issues a notice on transport schedules or upcoming maintenance, drivers or other staff needing clarification must first report through designated channels, such as their supervisor or unit head, before reaching the director. Our efficiency depends on responsiveness to tasks, and maintaining this structured communication helps manage absenteeism and truancy”.*

In this study, internal communication feedback in public universities in Owerri is noted to be slow, likely due to underlying organisational issues. To address absenteeism and truancy, these universities rely on a one-way, top-down communication flow aimed at effective employee management. Findings from Maiwada and Oshionebo (2024) support this, indicating that internal communication in Nigerian firms focuses on results and task performance, with limited emphasis on on-the-job training and development. Employers and, by extension, managers expect employees to be capable from the outset,

which highlights the need for a shift toward more strategic, inclusive, and responsive internal communication practices, particularly within rigid, bureaucratic entities like public universities.

### ***Traditional Communication Methods***

Traditional communication methods emerged as another key theme in understanding how the operational dynamics of internal communication affect the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative staff in public universities. Public universities in Owerri often rely on these methods. As such, reliance on formal, hierarchical channels and face-to-face interactions helps ensure clear information flow and structured coordination, which is crucial for supporting administrative tasks in complex, large-scale institutions like a university.

According to key informant (KI-2)

*“My role here is largely based on following instructions and directives. There’s little room for questions, because at any moment, I might get a call, an email, or even a face-to-face visit from the boss, giving me a task or directive. So, it’s very much a command-and-control style of communication... [Loud Laughter] ... Our communication is direct, without much technological mediation, aside from phones or emails.”*

Also, Key informant (KI-16) echoed this, saying thus:

*“We haven’t reached a point where we can work comfortably from home, especially since public financial tasks require us to be on-site. Technologically, we’re not there yet, so for now, we rely on our traditional, face-to-face communication methods. As long as we can see each other and get the job done, the current system works fine for us.” .... {Smile}....*

Based on respondents’ views as stated above, Nigerian public universities and many public entities still rely heavily on traditional communication methods, such as face-to-face interactions, phone calls, and official memos, due to several key factors in the operation of internal communication. Thus, limited technological infrastructure, budget constraints, and bureaucratic processes often make digital communication systems challenging to implement and maintain. Additionally, traditional communication methods align with the hierarchical and often rigid organisational structures of these institutions, which emphasise formal authority, direct supervision, and clear reporting lines. This approach is perceived as more reliable and secure, especially in managing sensitive information or public finance tasks that require strict accountability, further reinforcing the preference for conventional communication practices. These findings align with Dada et al. (2021), who identified major barriers to ICT use in Nigerian universities, including inadequate funding, insufficient ICT facilities, low computer literacy among staff, unstable power and internet, poor policy implementation, high maintenance costs, and poor maintenance culture. Thus, for internal communication to be effective and at par with standardised internal communication setup, increasing ICT funding, providing sufficient facilities in all offices, implementing comprehensive training programs, enforcing ICT policies, subsidising ICT costs, promoting a maintenance culture, and ensuring reliable power and internet services must be addressed.

### ***Objective 2: Internal Communication Process for Administrative Staff in Public Universities***

The second research question focused on how internal communication processes are structured for administrative staff in public universities in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. Upon analysis of data, two dominant themes were revealed, namely, multi-layered process and passive communication, respectively.

#### ***Multi-Layered Process***

All 18 Participants in the study agreed that the internal communication process within their respective universities assumed a multi-layered process. Thus, participants in the study described the internal communication process in a complex entity like their university as a structured and multi-layered process that facilitates the flow of information, instructions, and feedback across various levels and departments. This is because, in a university setting, communication often deploys formal and informal



channels, with information typically coming from senior management (such as the Vice Chancellor) to administrative staff, faculty, and students, respectively. The process is influenced by established structures, with each level of the organisation aligning with the management directives. This is made very clear in the views of the key informant (KI-3), who stated thus:

*“Our communication is multi-level and structured. For example, approval of the academic calendar is done by the University Senate, and the Vice Chancellor communicates it to relevant HODs and Deans, who then interpret it for their departments. The Dean of Student Affairs approves extracurricular events like cultural week and interdepartmental tournaments, which we, the student affairs staff, coordinate with student representatives and sports officials to ensure smooth execution without disrupting academics. If issues arise like venue challenges or lack of medical support, we report them back to the Dean for prompt resolution. Throughout the process, periodic updates from university management help maintain compliance and address any emerging challenges.”*

In the same token, a key informant (KI-17) acknowledged the notion of a multi-layered internal communication process, stating thus:

*“My responsibilities are clear, so close supervision isn’t necessary because communication here is well-structured. For example, when the Registrar issues directives on exam policies, like stricter ID checks to prevent impersonation, which are sent to department heads and the Head of Exams and Records, the HODs will review and interpret the directives and can adjust it like assigning teams for ID checks or updating exam attendance procedures during exams if delays from ID checks cause overcrowding, so front-line staff will report to their supervisor, who will take it to the Head of Exams and so when this feedback reaches the Registrar, he may adjust ID check stations to improve efficiency.”*

Based on the respondents' view, as stated above, the multi-layered internal communication process is well-defined, with each level ensuring that directives are interpreted, executed, and adjusted as needed to prevent disruptions. This demonstrates how a top-down policy is put into action, using feedback loops to maintain efficiency and resolve issues promptly. For instance, policy implementation also includes periodic updates and reminders to reinforce compliance and address ongoing challenges. Hence, regular communication is primarily instructional, with check-ins and performance reviews to ensure that all staff understand their roles and that those policies are effectively enforced. These findings align with research by Renani et al. (2017), who noted that the purpose of structuring communication is to streamline actions and support teamwork, as well as allow the organisation to accomplish more collectively than individuals could separately. In a similar manner, Xinyu (2023) argued that for communication to be effective within a complex entity like a university, communication must be structured and coordinated to achieve organisational goals. However, Vercic and Spoljaric (2020) argue that internal communication satisfaction is strongly influenced by the choice of communication channels, especially as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) rapidly evolves. As such, to ensure effective internal communication, managers must consider employees' preferences regarding communication methods. While the focus points to a model of communication as well as a channel, invariably, this approach allows managers to select channels that align with employee needs, thereby enhancing engagement and message clarity amidst the constant shifts in communication technology.

### ***Passive Communication***

The next dominant theme regarding the internal communication process of public universities in Owerri Imo state was passive communication. All 18 key informants in the study agreed that often their superiors engaged in information and communication situations whereby information is transmitted with little or no active engagement from the administrative staff as recipients and with minimal feedback or interaction. In the context of a university, generally, communication is largely one-way or directive, and recipients such as staff or students are expected to receive and follow instructions without providing much feedback or engaging in the communication process.

According to key informant (KI-7),

*“When we receive emails from university management or the HOD about updates such as new working hours or new regulations on parking space or entry stickers, there’s no option for questions or feedback. These formal messages simply expect compliance, with no space for staff to discuss or raise concerns and if we have any concerns, they are addressed through separate channels and definitely not in response to the initial communication.”*

In the same manner, a key informant (KI-15) shared the same sentiment, stating thus:

*“Communication here operates in what I call acquiescent style communication .... {Smile} .... Much like the university controls hiring decisions, they also dictate the flow of communication, and due to the structure and formalities in place, we experience acquiescent communication a lot in our interactions with our superiors. So...ooo...there is like an unspoken understanding here whereby questioning directives is viewed as challenging authority and so you must comply, even if you have constructive feedback to offer and so essentially, just wait till your opinion is needed, which, realistically never happens because somebody run things around here and you either follow the lead or get out.”*

Based on the views of participants in the study, as evident above, passive communication is very prevalent in internal communications of public universities in Nigeria. This is because administrative staff within the various departments and units responsible for the operation of the university, even as recipients, often receive information without much opportunity for dialogue or clarification, thereby reaffirming the one-way communication process. Studies by Eyo and Hasan (2021) highlighted that hierarchical organisations are often made at higher levels and then communicated downwards, with little room for feedback or input from lower levels, especially if there are strict policies or directives in place. However, on the bright side, passive communication enables information to be delivered with an expectation of compliance rather than delays in discussion and eventual engagement. While this method can be efficient for disseminating clear instructions, it can also lead to disengagement or misunderstandings if the recipients feel they have no voice in the communication process. This notion has been highlighted by Shabbir (2017), who observed that the organogram of entities in Nigeria often places employees at the lowest level in the organisation chart. Hence, while passive communication may help with compliance and clarity, it can limit collaboration and responsiveness.

### ***Practical Implications of the Study***

The study's findings emphasise the need for a more efficient and interactive internal communication system in Nigerian public universities to enhance administrative effectiveness and staff engagement. Currently, the reliance on linear, one-way communication and traditional methods (e.g. memos and circulars, notice boards) limits the potential for real-time interaction and feedback, resulting in delays and possible misunderstandings, particularly in solving employee grievances against top management. From a practical standpoint, these limitations restrict administrative staff's ability to address emerging issues promptly, as they are often bound to follow top-down directives without room for input. The multi-layered process further exacerbates this by increasing the time taken for messages to pass through various hierarchical levels, leading to information dilution and potential ambiguity. Thus, addressing these issues involves implementing modern digital communication tools, such as centralised communication platforms or intranets, that enable faster, more direct communication across hierarchical levels. These tools can support interactive features that allow administrative staff to seek clarification in real time and provide input when necessary. In addition, the usage of ICT in internal communication in public universities is almost invisible and as such, comprehensive training programs will help administrative staff utilise these tools effectively even during after-office hours, thereby promoting a holistic and inclusive communication system. Additionally, promoting regular feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes and an open-door policy for complaints, can help bridge the gap between administrative staff and university management. Hence, the shift toward more interactive and transparent communication can improve staff morale and engagement, ultimately enhancing their efficiency and responsiveness to university operations.

### ***Policy Implications of the Study***

The study underscores the need for policy reforms in Nigerian public universities that support a more inclusive, responsive, and efficient internal communication structure. Current public universities are under the purview of the federal government via the federal Ministry of Education. As such, existing policies favour a centralised, hierarchical approach that restricts administrative staff from contributing to decision-making processes, leading to a one-way, passive communication framework. Revising these policies to support a more decentralised communication approach could empower universities and, by extension, departments within the university with a certain degree of autonomy, thereby allowing for faster response times for department-specific issues. Policies encouraging interactive, two-way communication would also help administrative staff feel more valued as part of the university community, potentially reducing the disengagement and dissatisfaction that arise from feeling marginalised.

Furthermore, universities, on their part, can put in place policies mandating the establishment of regular feedback loops and opportunities for dialogue in various departments and units within the university. This will make it a requirement for management to actively engage with staff perspectives on new directives or policy changes before implementation. Universities could also establish clear guidelines on information-sharing practices to ensure that communication remains accurate, timely, and accessible at all levels. Thus, policies that incentivise feedback and reward constructive staff input will promote a more dynamic and collaborative administrative environment, which would enhance both communication efficiency and institutional responsiveness. Consequently, the adoption of such policy reforms will align the internal communication practices of public universities in Nigeria with contemporary standards, which will improve university operations and the administrative staff's work environment.

### ***Theoretical Implications of the Study***

Equity Theory asserts that employees seek and assess fairness in the work by evaluating their input and output ratio. As such, in the realm of internal communication, limited feedback mechanisms and passive communication practices identified in the study reveal a significant gap between staff expectations of inclusive communication and involvement in decision-making due to hierarchical, top-down communication practices, which often result in imposed communication. Thus, administrative staff at the lower cadre of the organisation rank often perceive marginalisation and exclusion from decision-making, resulting in an imbalance in perceived fairness and acknowledgement in the workplace. The feeling of marginalisation challenges Equity Theory's principle of balanced input and output, as administrative staff or employees are more likely to feel neglected when their contributions to an organisation's operations go unacknowledged by management. Consequently, a rigid and centralised communication structure may create a perception of inequity, which may lead to disengagement or dissatisfaction among employees. Although top-down communication is an acceptable and reputable communication approach geared at streamlining operational efficiency, its contrast with Equity Theory's premise of inclusivity implies a practical and theoretical disconnect. As a result of this, bridging the practical and theoretical gap through participatory communication not only enhances employees' voice and job satisfaction but also establishes an administrative culture that aligns policies and practices with a theoretical base of fairness and inclusiveness. Consequently, this paper underlines the need for the modernisation of communication practices in public universities in Nigeria for operational efficiency, fairness and viability of Equity Theory. Hence, by fostering a more inclusive communication framework, these institutions can improve staff engagement, aligning practical approaches more closely with the theoretical postulation of equity.

### ***Limitations and future directions of the study***

This study is limited to public universities in Owerri, Imo State, and may not fully reflect communication dynamics in other regions or types of institutions. Thus, by focusing exclusively on administrative staff, the study does not include the perspectives of academic staff, potentially missing an important communication challenge across the university and its various key stakeholders. Additionally, given the nature of the inductive qualitative approach and the limited sample size, findings

from the study may not be generalised to a broader population. As such, future research could expand the sample to include a more extensive and diverse group of participants nationwide to provide a more comprehensive understanding of internal communication processes in Nigerian public universities. Further studies can also examine the effects of real-time communication tools on employee satisfaction and productivity. Moreover, comparisons with internal communication in private universities may reveal best practices that could be adapted in the higher education sector.

### **Conclusion**

This study underscores the impact of structured, hierarchical communication on the efficiency and engagement of administrative staff in Nigerian public universities. While the current one-way communication system ensures order and clarity, it also limits flexibility and inclusivity, potentially diminishing operational responsiveness. In addition, currently, the involvement of ICT in internal communication operations and processes in public universities in Nigeria is apparently low due to rigid structure, funding, leadership and administrative setup, which streamline communication to one-way communication. Thus, greater involvement of digital communication tools and training programmes would encourage more interactive, inclusive communication internally and externally. As such, the adoption of policies that enable two-way engagement can help clarify expectations, reduce delays, and cultivate a more integrated administrative environment for both employees and the university at large. Thus, by adopting modern communication practices and fostering two-way engagement, Nigerian universities can bridge these gaps, enhancing both staff morale and institutional effectiveness.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

### **Author Contribution Statement**

PO: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Editing and Report Writing.  
DNK: Reviews. FDZ: Supervision.

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### **Ethics Statement**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM): Ref. No. UPM/TNCPI/RMC/JKEUPM/1.4.18.2(JKEUPM).

### **Data Access Statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## Appendix 1

### *Coding*

Objective 1	Raw Data		Codes	Categories	Themes
How do the operational dynamics of internal communication influence the efficiency and	(K14) Personally, it is mostly oral communication and written emails, and the WhatsApp group chat is only for me and my coworkers and colleagues; our supervisor and boss are not members of the group. Well, for me, it is mostly face-to-face, maybe because I am the admin sec, so	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	L1Q1: Formal communication, L3Q1: Tech Assisted Communication  L6Q1: Formal Communication	* Integrated Communication *Direct Interaction  *Direct Interaction	1. Traditional communication methods

effectiveness of administrative staff in public universities in Owerri, Imo State?	that is why I mostly speak with my boss face-to-face. The aim of internal communication in our department is to enable information sharing, especially on the task we have to do, and also enable coordination of our tasks and activities. "For instance, the Vice Chancellor's personnel assistant or secretary is responsible for drafting messages that move from department heads to faculties, departments, and, if relevant, to students. If the message involves policy implementation, such as allowing only registered students into the library, the librarian is tasked with enforcing this directive. My role is simply to ensure the information reaches its intended recipients; I do not decide when or how it is sent."	8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	L11Q1: Information sharing, L13Q1: Task coordination L15Q1: Organisational Protocol L18Q1: Information flow L21Q1: Directional Communication L22Q1: Task Implementation L25Q1: Task enforcement L25Q1: Management Choices	*Information dissemination structure  *Organisation Protocol  *Information dissemination structure   *Management Prerogative	2. Linear Information flow  2. Linear information flow  2. Linear information flow 2. Linear information flow  1. Traditional communication methods
How do the operational dynamics of internal communication influence the efficiency and effectiveness of administrative staff in public universities in Owerri, Imo State?	(KI-12) Like I said earlier, communication within the university, especially with superiors like HOD or supervisors, involves a combination of formal channels as well as informal approaches like face-to-face interactions, although very seldom and seeking feedback, respecting hierarchy, and following protocol are key principles that must be upheld in all aspect of communications. The aim and role of communication within the university is to facilitate information flow collaboration, resolve conflicts, and engage employees so that the university's mission and objectives can be achieved. "For example, if our director issues notice on transport schedules or upcoming maintenance, drivers or other staff needing clarification must first report through designated channels, such as their supervisor or unit head, before reaching the director. Our efficiency depends on responsiveness to tasks, and maintaining this structured communication helps manage absenteeism and truancy."	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25	L4Q1: Formal Communication  L7Q1: Communication feedback L7Q1: Communication Etiquette L8Q1: Organisational Protocol L12Q1: Goals of Communication  L17Q1: Organisational Protocol L18Q1: Structured Communication L20Q1: Channels of Communication L21Q1: Designated Hierarchy L24Q1: Intermediaries in communication	*Corporation Communication  *Communication Etiquette * Organisation Protocol * Organisational Protocol *Task Delegation *Task Coordination *Hierarchical Privilege	1. Traditional communication methods 2. Linear Information flow 2. Linear Information flow   2. Linear Information flow
<b>Objective 2</b>	<b>Raw Data</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>
How are internal communication processes structured for administrative staff in public universities in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria?	(KI-3) Our Internal communication processes are structured through a hierarchical system where information flows from directors to staff via designated channels like memos, emails, notice boards and face-to-face meetings with supervisors or unit heads. This structure ensures clarity of task, responsiveness, and effective management of issues. Our communication is multi-level and structured. For example, approval of the academic calendar is done by the University Senate, and the Vice Chancellor communicates it to relevant	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13	L2Q2: Structured Communication L3Q2: 14. Hierarchical Communication L5Q2: Communication Channels  L5Q2: Formal Communication L5Q2: Informal Communication	*Hierarchical communication flow  *Sequential information dissemination  * Task Coordination through	1 Multi-layered process  1 Multi-layered process

	HODs and Deans, who then interpret it for their departments. The Dean of Student Affairs approves extracurricular events like cultural week and interdepartmental tournaments, which we, the student affairs staff, coordinate with student representatives and sports officials to ensure smooth execution without disrupting academics. If issues arise, like venue challenges or lack of medical support, we report them to the Dean for prompt resolution. Throughout the process, periodic updates from university management help maintain compliance and address any emerging challenges.	14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29	L10Q2: Structure Communication  L16Q2: Organisation Culture  L19Q2: Task Coordination  L25Q2: Feedback Mechanism L26Q2: Updates	*Hierarchical roles           * Feedback	2. Passive communication             2. Passive communication
How are internal communication processes structured for administrative staff in public universities in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria?	(K117) Like any other organisation, we all have our roles and place, and we know it, but for me, "My responsibilities are clear, so close supervision isn't necessary because communication here is well-structured. For example, when the Registrar issues directives on exam policies, like stricter ID checks to prevent impersonation, which are sent to department heads and the Head of Exams and Records, the HODs will review and interpret the directive's and can adjust it like assigning teams for ID checks or updating exam attendance procedures during exams if delays from ID checks cause overcrowding, so front-line staff will report to their supervisor, who will take it to the Head of Exams and so when this feedback reaches the Registrar, he may adjust ID check stations to improve efficiency."	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21	L2Q2: Define Roles  L4Q2: Professionalism L5Q2: Structured Communication L7Q2: Top-Down Information Flow  L10Q2: Hierarchical Communication    L15Q2: Task Performance	*Communication Tack  *Professionalism  *Hierarchical Communication  *Structured Hierarchy   *Organisational Culture	2. Passive communication       1. Multi-layered process    2. Passive communication