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University - Community Relations' Strategies for Socio-Economic Development of Host Communities in Imo State: A Perceptual Analysis

¹Edith Chinyere Iroegbu, ²Paul Chibueze Ejiogu & ³Chuddy Christian Oduenyi

^{1,2} Department of Mass Communication, Imo State University, Owerri

³ Pan Atlantic University, School of Media and Communication, Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos

 **ORCID:**

¹ <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7009-2346>

² <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0401-1684>

³ <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8248-9846>

***Corresponding Author:** ejio3@gmail.com

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Abstract

The study examined university-community relations' strategies for socio-economic development of host communities in Imo State. It was anchored on relationship management theory and perception theory. Convergent parallel mixed method research design was adopted. The study had projected population of 488,435 from which a sample size of 385 was arrived at. Questionnaire and interview guide were used to generate qualitative and quantitative data respectively. Findings of the study revealed that 36.3% of the respondents' level of awareness to university's community relations' strategies for host community socio-economic development is high. Findings also showed that research and outreach are the major strategies used by the universities to promote socio-economic development with 31.8% and 26.6% of the respondents affirming their importance. The respondents viewed university's community relations' strategies for host community socio-economic development as mutually beneficial and effective with a grand mean of 3.1. They were also of the view that strong university – community relations yield mutual benefits, drive development and address community needs at an average mean of 3.2. The study concluded that the respondents perceived university's community relations' strategies for host community socio-economic development as effective and positively influence host community socio-economic development in Imo State. The researchers recommend the use of all media channels to intensify efforts to expose residents to university's community relations' strategies; fostering greater awareness and engagements in host community development projects. Also, universities and communities should prioritise collaborative activities to drive tangible benefits, economic growth and sustainable development in host communities in Imo State.



Keywords: Community Relations, Development, Host Community, Perceptual Analysis, University-Community Relations

Introduction

The contributions of universities to host communities' socio-economic development cannot be overemphasized. This is because through research, outreach and community engagement, universities can contribute to addressing social, economic and environmental challenges facing the host communities. However, the success of this effort depends on quality of relationship among the universities and host communities (Eze, 2021).

Universities can drive socio-economic development of their host communities by forming partnerships and sharing knowledge, expertise, and resources with host communities, organizations, and stakeholders (Preston, 2024). This collaborative approach enables the co-creation of innovative solutions, empowers host community members and fosters economic growth, social, equity, and environmental stewardship (Awah, 2010). By working together, universities and host communities can address pressing challenges, capitalise on opportunities, and foster host community growth. However, substantial evidence suggests that host communities with the presence of tertiary institutions have been transformed both socially and economically. For example, Fatoki (2017) posits that the situating of a tertiary institution in a community has the potential to create employment opportunities for both skilled and unskilled labour which in turn increases the population of the town as a result of migration.

Higher education fuels human capital development, economic growth, social progress, and community advancement especially in communities where they are situated (Adeyemo, 2018). For more realistic community development, the relationship between the universities and their host communities needs to be cordial. Of course, a university cannot thrive in a hostile community. The economic impacts of tertiary institutions on communities range from knowledge creation and sharing through research and development to the flow of income and expenditure within the community (Stokes and Comes, 2018). According to Okoye (2013), while universities provide quality education, they also offer a range of social, economic, and cultural activities to their host communities. According to Odulam (2020), universities and their host communities are interdependent. This is seen where the universities rely on the community for resources, services, and a stable environment, while the community benefits from the economic activity, cultural enrichment, and intellectual capital that universities bring (Etikan, 2016). University-community relations can range from positive and collaborative strained to conflict of interests. There are times when the relationship may be unfavourable due to certain conflict of interests and distrust. Other times, the university and the host communities can put their differences aside and become truly equal partners in addressing community challenges.

University-community relations have a significant impact on the local economy, with universities often being major employers and drivers of economic activity. They also shape the social fabric of the community, influencing cultural life, educational including conservation, renewable energy, and waste management (Modoye, 2020). Basically, university's investment in its surrounding community is not merely a philanthropic endeavour, but rather a strategic approach to fulfilling its core mission, enhancing its reputation, and contributing to a more prosperous and sustainable future for both the university and the community (Onwuemele, 2018).

Despite the establishment of new universities in Imo State, not enough research has focused on how such universities impact on the host communities where they are situated. Hence, this study raised the question, whether university's community relations impact host community's socio-economic development in Imo State?



The socio-economic development of host communities in Imo State is crucially linked to the effectiveness of university-community relations. However, there is a lack of understanding regarding the strategies used by the university to drive host community socio-economic development. There is a knowledge gap on the extent to which residents are exposed to the activities and effectiveness of these relations; residents' perception of university-community initiatives, and the influence of these relations on host community development in Imo State. This knowledge gap may hinder the true notion or perception on university's community relations strategies for host community development in Imo State. This therefore, becomes the gap this present study intends to close.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Relationship theory, and Perception theory

Relationship Management Theory

The root of relationship management theory can be traced back to the 1990s by the early Greek philosopher (Aristotle) and the concept of a relation or relationship between creatures both natural and social (animal, people, organizations, stages etc.) This Theory was discussed by various scholars, but some notable contributors include, Edward Bernays, known as the father of public relations, Bernays emphasised the importance of relationships between organisations and their publics. The development of Relationship Management Theory is as a result of contributions of multiple scholars' overtime, and its evolution continues to shape various fields, including marketing, public relations, and management (Boton, 2009).

Building, maintaining, and nurturing relationship between organisations or institutions and their stakeholders is the main focus of Relationship Theory.

It emphasises mutual understanding, trust, and benefit-sharing. Universities can apply Relationship Management Theory to foster positive relationships with their host communities. Improved relationship between the university and the host community can lead to increased community engagement and participation. Also, stronger relationships can drive economic, social, and environmental benefits.

This theory relates to this study because it focuses on building, maintaining, and nurturing relationship between organisations or institutions and their stakeholders. It emphasizes mutual understanding, trust, and benefit-sharing. Universities can apply Relationship Management Theory to foster positive relationships with their host communities. Improved relationship between the university and the host community can lead to increased community engagement and participation. Also, stronger relationships can drive economic, social, and environmental benefits for the host community.

Perception Theory

Perception theory was developed by social sociologist Dary Bem in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The basic premise of the perception theory is that perception is the process through which people are aware of objects and events in the external world. It lends itself to be useful in therapy or persuasion related contexts. Schwarzlose (2015) noted that perception helps us to understand events, issues and difference between reality and illusion. Perception theory suggests that people's perceptions of reality are filtered through their individual mental models, leading to varied interpretations of the same information. This, in turn, affects their attitudes towards policies, with acceptance or rejection determined by how well the policy aligns with their internalized perspectives.

This theory plays a crucial role in university's community relations strategies for host community socio-economic development. The community's perception of the university's intentions, actions, and impacts can significantly influence their willingness to engage with the university and support its initiatives. If the



community perceives the university as committed to their development and well-being, they are more likely to trust and collaborate with the university, leading to more effective partnerships and outcomes. The university's understanding of perception theory can inform its approach to community engagement and socio-economic development. This will help the university make inclusive decision, have a clear communication, and targeted initiatives that address host community socio-economic needs.

Method

This study adopted convergent parallel mixed method research design which deals with the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. It involves the integration of both qualitative and quantitative method within a single study (Creswell, 2014). The researchers employed the survey research method in the quantitative aspect of the study and in-depth interview for the qualitative aspect of the study. According to QuestionPro (2024), survey is a quantitative method of collecting information from a pool of respondents through questions. The area of study comprised six communities, namely Ezioibodo, Ihiagwa, Obinze, Ikenegbu II and Aladinma I and Umuororonjo, which are host communities to Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) and Imo State University Owerri (IMSU). Geographically, these communities are situated in the southeast of Nigeria, with Ezioibodo, Ihiagwa, and Obinze, located in Owerri West, while Ikenegbu II, and Aladinma I and Umuororonjo are urban neighbourhoods and districts within Owerri Municipal Council of Imo State, Nigeria.

The population of this study comprised residents of Owerri West and Owerri Municipal Council which are local government areas in Imo State where the two select universities (Federal University of Technology, Owerri and Imo State University, Owerri) are situated. The population of Owerri Municipal Council and Owerri Local Government Area is projected at 488,435. However, this population served for the quantitative aspect of the study. The sample size for the quantitative study is 385. For the qualitative aspect of the study, the sample size of 10 management staff; being five (5) management staff from each of the select universities were purposively selected.

Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted in this study. Stage 1, two universities (Federal University of Technology, Owerri and Imo State University, Owerri) were randomly selected from Imo State. The chosen universities have a strong reputation, accreditation and recognition within the academic communities in Imo State; ensuring the credibility and validity of study. Stage 2, respondents were selected from host communities of the two select Universities (Federal University of Technology, Owerri and Imo State University, Owerri) for the quantitative study using stratified random sampling technique. Stage 3, the researchers distributed questionnaire to the randomly selected host communities of the two select Universities (FUTO and IMSU), for the quantitative data. For the qualitative aspect, the researchers purposively selected 10 management staff from the select institutions.

The instruments for data collection was questionnaire and interview guide. Items for the questionnaire were drawn from the research questions. Closed ended questionnaire is structured using the 4-point Likert rating scale item to generate responses that are in line with the research questions. Also, the interview guide used to generate qualitative data was in form of questions and follow up questions format. The researchers adopted test re-test to establish the reliability of the instrument. Responses retrieved were compared via Pearson Moment Correlation and result indicated very high reliability at 0.8 reliability. Ethical guidelines were adhered to strictly in the study to ensure the protection of participants and respondents. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and participants prior to participation, with clear explanations provided about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Participants and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and all data collected were used solely for the study. The researchers adopted a face – to – face administration and collection.



This helped to ensure hundred percent (100%) return of the questionnaire. which gave room for the researcher to assist the respondents by explaining the questions/items where necessary.

The researchers adopted mean analysis to analyse the data.

Findings

The researcher distributed 384 copies of the questionnaire to the respondents and was able to retrieve 380 copies meaning that the researcher had 98.7% return rate

Research Question One ‘To what extent are residents of Imo State aware to university-community relations for host community socio-economic development?’

Table 1: Respondents responses on the extent to which they are aware of university- community partnership to address socio- economic needs in their community

Items	Frequency	Percent
Very High	101	26.6
High	121	31.8
Moderate	89	23.4
Low	69	18.2
Total	380	100

Sources: Field Survey, 2026

Data obtained from Table 1 showed that 31.8% of the respondents’ level of awareness to university-community engagement strategies for host community socio-economic development is high. This means that majority of the respondents are aware of university-community relations for host community socio-economic development of the host communities in Imo state

Research Question Two ‘What strategies does the university utilize to promote socio-economic development in its host community?’

Table 2. Respondents’ responses on what types of projects/programs the university has undertaken with their community

Items	Frequency	Percent
Research	121	31.8
Outreach	109	26.6
Education	89	23.6
Others	69	18.2
Total	380	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of 4-point likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that/i the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is acceptable. However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, item in question is rejected. This decision rule apply to Tables 2-10

From the responses of the respondents, it clearly revealed that Research (31.8%) and Outreach (26.6%) were the major projects/ programs that the universities undertake in their various host communities. This means that the university utilizes various project/programmes such as research, outreach and educational programmes to drive socio-economic development in their communities.

Research question Three: What are the perceptions of residents of Imo State about university-community relations for host community development?



Table 3. Respondents' responses on whether they think the university supports their community-led initiatives

Options	Frequency	Mean	Decision
SA	149		
A	174		
D	36		
SD	20		
Total	380	3.2	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of mean score result of 3.2 which is above decision rule, shows that the respondents agreed that the university support their community-led initiatives.

Table 4. Respondents' responses on whether they think their communities benefit from the university-community collaborations

Options	Frequencies	Mean	Decision
SA	240		
A	130		
D	4		
SD	6		
Total	380	3.5	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of mean score 3.5 on Table 4 above which is above the decision rule, indicates that the respondents agreed to the assertion that their communities benefit from university-community collaborations. This means that a majority of the respondents were of the view that university-community relationship actually profits them.

Table 5. Respondents' responses on whether they think community cultural values and traditions are respected

Options	Frequency	Mean	Decision
SA	200		
A	158		
D	15		
SD	7		
Total	380	3.5	Accepted



Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 5 mean analysis reveals 3.5 indicating that the respondents agreed that community cultural values and traditions are respected. This represents the views of a majority of the respondents who agreed that the university acknowledges the cultures, traditions, and values of the community.

Table 6. Respondents' responses on whether university-community collaborations have enhanced local skills and entrepreneurship training

Options	Frequency	Mean	Decision
SA	153		
A	170		
D	31		
SD	25		
Total	380	3.2	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of mean score which is showing 3.2 reveals that the respondents attested to the statement that “university-community collaborations have enhanced local skills and entrepreneurial training”. This confirmation implies that collaborative efforts of the university and the community helped local individuals acquire new skills and improved existing ones.

Research Question Four: What is the impact of university-community relationship for host community socio-economic development in Imo State?

Table 7. Respondents' responses on whether the university-community collaborations have impact on local economic development

Option	Frequency	Mean	Decision
SA	200		
A	174		
D	2		
SD	4		
Total	380	3.5	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of mean shows 3.5 which is above the benchmark reveals that the respondents attested to the assertion that “university-community collaborations have impact local economic development. This insinuates that there are increased economic activities and opportunities for local businesses which can drive economic growth.

Table 8. Respondents' responses on whether they have observed improvement in community well-being /quality of life



Options	Frequency	Mean	Decision
SA	101		
A	112		
D	99		
SD	68		
Total	380	2.6	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Mean score analysis on table 8 above indicates 2.6 which is above the standard, states that the respondents agreed to the statement that “they have observed improvement in community well-being /quality of life”. This represents that most of the respondents have experienced an improved quality of life because of the location of universities in their community.

Table 9. Respondents’ responses on whether university- community relations has improved local businesses and industries in host communities

Options	Frequency	Mean	Decision
SA	129		
A	136		
D	65		
SD	50		
Total	380	2.9	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Analysis of mean score on table 9 shows 2.9, revealing that university resources are accessible to the community. This implies that a higher number of the respondents agreed that university- community relations has improved local businesses and industries in host communities.

Table 10. Respondents’ responses on whether technology innovations are shared through university partnerships

Options	Frequency	Mean	Decision
SA	101		
A	112		
D	99		
SD	68		



Total	380	2.6	Accepted
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Source: Field Survey, 2026

Mean score analysis on table 10 above indicates 2.9 which is above the standard, states that “technology innovations are shared through university partnerships”. This means that most respondents agreed that through university partnership, technology innovations are shared through university partnerships.

Qualitative Data

To what extent are residents of Imo State aware of university’s activities aimed at promoting host community socio-economic development?

IMS 8... “Well, residents are likely to have a high level of awareness to university’s community relations, especially through events like public lectures, workshops, and community outreach programmes”.

IMS 10... “The level of awareness will vary across different communities in Imo State. Residents in closer proximity to the university or those who have directly benefitted from community development projects through university-community collaborations may have higher exposure”.

FMS 3... “I think the level of awareness of is relatively low. Many residents may not be aware of the university’s community development initiatives or may not see the direct impact on their daily lives”

IMPRO 6... “Residents who regularly follow local media, such as newspapers, radio, or TV stations, may have higher level of awareness to university-community relation, especially if the university’s initiatives are featured in these outlets”.

IMS 9... “Actually, there may be some level of awareness, but I believe there’s always room for improvement. You know the university could do more to increase awareness and engagement among residents such as leveraging social media”

A summary of the above responses showed that a significant portion of the population of university host community members in our study area is aware of university’s community relations strategies for host community development because of community involvement in university initiatives, effective outreach by universities and media coverage of university-community projects. However, an insignificant segment of the population is less aware of university-community relations for community development dues to low level of engagement with the university initiatives.

In the present study therefore, the level of awareness is very high. This is because people get to know about university’s community relations’ activities, if not on television or on social media, then through direct or indirect involvements. Also, the universities often have websites that publish stories about their research and programmes, people easily access information about the universities through their websites.

What strategies does the university employ to drive socio-economic development in its host communities in Imo State?

FMS 4... “The university generates and shares knowledge to address economic development in host communities. I say this because knowledge – sharing in all spheres promotes innovation”

IMS 8 ... “Majorly, Research and Innovation initiatives are conducted by the university to address community needs and challenges. Also, the university through community engagements collaborate with host community to identify needs, develop solutions and implement projects that benefits the community”

FTS 1 ... “University provides employment opportunities for host community member and this contributes to host community workforce”



FTPRO 5... “Well, the university uses community - based research strategies. The university does this by collaborating with host community members to identify needs and develop research projects that addresses host community challenges”

FTS 2 ... “University offers admission opportunities to local students. This promotes this promotes education and skills development. It is called ‘Admission Quota’. Permit me to add, access to educational resources and vocational training help empower host community members”

In Summary, these views showed that the university’s strategies encompass a range of activities including outreach and engagement programmes, partnerships with local organisations and stakeholders, vocational training and education initiatives, economic empowerment and cultural events. Again, views suggested that the university engages in collaborative research and development projects to address community needs and challenges. These initiatives aim to create positive social, economic and environmental impacts on the quality of life of community members.

What are the perceptions of residents of Imo State about university’s community relations’ strategies for host community socio-economic development?

IMS 10 ... “University’s engagement effort is quite commendable. They portray signs of commitment to host community development”

FTS 1... “There is potential for host community growth and development through university-community relations”

IMS 9 ... “University- community relations drive economic growth and job creation”

FTS 4 ... “Universities have not done much but neglected the host community where they operate. Yes, because the university’s impact on the host community is more harmful than helpful, with noise pollution and traffic congestions overshadowing its potential benefits to the host community”.

IMS 7... Well, I see university-community relations as a fast-track to host community economic growth. I say this because, it creates jobs, attract investments and promote local entrepreneurship”

FTS 3 ... “University-community relations are beneficial. This is because they foster development and improve quality of life”

In summary, these views showed that there is varied perception of university-community relations, ranging from positive views of mutual benefits and commendation for engagement, to mixed opinions and expectations for more tangible benefits. Majority of the respondents perceive the universities as driving economic growth and demonstrating social responsibility. Respondents acknowledged room for improvement, citing communication gap and unmet expectations. There is need for universities to understand and engage with their host communities.

What is the influence of university’s community relations’ strategies for host the socio-economic development of the host community in Imo State?

IMS 4 ... “Strong university-community relationship yield mutual benefits. Permit me to say that each of these parties cannot deny gaining from the other. This is because; there are enhanced reputation, increased community engagement and improved development outcomes for both the university and the host community”

FTS 1... “The partnership or should I rather the collaborations with host communities drive development and address community needs”



IMS 7... “I think the major influences of university-community relationship is the promotion of environmental sustainability in host communities”

FTS 10 ... “Through collaborative research, healthcare services and health programmes, the university improve health outcomes in host communities. Permit me to also add that, university- community collaboration improves infrastructure. I am talking about roads, educational institutions and healthcare facilities; like I earlier emphasized”

IMPRO 6... “I would say that, through social responsibility initiatives, the university fosters social cohesion in host communities. The university does this by promoting cultural exchange and community engagement”

Summarizing these views, it indicated that university’s community relations’ strategies for host community development are effective and positively influence host community development in Imo State through economic growth, infrastructure improvement, capacity building, improved environmental and health outcomes in Imo State. They emphasized mutual benefits for both universities and host communities. The views also showed that these relations drive holistic development and foster collaborative progress.

Discussion

The quantitative data obtained from the level of exposure of residents of Imo State to university’s activities aimed at promoting host community socio-economic development showed that all the respondents are aware of the relationship that exist between the universities and their host communities for community development purposes, with the radio (36.3%) and (30.2%) of respondents representing the majority attributing their awareness of university-community relations to their exposure to radio and television respectively. Findings from the qualitative data which was gotten from in-depth interviews revealed that almost all the residents of Imo State is aware of university-community relations’ strategies for host community development. To support this findings, a study by Safina et al. (2024) revealed that radio’s accessibility, affordability, and ability to covey content in local languages make it a crucial tool for political communication and civic engagement. Radio has been found to be effective in shaping socio-political awareness and participation among residents in Imo State. According to Anaeto (2006), a study on educational broadcasting for community development highlighted the importance of community participation in radio programming. He added that, while radio is more accessible and affordable, television can provide visual content that enhances understanding and engagement.

The data obtained from the strategies utilised by the university to promote socio-economic development revealed that the university’s strategies are multifaceted, with various projects and programmes aimed at promoting socio-economic development. Research is one of the major strategies used with 3.8% of respondents affirming its importance. Outreach and educational programmes are also prominent, with 26.6% of respondents agreeing that these initiatives contribute to socio-economic development in the host community, operating at a significant ratio of 3.4.

Findings also revealed that the university employs a range of strategies to promote socio-economic development in its host community. These include generating and sharing knowledge to address economic development challenges, utilising ICT interventions to promote social economic growth, and providing social amenities such as healthcare, education, and cultural events to enhance quality of life. Additionally, the university provides employment opportunities and uses research and outreach programs to address community needs and influence behaviour and living standards among host community members.



In relations to this findings, Foley (2016), found that collaborative research projects/programmes between a municipality and universities can prove beneficial to a cooperative community. His study also revealed that outreach tactics to increase interaction of residents and the university helped improve current attitudes. Okoye (2013) identified regular communication, engagement initiatives, as strategies that have been effective in fostering collaborative and mutual benefits between the university and the community. Onwuemele (2018) posits that through collaborative efforts, universities drive socio-economic development in host communities by promoting local businesses, creating jobs, improving infrastructure, and enhancing access to education and healthcare services.

Educational programmes, research and innovation, environmental initiatives and capacity building were the major strategies used by the universities to promote socio-economic development of host communities in Imo State. From the present study, Imo State University Owerri (IMSU) offers various academic programmes that equip students with skills and knowledge to contribute to the social, economic and cultural development of the society. For instance, the Department of Economics aims to develop students' analytical skills and knowledge to tackle economic problems and promote community development. Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) through the Department of Environmental Technology organize clean-up exercise, tree planting and environmental campaign in surrounding communities. These help address the environmental needs of the host communities.

Quantitative result obtained on the perception of the respondents about university-community relations for host community development revealed that an grand mean of 3.1, indicated that the respondents were of the views that both the university and the community benefit from each other, both parties trust and respect each other and community members are actively involved and valued. The respondents also believe that educational initiative; cultural understanding; and mutual benefits enjoyed by the university and the host community is crucial as it fosters host community development. Findings from the qualitative data showed that there is varied perception of university-community relations as regards to host community development, ranging from positive views of mutual benefits and commendation for engagement, to mixed opinions and expectations for more tangible benefits. Majority of the respondents from the qualitative data perceive the universities as driving economic growth and demonstrating social responsibility. They respondents also see the relationship as symbiotic where both parties benefit from each other. They acknowledged opportunities for improvement in the areas of communication gap and unmet expectations.

In relations to these findings, Olatoye (2023) in his study revealed that there are strategic partnerships that ensure that the community as well as the university maximally benefits from their co-existence. Second, this relationship ensures peace and safety, employment of host community members, capacity building of locals, enhanced corporate social responsibilities, and mutual collaborations on multi-dimensional areas to sufficiently achieve the goals of higher education and the developmental strides of the host community. Okpara, (2018) revealed that host community members learn new skills, develop new economic options; and build physical and financial capital. They also can improve their environment. Rufus et al. (2020) revealed that wealth creation in host communities as an offshoot of the establishment of tertiary institution is a piece of common knowledge among its residents. Their study concluded that the establishment of a tertiary institution in a community would translate to wealth creation by cause and effect.

This result is supported by the psychological perception theory as Onwuemele (2018) viewed proximity, novelty of collaboration, residents' attitudes, motives, experiences, interests, and expectations can shape their perception of university-community collaborations. He added that cultural context can significantly alter perception, and residents' cultural background may influence their understanding of university-community relations in all spheres. From the result established, it showed that the respondents perceived university-community relations for community host development in a favourable note.



In the context of the present study, the community members perceived the university's intentions, actions and impact can influence their willingness to engage and support its strategies. In other words, the perception of host community members can affect their attitudes towards the university's development efforts.

Data obtained from the perceptual analysis on the influence of university's community relations strategies for host community development in Imo State revealed that at a grand mean of 3.2, the respondents attested to the statement that university-community collaborations have enhanced local skills or knowledge. This confirmation implies that collaborative efforts of the university and the community helped local individuals acquire new skills or improved existing ones. Findings from our qualitative data showed that majority of the respondents were of the view that university-community relations yield mutual benefits, drive development and address community needs such as good roads, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. Additionally, strong university-community relationships drive technological advancement and create new economic growth. Through social responsibility initiatives, the relationship between the university and the host community. University community participation leads to capacity building in communities where they are situated. From the result established, it indicated that university's community relations are effective and positively influence host community development through economic growth, infrastructure improvement, capacity building, improved environmental and health outcomes in Imo State.

With reference to previous studies, the result of Eze (2011) supports this result where he established that education is the precursor of societal transformation because its impacts affects all spheres of human life. He stated further that "education frees human being from the entrapment of want, ignorance, poverty and underdevelopment. Corroborating above, Eze (2011); and Flaherty; (2005) affirm that education, research, scholarship and innovation vis-a- is community partnership, outreach, and engagement to arouse the economic, social and cultural well-being of the larger society. The authors reiterated that communities that have tertiary institutions are extraordinary places and are seen as engine in the host communities that propels economic activities of the people. Fatoki (2017) conducted a study on 'socio-economic impact of tertiary institutions in Nigeria on the host communities'. He asserts that it is a deliberate attempt to take development to the door steps of these communities especially in the areas of healthcare delivery, infrastructural development, increased commercial activities, population explosion as well as integration of different ethnic groups into the system.

This present study supports the theoretical framework of social exchange theory (Ekeh, 2024). The central idea of this theory is that the exchange of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interactions. According to this idea, perceptions are affected by perceptions of the exchange people believe they are making. Consequently, individuals who evaluate the exchange as beneficial perceive the same impact differently than someone who evaluates the exchange as harmful. It specifies the exchange of tangible and intangible resources that host community and university may give and receive in the host university context. The theory is a relevant explanatory tool as location of tertiary institutions is greeted with expectations of socio-economic prosperity of host communities, while tertiary institutions also need conducive environment to realize its mandate.

The present study showed that trainings and capacity building programmes provided by the university for individuals and groups in the community enhance their skills and knowledge to participate in socio-economic activities. For instance, the Entrepreneurship and Skills Department Center (ESOC) at Imo State University Owerri (IMSU) offers training and development programmes for students and communities. Adequate implementation of the acquired skills could contribute to the socio-economic development of host communities in Imo State. Other findings revealed that the universities collaborate with local industries, government agencies, or community organisations to conduct research and develop solutions. This means that an outcome of the research could contribute to socio-economic development as



an evident of its academic programmes and publications. These strategies can influence socio-economic development of host communities and promote sustainable growth and development in Imo State.

Conclusion and Recommendations

No doubt, university-community relations can be mutually beneficial for both parties, fostering mutual understanding, trust, and collaborative development projects that benefit the host community and allowing the universities operate freely in safe environments. While few respondents of Imo State perceived university- host community collaborative efforts for socio-economic development negatively due to power imbalance, lack of transparency, unmet expectations and conflict of interest; majority others acknowledged that it is beneficial, considering its contributions to the host communities. Although, residents' cultural background, attitudes, motives, experiences, interests and expectations can form their perception of university's community relations' strategies aimed at host community development, the result established from the study showed that respondents perceived university's community relations' strategies for host community socio-economic development on a bright side. They attested to the fact that, university's community relations' strategies are effective and positively impact host community socio-economic development through capacity building, infrastructural improvement, and economic growth, improved environmental and healthcare outcomes in Imo State. The researchers recommended that;

1. Universities in Imo State should utilise all media channels in order to intensify efforts to expose residents to university's community relations' strategies; fostering greater awareness and engagements in host community development projects.
2. The universities should continue to expand and diversify its strategies for socio-economic development, building on successes of their research, outreach, and education programmes.
3. Universities should engage in proactive communication and feedback mechanisms to understand and address negative perceptions, while highlighting the benefits and success of university-community relations in host community development.
4. Universities and host communities in Imo State should prioritise collaborative development initiatives, ensuring that university-community relations are leveraged to drive tangible benefits, economic growth, and sustainable development in host communities.

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