

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND RESTORATION OF PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN NIGERIAN'S GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

Public confidence in governance plays an important role in the stability and effectiveness of any nation's political system. This paper therefore sought to examine the role of Public Relations in restoring and enhancing public confidence in Nigerian governance with a focus on the challenges faced by the Nigerian government in maintaining transparency, accountability and credibility. This research is pronged on three objectives: to examine the factors contributing to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance; to explore the role of public relations in restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance by analyzing the importance of effective communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis management and ethical considerations; to provide recommendations for Nigerian policymakers and Public Relations practitioners to foster a trustworthy relationship with the public. This study is hinged on the Stakeholders theory and the situational crisis theory with residents of Port Harcourt LGA as its research population and adopts the qualitative research design. The method of data collection is interviews and focus group discussions. This paper recommends that the government needs to be transparent and accountable and engage with stakeholders while communicating effective steps in addressing issues that border around the public and that Public Relations campaigns can focus on showcasing government's achievement. Panoramic Public Relations strategies should be implored in the restoration of public confidence in Nigerian's government.

Keywords: Public Relations, restoration, public confidence, governance.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with over 200 million people. The country has a complex political landscape, with a history of military rule and a transition to democracy in 1999. Despite some progress, the Nigerian government has been facing significant challenges including political instability, corruption, and economic hardship. One of the major issues affecting Nigeria is the decline in public confidence in governance. Nigerian citizens often express frustration with their government's inability to deliver on its promises, leading to a loss of trust and faith in the government. This lack of trust can have far-reaching consequences, including reduced economic growth, social unrest, and political instability.

Public confidence in governance plays an important role in the stability and effectiveness of any nation's political system. It is a fundamental component that strengthens the relationship between the government and its citizens, enabling the smooth implementation of policies, promoting social cohesion and fostering sustainable development.

Public relations is one potential solution to restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance. Public relations involves the strategic communication between an organization and its publics, with the goal of building and maintaining positive relationships. Public relations offers valuable tools and techniques that can contribute to the restoration of public confidence in Nigerian governance. In the context of Nigerian governance, effective public relations can help improve the image of the government and also build public trust among citizens. One approach is for the government should communicate more effectively with citizens, engage stakeholders in decision-making, manage crises,

and uphold ethical standards. According to Olusegun Adekoya (2015), public institutions in Nigeria have been struggling to gain public trust due to a lack of transparency, accountability, and effective communication. This has resulted in a growing public relations sense of disillusionment among Nigerian citizens towards their government. David Olusegun Oyedele (2014) also notes that the lack of public trust is a major challenge facing Nigerian governance. He argues that can help improve public trust by promoting good governance and building positive relationships with stakeholders. Chuka Onwumechili (2019) highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement in building trust between the government and citizens. Effective stakeholder engagement involves listening to the concerns and needs of citizens, involving them in decision-making processes, and communicating transparently with them. Adekunle Olayinka (2014) also emphasizes the importance of crisis management in restoring public confidence in governance. Effective crisis management involves communicating transparently with stakeholders, addressing concerns in a timely manner, and taking responsibility for mistakes.

Ethical considerations are also important in building trust between the government and citizens. Ezechukwu Christian O. and Nwankwo Ijeoma R. (2018) note that ethical issues in public relations can undermine public trust and damage the reputation of the government. Upholding ethical standards in governance involves being transparent, fair, and honest in communication with citizens. The paper therefore sought to explore the role of public relations in restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance. Specifically, the study will examine the factors contributing to the decline in public confidence, the potential role of public relations in restoring that confidence through effective communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis management, and ethical considerations, and provide practical recommendations for Nigerian policymakers to foster trustworthy relationships with citizens. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between public relations and governance in Nigeria and provide actionable insights for policymakers to improve their relationships with citizens.

Statement of Problem

The Nigerian government has been struggling with significant decline in public trust resulting from issues such as inefficiency, corruption and political instability. The abrasion of trust hinders effective governance and aggravates societal challenges. There is limited research on the role of public relations in Nigerian governance and its potential to restore public confidence. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the factors contributing to the decline in public confidence in Nigerian governance and exploring the potential role of public relations in restoring that confidence. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between public relations and governance in Nigeria and provide practical recommendations for policymakers to improve their relationships with citizens.

Objectives of the study

This paper is pronged on the following objectives:

1. to examine the factors contributing to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance
2. to explore the role of public relations in restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance by analyzing the importance of effective communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis management and ethical considerations
3. to provide recommendations for Nigerian policymakers and Public Relations practitioners to foster a trustworthy relationship with the public.

Research questions

The following research questions are hereunder couched to guide this study:

1. What are the factors contributing to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance?

2. What is the role of public relations in restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance?
3. What are the probable recommendations for Nigerian policymakers and Public Relations practitioners to foster a trustworthy relationship with the public?

Theoretical Framework

Situational Crisis Theory:

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), is a theory in the field of crisis communication. It suggests that crisis managers should match strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat posed by a crisis. SCCT was proposed by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007. According to SCCT, evaluating the crisis type, crisis history and prior relationship reputation will help crisis managers predict the level of reputational threat of an organization and how that organization's publics will perceive the crisis and attribute crisis responsibility. Thus SCCT can be applied in an organization's crisis management. Three types of crises have been identified by Coombs: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the intentional cluster. Coombs created his experimentally based SCCT to give communicators scientific evidence to guide their decisions, essentially stating that the actions an organization takes post-crisis depend on the crisis situation. "SCCT identifies how key facets of the crisis situation influence attributions about the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders. In turn, understanding how stakeholders will respond to the crisis informs the post-crisis communication".

In relations to this study, this theory suggests that different crisis situations require different communication strategies. It can be used to develop effective communication plans to restore public confidence in Nigerian governance during crisis.

Stakeholder Theory:

Accordingly, the stakeholders' theory began to find expression in the mid-1980s when a stakeholder approach to strategy came up. One essential point in this movement was the publication of Richard Edward Freeman. He is generally credited with popularizing the stakeholders' concept. He indicated that his view of the theory was done from the perspective of the organization. Freeman first of all described stakeholders as those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist. Freeman (2004) has continued to use this definition in a modified form as those groups who are vital to the survival and success of such organization. Further, Freeman (2004) describes stakeholders as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives.

Similarly, a common way of differentiating the different kinds of stakeholders is to consider groups of people who have classified relationships with the organization or in the case of this study the community. Freeman (2004) identifies customers, employees, local communities, suppliers and distributors and shareholders as primary stakeholders of an organization. He as well listed; the media, the public in general, business partners, future generations, past generations (founders of organizations), academics, competitors, NGO's or Activists, trade unions, financiers/debtor, and government/regulators/policy makers as secondary stakeholders.

Particularly, the purpose of stakeholders' theory according to Freeman (2004) is to create methods to manage the different groups and relationships that resulted in a strategic fashion. Further, Freeman (2004) thinks that the idea of stakeholders' management or approach suggests that managers must formulate the policy and implement processes which satisfy all and only those groups who have a stake in the business. The main task in this process is to manage and integrate the relationships interests of stakeholders in a way to guarantee the long term success of the Institution. A stakeholders approach is much more concerned about active management of the business environment, relationships and the promotion of shared interests in order to develop development strategies.

Deductively therefore, this theory proposes that government must consider the interests and needs of all stakeholders, including the publics in decision-making processes. This theory can be used to guide Public Relations efforts in engaging with the diverse groups that make up Nigerian society.

Conceptual Review:

Understanding public trust in Nigerian government

"Public trust is a critical element of democratic governance, and it is the bedrock upon which the legitimacy of government rests" (Okolie & Ekeanyanwu, 2017). In Nigeria, public trust in government has been historically low due to widespread corruption, lack of transparency, and ineffective service delivery (Adeyemo, 2018).

The lack of trust has resulted in a significant loss of confidence in government institutions and a growing sense of disillusionment among citizens. To understand public trust in Nigerian government, scholars have conducted various studies and surveys. According to a report by Afrobarometer, only 25% of Nigerians trust the government, with corruption being the primary reason for the lack of trust (Afrobarometer, 2018). Another study by Transparency International revealed that Nigeria ranked 149 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index, indicating a high level of corruption in the country (Transparency International, 2020).

To restore public trust, the government needs to address corruption, improve service delivery, and increase transparency. The government can achieve this through effective communication and public relations initiatives, which can help to build credibility and establish a positive reputation for government institutions.

The role of public relations in restoring public trust

"Public relations can play a crucial role in restoring public trust by fostering open communication, transparency, and accountability" (L'Etang, 2012). Effective public relations can help to build credibility and establish a positive reputation for government institutions, which can ultimately increase public trust (Okolie & Ekeanyanwu, 2017). Public relations initiatives can also help to address misperceptions and misunderstandings among the public, leading to greater understanding and support for government policies.

Some of the key public relations strategies that can help to restore public trust include:

- Building relationships with stakeholders: Government institutions need to establish relationships with various stakeholders, including citizens, civil society organizations, and the media. By building relationships, government institutions can gain a better understanding of the needs and concerns of the public and address them accordingly.
- Transparency and accountability: Government institutions need to be transparent in their operations and decision-making processes. This can be achieved through regular communication with stakeholders, open data policies, and public reporting.
- Crisis communication: In times of crisis, government institutions need to communicate effectively with stakeholders to provide accurate and timely information. Effective crisis communication can help to build trust and confidence in government institutions.

Successful public relations initiatives in Nigerian government

Some successful public relations initiatives in Nigerian government include the launch of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) and the Whistleblower Policy (Adeyemo, 2018). The TSA helped to consolidate government funds into a single account, reducing the risk of corruption and improving accountability. The Whistleblower Policy encouraged citizens to report corruption and other illegal activities, leading to significant recoveries of stolen funds.

Another successful public relations initiative is the Open Treasury Portal, which provides citizens with access to information on government spending. The portal allows citizens to monitor government expenditure and hold government institutions accountable for their actions. Additionally, the Nigerian government has launched various social media campaigns, such as the

#ChangeBeginsWithMe campaign, which aims to promote ethical values and encourage citizens to take responsibility for their actions.

Challenges in restoration of public trust

Restoring public trust is not an easy task, particularly in countries with a history of corruption and ineffective governance" (Okolie & Ekeanyanwu, 2017). One of the biggest challenges is changing deeply ingrained attitudes and perceptions among the public. Additionally, government institutions may lack the resources, expertise, and political will to implement effective public relations initiatives (Adeyemo, 2018).

Another significant challenge is the lack of trust in the media. In Nigeria, the media is often seen as biased and unreliable, which can make it difficult for government institutions to communicate effectively with the public. Accountability, capability and responsiveness are three key factors that can help in rebuilding public trust in Nigerian government.

Method

This research adopts a semi structured qualitative method as it interviewed 45 adult citizens of Nigeria. The first 10 interviews were conducted via Whatsapp audio calls and normal phone calls with selected Public Relations experts while the rest 35 interviews were conducted in person in 7 focus groups in Port Harcourt. During all interviews, demographic questions such as gender, age, occupation, religion and educational level were asked. Interviewees were subsequently asked what factors contribute to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance? What role can public relations play in restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance? What probable recommendations they have for Nigerian policymakers and Public Relations practitioners to foster a trustworthy relationship with the public?

The researchers adopted stratified sampling technique because of the diverse nature of Nigerian citizens and also stratifying the sample by demography would help ensure that the sample is a representative of the Nigerian population as a whole. This helped provide a more accurate picture of the opinions and attitudes of the Nigerian public towards the government and their efforts to restore confidence.

Findings:

1. The factors contributing to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance include corruption, lack of transparency, ineffective communication, poor service delivery, and insecurity.
2. Effective public relations can play a crucial role in restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance through improved communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis management, and ethical considerations.
3. Nigerian policymakers and public relations practitioners need to work together to restore public trust in the government by addressing the factors contributing to the decline of public confidence and implementing effective public relations strategies.

Discussion of Findings

One of the key findings of the study was that corruption was a significant factor contributing to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance. Corruption has been a persistent problem in Nigeria for many years, and it has eroded public trust in government officials and institutions. This has led to widespread cynicism and apathy among citizens, who feel that their voices are not heard and their concerns are not addressed by the government.

Another factor that contributes to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance is the lack of transparency in government operations. Citizens feel that they are left out of the decision-making process and are often left in the dark about government activities. This has further fueled public mistrust and skepticism towards the government.

The study also found that ineffective communication was a significant factor contributing to the decline of public confidence. Citizens feel that their voices are not being heard, and their concerns are not being addressed by the government. This has led to a breakdown in communication between the government and the public, which has further eroded public trust in the government.

Poor service delivery was also identified as a significant factor contributing to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance. Citizens feel that the government has failed to provide basic services, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, which has led to widespread disillusionment and frustration.

Insecurity was also identified as a significant factor contributing to the decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance. Citizens feel unsafe due to the prevalence of crime, terrorism, and other security challenges, which has led to a sense of fear and uncertainty among the populace.

The study found that effective public relations can play a crucial role in restoring public confidence in Nigerian governance. Effective communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis management, and ethical considerations were identified as key components of a successful public relations strategy. Improved communication can help to bridge the gap between the government and the public, while stakeholder engagement can help to build trust and understanding between the government and various groups within society. Effective crisis management can also help to restore public confidence by demonstrating that the government is capable of responding to challenges and addressing concerns. Ethical considerations are also crucial, as citizens are more likely to trust a government that is transparent, accountable, and committed to ethical standards.

The study recommends that Nigerian policymakers prioritize transparency, accountability, and good governance to restore public confidence. Public relations practitioners should focus on improving communication and stakeholder engagement to build trust with the public. Crisis management plans should be put in place to respond quickly and effectively to any challenges that may arise. Ethics should be at the core of all public relations activities to build trust and credibility with the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nigerian policymakers should prioritize transparency, accountability, and good governance to restore public confidence.
2. Public relations practitioners should focus on improving communication and stakeholder engagement to build trust with the public.
3. Crisis management plans should be put in place to respond quickly and effectively to any challenges that may arise and Ethics should be at the core of all public relations activities to build trust and credibility with the public.

CONCLUSIONS

The decline of public confidence in Nigerian governance is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach to address. Effective public relations can play a critical role in restoring public trust by improving communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis management, and ethical considerations. Nigerian policymakers and public relations practitioners must work together to implement effective strategies that address the factors contributing to the decline of public confidence and foster a trustworthy relationship with the public. Panoramic Public Relations strategies should be implored in the restoration of public confidence in Nigerian's government.

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