



Political Public Relations In Nigeria: Image, Campaign And Competitive Advantage Of Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the state of political public relations in Nigeria by focusing on the image, campaign and competitive advantage of political parties. Its arguments are based on the theoretical literature review on political public relations, image, campaign and competitive advantage. This article suggests an in-depth investigation of the nature of some of the major problems in political public relations and contributes to a better understanding of the concept. The nature of the analysis is exploratory rather than definitive, and specific investigations are needed to thoroughly explore and better theorise political image, campaign and competitive advantage in various political domains. The study affirmed that political image management is the essential key for securing public trust and support. And that political parties in Nigeria should carry out issue-based campaign and ideology in order to gain a good image, public trust, which in the long run will increase electoral support and victory.

Keywords: Political Public relations, Image, Campaign, Competitive advantage and Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In every country, government officials and civil servants are the most important publics for public relations (Taylor and Kent, 1999). Government and political institutions are not only one of the most important publics for corporation/non – profit public relations, they are also active players and active users of public relations knowledge. They develop their own strategies and tactics to cultivate relationships with various publics and manage communication within and outside their political organizations (Gregory, 2006).

They need to strengthen their political reputations for Election Day as much as their foreign image as representatives of Nigeria, handling foreign relations (Stromback & Kioussis, 2011).

The fact that public relations strategies and tactics are commonly used by political parties, institutions, and government bodies (Cutlip, 1976, Lee, 2007) knowledge of the state and development of political public relations become imperative to ascertain political party's image, campaign and competitive advantage. The increasing international relations of Nigeria with other nation states make Nigeria and its economic and political activities and ideology an interesting case study to investigate the nature of political public relations in Nigeria.

Corporate image can be traced to the era of the evolution of the theory relating to corporate identity management since the 1950s (Balmer, 1998). Essentially, the corporate or political image can be explained as the general notion electorate creates as a result of accumulated feelings and involvement in

the electoral process, which are stored in memory, transformed into a positive or negative meaning during any election (Hatch, Schultz, and Williamson, 2003). The key to acquiring favourable support, image and reputation is a clear campaign based on issue and ideology through an effective communication channel to the electorate. No political party can ignore political image since every organization has an image (Bernstein, 2008). Whether the image is created consciously or unconsciously, it affects the behaviour of the people; hence, knowledge of corporate image helps political parties direct their communication effort in a more efficient way (Bernstein, 2008); corporate image is the eye of the receiver. It is simply the picture that the electorate has of a political party through the accumulation of all received messages. In today's competitive environment, there is a competitive pressure and the desire to be recognized and supported by the people; political parties invest millions in the campaign and ideology in every election period to strengthen their corporate images and reputations. Led by the best strategic thinking on the matter, political elites select those attributes of the political party that is unique and non-imitable in order to project their image into the hearts and minds of the people for political support. (Hatch and Schultz, 2004) it is more difficult to gain a competitive advantage nowadays when political campaign and ideology are becoming more similar in Nigeria. In those circumstances, political parties must show corporate image and reputation (Balmer and Greyser, 2003).

Again, corporate image is the sum of expectation and impressions stakeholders have built up in their minds. Corporate identity is mainly under the control of the political parties; corporate image, on the other hand, is formed within the minds of target audiences as a result of different received messages. Corporate image is a good competitive advantage tool used by political public relations to achieve set out goals for an organization. Political parties that have a competitive advantage always had the ability to understand the changes in the structure of the state and is able to choose an effective communication strategy to reach the target audience. The corporate image and good political ideology are very important as they determine the success of an organization (Kapferer, 2008). Consequently, corporate image is to achieve a favourable image and reputation, which leads to competitive advantage or "Strategic advantage". Balmer (2005) asserts that a strong and favourable corporate image offers an organizational benefit. However, unethical practices such as rigging the election, vote-buying, thuggery, killings, snatching of the ballot box, lack of political ideology, poor qualitative services, giving misleading information, poor representation, ethnicity and tribal sentiments as well as dishonest services are some of the misconducts that devalue political party image in Nigeria.

These sharp practices and the failure of the Nigerian political class have caused the electorate to develop a negative image of political parties, which in the long run affects the nation's development. Therefore, this study focuses on political public relations in Nigeria-image, campaign, and competitive advantage of political parties. In order to reposition or rethink political parties, public – relations practices in line with a sustainable, innovative solution, effective use of public relations management is imperative in Nigeria. The reason is that the purpose of public relations information is to influence public opinion, perceptions, negative attitude, reputation and public relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political public relations is a subfield of public relations that focuses on the political sphere and political institutions and their actors. This hybrid discipline draws from more established fields such as public relations, political communication, and marketing. Political public relations often share similar communication approaches and techniques with two disciplines to the degree that drawing lines between these three disciplines are often difficult (Stromback, Mitrook, & Kioussis 2010). While all three are concerned with specific publics – the media for political communication and citizens for political marketing- or broader public groups and their engagement, and while all three are grounded in strategic communication, political public relations differ from the other two areas because it is focused on building and maintaining mutual relationships and managing reputation (Stromback and Kioussis, 2011, P.8)

Two other research areas that overlap with political public relations are public diplomacy and nation branding. Public diplomacy is often referred to as government (Malone, 1985), whereas nation branding

is frequently defined as branding and marketing communication activities that promote a nation's image (Fan, 2006). This article, however, focuses on internal publics of Nigeria state and publics belonging to the same polity. Therefore, the literature review will examine only those studies that focus on political public relations. Specifically, it will explore the possibilities and limitation of applying image management constructs to the Nigeria political context. The following sections will thus underline only some important elements of image, campaign and competitive advantage for political actors and institutions and major studies of political public relations and Nigeria.

Political Corporate Image Management in Nigeria

Image is the reflection of an organization over time as seen through the eyes of its stakeholders (Saxton, 1998). Image is an overall stakeholder evaluation of any organization (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). According to Bensiali (2011), corporate image is based on intangible aspects of an organization's performance, culture, marketing and quality of products and services. Basdeo, Smith, Grimm, Rindova & Dertus (2006) explained that image formation is a communication process in which industry context and actions of rival influence and how signals of local firms affect its image before the public. Image is formed on perceptions, that it is an aggregate perception of all stakeholders, and it combines firms past actions, current state and prospects (Walker, 2010).

Moreover, there could be a threat to an organization if it does not pay attention to build its image. The threats include bad behaviour by political leaders, unpopular candidate, and poor treatment of party members and absence of democratic process in the selection of candidates (Burke, 2011). Notably, electorates have a low opinion of organizations, especially in developing countries (Nigeria inclusive). Thus, corporate image is becoming more and more important in Nigeria, where there is even more competition, poor political ideology and strategies. In the circumstances, building a highly corporate image or corporate brand had become even more imperative. Paul & James (2014) affirm that corporate image significantly affects organizational productivity.

Political Campaign management in Nigeria

Literature has documented the efforts of political public relations and advertising in various respects. Brains and Wattenberg (1996) suggested that political campaign advertising plays an important role both in voter's political learning and their evaluations of a candidate based on his learning. Alvarez and Shankster (2006) found that televised campaign ads, including attack ads, could influence candidate evaluations and preferences. Over the years, a tremendous number of studies have focused on assessing the relationships between negative political ads and voter turnout. The findings are inconsistent. Although some studies (e.g. Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, 1991, Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino 1994) found that negative campaign advertising hinders electoral participation, other studies (Finkel & Geer, 1998; Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbit, 1999) rejected demobilization claims. On the contrary, some studies (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Geer & Lau, 2006; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002; Wattenberg & Briens, 1999) found that negative ads may stimulate voter turnout.

Garrazone and colleagues (1990) found that exposure to negative ads and exposure to positive ads does not differ in terms of the likelihood of mobilizing voters to vote. Assessments of campaign effect should not ignore the interconnected nature of various types of effects. Political public relations mobilization and persuasion are closely related to campaign effects in voter turnout can result from persuasion as well. Holbrook and McClurg (2005) argued that "Independents need to be persuaded and mobilized" and "what is often interpreted as persuasive effects may, in fact, be the product of mobilization" (P.691).

In political public relations campaigns, candidates may select specific messages to communicate through their ads. By pushing messages that are favourable to themselves rather than to their opponents, candidates attempt to prime citizens so that they become voters who will rate them higher than the competition and vote accordingly. Unlike product campaigns, in which competing brands are usually not mentioned, at least not by name, the political campaign often makes explicit references to negative messages about the candidates. However, studies have found that negative political ads can bring about both intended effects, e.g. votes cast in favour of a candidate, and unintended effects, e.g. detrimental

voter backlash against the source (Garramone, 1984, Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Hill, 1989, Shen & Wu, 2002)

Effective communication sources are evaluated by the audience influences and how persuasive the communication messages will be. Candidates in political campaigns are just like products in a commercial campaign. Political campaigns present positive images and create positive environments for their candidates involved in the elections, just as product marketing tries to present positive images and create a positive environment for goods and services. Researchers (e.g. Allen & Post, 2004) suggested that candidate image influences which candidates voters prefer. In political public relations advertising campaigns, the success of the brand, whether a candidate or a product, hinges on consumers or voters attitude towards the ads. Therefore, in assessing the effects of political public relations content on people's attitudes towards a brand, people's attitudes towards ads used to promote the brand should not be ignored. Research on product advertising has shown that attitudes towards ads play an important role in the formation of attitudes toward brands and brand choice (Dens, De Pelsmacker, & Janssens, 2008; Edell & Burke, 1987; Gardner, 1985; Homer, 1990.). Extrapolating this to the political arena, attitudes toward a political party may translate into the attitude towards the campaigner. Hill (1989) suggested that negative ads may communicate to voters a negative image of the political process, which may be perceived as a type of entertainment. Garramone (1984) argued that the perceived truthfulness of negative political ads determines whether the ads produce the intended effects. Thus, the present study focuses on understanding how the non-behavioural – perceived impact of media – and a behavioural variable – mass media use – influence people's attitude toward political public relations campaign ads.

Political Competitive Advantage Management in Nigeria

One way of achieving a competitive advantage is through competency-based approaches in which an organization tries to build differentiation as its core competence, which, if peculiar to the organization, will be difficult for competitors to imitate. These strategies have a long-term benefit to the organization. Differentiation builds a competitive advantage by making customers or electorates more loyal and willing to consider other product alternatives (Johnson & Scholes, 2002). In planning a full course of action for a politician to gain a political advantage among the electorate and political opinion leaders, efforts should be made to tackle the challenges mentioned above using public relations strategies, tools, tactics, etc. public relations, in essence, provides an articulated credible and effective voice in pleading an idea on behalf of an individual or organization before the seat of public opinion in the hope that the projected idea will become acceptable. And to achieve this lofty goal, they embarked on electioneering campaigns. The purpose served by this electioneering campaign includes; informing and educating the electorate about the party's name, logo, manifesto, and another identity that differentiates it from other political parties; canvassing or soliciting for votes on the election day; creating mutual understanding and garnering goodwill, projecting the good image of the party and the contesting candidates; dispersing rumour and opinion management and opportunity to interact with the electorate face to face.

Public Relations Research on the Nigeria Election Management

In respect to political public relations and Nigeria, theoretical and empirical evidence mostly deals with Nigeria internal activities, media relations efforts, the actions of Nigeria institutions and political actors in mass media, civil society activities and some case studies, for example, about past campaigns for Nigeria, Presidential, Governorship, Senate, House of Representative, House of Assembly and Local Government election campaigns. (INEC, 2015 and 2019), The bulk of existing studies of Nigeria internal communications are primarily about Nigeria Institution Communications and the level of playing grounds and professionalization of Nigeria media relations activities. In a recent study, Edo Governorship election (INEC, 2020), findings show a certain level of professionalization of media relations activities and security agencies. In general, these studies depict only minor improvement in Nigeria communication management.

When Nigeria changed from military autocracy to civil democracy on May 29, 1999, its citizens hoped that democratic values, especially the rights of political expression and criticism that were well abused

during the years of military rule, would be over in the country. Nigerians hoped that political repression which found expression with past military regimes, would be consigned to the dustbin of history. By political repression, I mean the curbing of opposition political party rallies, criticisms, meetings and demonstrations. Political rallies, assemblies, processions and demonstrations are forms of symbolic expression of liberal democracy.

On May 29, 1999, Nigerians hoped that after many years of military rule, the new democratic state would be the prime mover of human rights, good public relations, civil liberties, especially freedom of expression, political ideology, issue-based campaigns and free and fair election. These hopes were anchored on the belief that the worst form of democracy is more tolerable than the most benevolent dictatorship. Nigerians hoped that the new democratic dispensation would mark the end of the use of repressive institutions that were created by the 1999 out-going military to violate constitutionally protected civil liberties, including the rights of political expression, rallies and assembly. Nigerian government explained that it arrested opposition politicians and disbanded political rallies and assemblies to maintain public order and safety. The government further explained that it took these actions pursuant to the provisions of the Public Order Act, a 1979 statute that empowered the police to stop unauthorized rallies in the interest of public safety (Guardian, December 5, 2006).

An Overview of Public Relations

No one even knows when public relations became an independent entity. People have used public relations tool and techniques, however subconsciously, from time immemorial, but its development into specific business science probably took place in the 1920s in the United States. It is imperative to state that public relations had developed from the status of circus agent to an important strategic position in the conduct of the world's affairs (Black, 1995). In fairness, many big companies/organizations take public relations very seriously. They are becoming more aware of their responsibilities, and governments are starting to listen to their advisers, rather than using them as a mixture of publicist for good news and muzzles for the bad news. In the last analysis, however, we discovered that a good public relations expert is selling something, whether it's your product, yourself, your image or your views. Public relations, therefore, will often involve elaborate campaigns and a good image to change public opinion on one or more of its activities.

Political parties use massive public relations campaign to buy public understanding and also maintain a mutual relationship. Remember all the propaganda before, during and after campaigns are not public relations (Glen, Dennis, Bryan and Jac – Hwas, 2008). For our purpose: public relations is about presenting yourself, your organization and your product in a favourable light to your various publics' based on full truth. It is about getting them to hear of you if they haven't heard of you before and giving them a good impression of you.

Today's business world is, therefore, highly competitive, and every firm or political organization does things not neglecting the actions and reactions of its competitors and other interest groups around. It is therefore not a good strategy for an organization or political association to make a good "product or candidate" and it feels that it can market it properly when it actually has a bad image and relationship in the public understanding (Glen et al., 2008).

Public relations is, therefore, the business of getting and maintaining public understanding and support. It is a management function, which attempts to create goodwill for an organization and its products or candidates. Hence, the need for the use of public relations strategies and practices be adopted in political public relations management in Nigeria. The political parties have a great interest in developing mutual and beneficial relationships with interest group publics because they rely on key publics such as area/policy experts, think-tank organizations and civil society organizations to collect information and positions on diverse policy issues with a view to drafting proposals. It is a mutual and beneficial relationship.

Finally, the importance of political public relations in the political sphere of Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. It is highly imperative for the overall success of any political party that wishes to win an election or maintain political leadership in Nigeria.

Political Public Relations In Nigerian Modern Democracy: Influence Of Image, Campaign And Competitive Advantage In Politics

The 2019 general elections have once again brought to the front burner the craving for efficient public relations by Nigerian politicians to carry out their communication services in the country. Political parties in Nigeria recognize the importance of image, branding, campaign and political competitive advantage in their quest to seize political power. According to Tunde Faleye (2015), political parties in Nigeria go as far as hiring foreign public relations firms to help them sell their candidates to the electorates. During the 2015 and 2019 elections in Nigeria, politicians and their political parties failed again to engage any indigenous PR firm, sending the wrong signal that the government's campaign on local content policy is just a mere lip-service initiative.

He further stated that over the years, the Image Management and Public Relations sub-sector of the integrated marketing communication industry has been experiencing low patronage by politicians during electioneering. 2019 is not different. Save for few individuals (not PR firm) who are in charge of communication services of Sanwo-Olu, gubernatorial candidate of All Progressives Congress (APC) in Lagos, many of the image Management and PR firms have the same old song to sing. This continual neglect of the nation's PR professionals by the politicians has made practitioners frown at the attitude of Nigerian political parties for contracting foreign lobbyists. Politicians and political parties stand to gain a lot when they engage image managers and PR consultants to be in charge of their communication materials.

Public Relations and the Nigerian Perspective

An issue that is given attention at the introductory stage of the public relations course at the beginner is the "Comparative Analysis of Public Relations, Marketing, Advertising and Propaganda." Interestingly, PR seems to be the only discipline that vigorously embarks on "sensitization" by defining itself, essentially by what it is not. These misconceptions, according to Ajala (2005:36), "occur because public relations practitioners perform various functions. While some work in the area of product publicity, others are fundraisers, while some others are political specialists who decide what their candidate will say or do".

Lastly, again, based on the misrepresentation of what PR really is, it has been referred to differently as Spin, Publicity, Gin and Tonic, Hype, Propaganda, etc. This maze of confusion as to exactly what PR is or what PR people do has increasingly undermined the strategic relevance of the profession in the Nigerian political system.

In conclusion, this study analyzed the effect of political public relations during Nigerian elections from the transition from military to constitutional democracy (May 29, 1999, to May 21, 2019).

Public relations as a management function that creates mutual understanding between an organization and the public is too critical to be ignored by political parties in the current political process in Nigeria, and it found that during the election, political parties do not engage Nigeria PR expert in their campaign strategies rather employ foreign PR experts. It also found that by political parties campaign lacks ideology and political will, and the public was fed with propaganda. It was further found that opposition parties were intimidated, arrested and detained by the security agencies during rallies. There were no level playing grounds for a free, fair and credible election. To this end, the paper proffers the following recommendations for the positive consideration of political parties in Nigeria, with a view to improving political image, campaigns and competitive advantage. Therefore, the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) should combine with the vociferous, vocal and vigorous Nigerian press to help combat political intimidation and the tendency of the political party in power to violate constitutionally protected relations practitioners.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the effect of political public relations driving Nigeria election from 1999 transition to constitutional democracy (May 29, 1999 – May 29, 2019). It found that during the period, political parties in Nigeria does not engage Nigeria public relations practitioners in their campaign strategies.

Public relations as a management function that creates mutual understanding between an organization and the public is too critical to be ignored by political parties in the current political process in Nigeria. It also found that political parties' campaign lacks ideology and political will and the public were fed with propaganda. It was further found that opposition parties were intimidated, arrested and detained by the security agencies during political rallies. There were no level playing grounds for a free, fair and credible election. To this end, the paper proffers the following recommendations for the positive consideration of political parties in Nigeria, with a view to improving political image, campaign and competitive advantage. Therefore, Nigeria institute public relations (NIPR) should combine with the vociferous, vocal and vigorous Nigeria press to help combat political intimidation and the tendency of the political party in power to violate constitutionally protected public relations practitioners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The public relations arm of political parties should make monthly public relations announcements aimed at educating the public on their rights, electoral laws and duties, before, during and after the election, as well as new programmes and ideologies of the parties.
- Furthermore, the government should set up a panel to investigate political abuses and other forms of human rights violations in Nigeria.
- There should be a level playing ground for all the political parties to ensure the confidence of the people.
- There is the need, therefore, for political public relations in Nigeria to redefine itself by refocusing communication radar on its democratic/civil responsibilities, which includes disseminating to the people in the rural areas, based on political information required in an all-inclusive democratic process
- The importance of political public relations cannot be over-emphasized. Therefore, public relations practitioners should be vociferous, vocal and vigorous in Nigeria media to help improve political campaign based on issues and ideology by the political parties
- Political parties should constitute an effective committee to monitor and evaluate the result of their public relations activities
- Also, the Nigerian Institute of Public relations should monitor the activities of these public relations practitioners to ensure that they abide by the ethical conduct of public relations practice.
- Political parties in Nigeria should also employ the services of indigenous public relations firms instead of hiring foreign PR firms who are not conversant with the local terrain, culture and Nigeria political behaviour.

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