A DISCOURSE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS AND IMAGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF THE NIGERIA POLICE FORCE (NPF) AFTERMATH OF ENDSARS PROTESTS ACROSS NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study delved into a purposeful discourse on public relations and image management strategies of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) aftermath of the #EndSARS protest that took place across Nigeria in 2020. Specifically, it pursued three basic objectives – which are to identify PR image and reputation management strategies or techniques in modern times, and to find out different efforts by the NPF aimed at its image and reputation management. In addition, the study also sought to ascertain the new twist #EndSARS protest brought to the reputation management strategies in Nigeria (with special focus on the NPF). Through the use of conceptual analysis with the aid of existing literature in the subject area, the study found out that the NPF adopted the communication strategy that factored in the use of social media as a tool – a feat achieved or actualised through deliberate efforts such as establishing PR units across strategic formations of the force. The study concludes that owing to the situation the police found itself aftermath of the EnSARS protest, there was need for adoption of varied strategies to help them repair the damaged reputation – an action that was well taken.

Keywords: #EndSARS, Brutality, Law Enforcement, Public Relations, NPF.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Public relations is an important aspect of any organisation's quest to build or establish, manage or even maintain a favourable image and reputation across board. In this regard, the organisation is expected to make constant efforts aimed at positioning and presenting itself in good light to its public – internal or external. However, when there is a blur or unfavourable image as in the case of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), adoption of image management strategies becomes inevitable. In addition, such efforts to rebuild or manage damaged image or reputation become even more a herculean task. It is on this basis that strategies and plans are hatched by an organisation's PR department or unit for deployment, execution or implementation – and with the overall goal of getting the task done within set time.

The information that there is battered image of the NPF is not new and Nigerians are not strangers to the reality as calls have been made on top hierarchy of the force to ensure that a favourable image is built over time. However, the EndSARS movement and the protests that followed further exacerbated already established lows for the force and became an even more greater-a-task that needed to be accomplished. Therefore, it is noted that the top hierarchy of the force saw the need to embark on series of activities to reposition the force as well as build a favourable image between itself and the community it answered the call to serve.

It must be noted that, though literature that focused on the use of PR to manage or build reputation of the police force in Nigeria and elsewhere exist, there are identified gaps. One of such is with respect to specific strategies utilised by the NPF – and another is the EndSARS protest being a unique social movement that got publicity and amplification through social media platforms. On the basis of the foregoing, this study became even more significant. Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to identify the PR strategies adopted by the police in Nigeria to repair its battered image and reputation. On the basis of the foregoing, therefore, this study through conceptual analysis discussed PR efforts of the NPF and delved into the image management strategies adopted by the PR unit of one of Nigeria's oldest law enforcement agencies. It takes on the discourse with consideration of the new possibilities available to PR practice in modern times – the digital era that enable digital platforms and image management.

The study established that the PR unit of the force saw communication as the main thrust of their strategy for image and reputation management as they could not afford to do nothing in the face of glaring bad publicity. The situation could only be described as "tensed" as police formations in the country came under heavy attack by way of response from the largely youthful population who felt disenchanted in reaction to the excesses of officers and men of the NPF.

Therefore, with the infusion of strategies that took cognizance of the new media technological capabilities and possibilities, the PR efforts of the force received the desired focus and attention.

INTRODUCTION

In any organisation, there is often the growing need to maintain a good image due to divergent and important factors. One of such factors or reasons is that no organisation can satisfy its numerous publics without being perceived, first by the publics, as trusted and dependable. The dependability of the organisation depends on the degree of the comfort given to the publics coupled with her goodwill. Reputation, profitability and the continued existence of any organisation is often dependent on the degree to which its targeted public supports its goals and policies (Pearson Education, 2012). This is true with respect to both public and private organisations as the public is a key stakeholder and decides whether to patronise one or jettison it (as the case may be). Omale (2007) lends credence to the foregoing that the corporate image of an organisation forms a strong marketing communication and enhances public patronage. The results of this could encourage high patronage for business entities and bolstered relationships in case of others.

In Nigeria just like other parts of the world, individuals, institutions and organisations today are understandably concerned with managing their corporate image – a situation that paints the picture that there is a strong positive correlation between how people perceive an organisation and the pro-corporate supportive behaviour. It has been observed that organisational image management play a significant role in the overall performances of most organisations. In the view of Adeniji, Osinbajo, Abiodun and Oni-Ojo (2015), the recognition of the importance of a favourable organisational image has likewise made organisational image management a widely studied topic within the field of communication. This also relates to the realisation that every organisation has its image – regardless of whether the organisation does anything about it or not. Adeniji et al. (2015) further state that organisation's image is formed based on the stakeholders' perceptions of specific company actions as well as associated industry and national issues. At the same time, an organisation's image to a large extent influences stakeholder's reactions to specific corporate actions and products.

A battered image can be seen as an ill-wind that blows nobody good. In Nigeria, one institution with a battered image is the police, and the situation was exacerbated by way of response by "the people" to different reported case of abuses against officers and men of the police force in the country. According to Duhe (2019) success is tied to a strong reputation and then its bounds extend beyond that of the audience. For instance, the NPF by virtue of the poor image and perception gained through extra-judicial executions may have attracted the attention of International

Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) domiciled elsewhere in the world other than Nigeria. An example was when the Nigeria security forces which include the NPF were accused by Amnesty International of killing over 115 persons in South East of the country within a period of four months (Amnesty International, 2021; Reuters, 2021). There is a danger associated with such bad publicity – as an organisation or instituion often becomes the figure of public scrutiny.

It can be clearly stated that bad publicity attracts more attention which could paint a negative image and by extension poor perception from the people within and outside of Nigeria. Considering bad publicity that the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has managed to attract over the years, coupled with the issues surrounding the #EndSARS protests of 2020, the force needed serious reputation management and image building efforts. Therefore, this study with the use of conceptual analysis backed by numerous existing literatures on police brutality, PR strategies and image or reputation management of organisations delved into providing conceptual analysis to PR efforts of the NPF.

1. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the PR image and reputation management strategies or techniques in modern times?
2. What are the different efforts by the NPF aimed at its image and reputation management?
3. What the new twist to the reputation management strategies in Nigeria occasioned by #EndSARS protest (with special focus on the NPF)?

2. Review of Relevant Concepts

This study draws its strength from conceptual analysis research method. Therefore, related/relevant concepts with respect to the area of focus shall be discussed extensively to place in perspective their meanings. In line with the foregoing, concepts such as public relations, reputation/image management, and #EndSARS are conceptualised and explanations offered to put them in perspective with respect to the subject of discourse. The study focused on and delved into issues that relate to public relations and image management of the Nigeria Police Force in the aftermath of the #EndSARS protests that rocked Nigeria – Africa's most populous nation in the last quarter of the year 2020.

2.1 Public Relations

The term public relations or PR is a broad one and it has been conceptualised by different scholars in diverse ways. One of the most simplified definitions of the term was put forward by Hayes (2021) that any attempt to portray oneself to others in a particular way is considered PR. According to Asemah (2011) "public relations is considered a two-way communication between an organisation and the audience critical to its success" (p. 249). Asemah (2011) further describes PR as an activity geared towards the construction of positive image or reputation for an organisation – and also influences attitudes of the people towards a brand. It suffices to state that PR is responsible for the creation of favourable attitudes among key audiences. As a function of management, it is primarily responsible for shaping and implementing policies of mediation, among socio-political and economic interests, which could influence the growth and survival of an organisation's basic franchise. Public relations is also seen as the promotion of rapport and goodwill between a person, firm or institution and other persons, especially the public or community at large, through the distribution of interpretative materials and the development of neighbourly interchange.

According to the Public Relations Society of America (2012), "public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics". The concept can also be seen as the science and art that involves creation and maintenance of acceptance and mutual understanding among various interest entities – individuals, groups, institutions, organisations among others (Nnamani, 2016). The foregoing definition explores the concept from the angle of bridging gaps that may exist between people and organisation causing all forms of misunderstanding – so with PR, all concerned are brought to common knowledge and mutual understanding which serves as panacea for poor or bad reputation.

According to Hayes (2021) PR entails a set of strategies or techniques with respect to the management of information about a company or an individual targeted at the public, and the media. Part of Hayes' (2021) observation is that among the main aims or goals of PR include that which has to do with image management necessary to prevent fallout – just as the practice can come in the form of news conference, press release, interview sessions with journalists, and posts on social media, among others. PR appeals to public sentiment because activities of any organisation or entity are often times presented to members of the public. On the basis of the foregoing, it was observed that public-facing entities or individuals most often have information about them or their practice or activities presented to the public (Hayes, 2021).

As a management function, PR refers to the systematic creation and nurturing of mutually beneficial relationship with the public and the main goal is to enhance the reputation of an

organisation or institution (Minshaw, 2019). Bailey (2018) posits that anytime people refer to PR, they are actually talking about PR management. This is because, according to Minshaw (2019) PR is considered as one of the core functions of management just like operations and finance – and therefore must be backed by a system of procedures, policies and acceptable or global best practices. Therefore, in order to ensure its effectiveness, PR must align with policies and must be practiced according to laid down guidelines or procedures.

Regardless of the several definitions of PR put forward by various scholars, it is in reality, effort carefully planned and executed – as it is often organised by way of continuous programme or campaign carefully done – and not in haphazard manner (Onyiengo, 2014). The second deduction from the several definitions of PR, according to Onyiengo (2014) is that its main purpose is the creation and maintenance of mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. PR as used in this study refers to systematic attempts of the NPF to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the publics – the Nigerian public to which they have sworn to protect.

To Asemah (2011) the recognition and acceptance of public relations as a vital communication tool in the hands of all organisations in all modern societies is very important. Asemah (2011) further explains that public relations is a management function in human organisation, which helps in establishing a favourable relationship between an organisation and its publics. The importance of this is that, every organisation, be it commercial or non-commercial, government or non-governmental, has certain goals to achieve; such goals may be long term or short term. Asemah (2009) further buttresses that effective coordination of activities will be needed to achieve goals and objectives. Public relations, which is a management function, therefore becomes handy in facilitating effective communication of organisational goals and objectives. The public relations department in any human organisation handles various activities, which include: conflict resolution or crisis management, internal or employee relations, community relations, promotions, media relations, environmental scanning and sponsorship programmes.

Public relations strategy involves the "big picture"- the overall plan, how the campaign will achieve organisational or national goals and objectives. According to Anatusi, (2013) it involves deciding who the important publics are and which of them will be the recipients of the messages (i.e., "target audiences). The public relations strategies as listed by Anatusi (2013) include:

Communication – serves as the basis for control and coordination in organisations or nations – and also provides information essential to effective completion of national mission. Anatusi (2013) defines communication as the exchange of symbols or verbal symbols (oral and

written) that uses words or pictures. By virtue of the foregoing, communication can come in form of newsletters, flyers, news releases, brochures, direct mail, advertising, themes, slogans, the World Wide Web (www), and other initiatives that use words and language. The public's perception of credibility and validity is largely dependent on the successful transmission of verbal and non-verbal messages and the sharing of information at all links through the appropriate channels. The objective of influencing public opinion, changing or forming a new one can only be achieved through good and effective public relations. That way, hostility could be turned into friendship thereby resolving the conflict occasioned by corruption, misunderstanding and misconception. Public relations officers or practitioners can exploit NPF's potentials using the strategy discussed above thereby building on existing structures to entrench understanding with the Nigerian public and rebuild a favourable image.

Propaganda – can be seen as activities that involve disseminating information and ideas specifically towards intensifying or inducing specific actions and attitudes (Bhasin, 2019; Smith, 2021). Though, it is often thought that propaganda is false or misleading (Sinha, 2020), such line of thought or view is relative, even though some propagandists may intentionally distort fact but others may present it as faithfully as objective observers. However, the essential distinction lies in the intentions of the propagandist to persuade an audience to adopt the attitude or action he or she espouses. Propaganda is a powerful strategy that public relations use to influence behaviour or public opinions. It can be used positively in promoting the image of the country. However, with the circumstances of the lingering distrust between the Nigerian public and its police force, propaganda as a PR tool may not be the best strategy to repairing a battered image.

Lobby Groups – by its traditional meaning refers to group of persons joined together by a common purpose whose major function is to influence politicians and other public officers (Chen, 2020). Such groups claim to represent a particular interest and, therefore, should be established to influence government policy, corporate or public opinion. When a lobby group hides its true purpose and support base, it is known as a front group (Pietracatella & Brady, 2020). However, there is a connection or relationship between lobbying, PR and advocacy (Berg, 2009). Therefore, lobby can equally be used by public relations in order to sway public opinion or perception both within and outside the country to create good image. In the same vein, the NPF can also take advantage of this across several fronts.

Exhibitions and Expositions – are public displays of industrial or commercial products (Smit, 2012). Whereas exhibitions are a display of such products or arts for a short period, expositions are organised and often take a longer period and usually on a larger scale when compared to the former. The scope of both exhibitions and expositions may be regional, national or inter-

national – and such occasions can be explored to expose the traditional ways of life preserved in local customs, varied handicrafts and native arts and lifestyle of Nigeria in particular and Africa in generally. Relatedly, exhibitions and expositions as PR strategies also afford organisations the opportunity to present products and ideas that could sway perceptions of the public. In the sense of the foregoing, the NPF can take advantage of the strategy to sell its idea to the people with a view to get their buy-in and repair the damaged image.

Action Events – involve strategies or tactics that are non-written and include demonstrations, special events, parades, exhibits, community contributions (advice, manpower, money, talent) as well as other non-verbal activities that can be utilised or deployed by public relations practitioners or persons to project the image of an organisation, institution or a nation in the comity of nations (Miyamoto, n.d.). In other words, it means taking advantage of special occasions to project the image of an organisation, institution or a nation such as Nigeria. It is a strategy that can be deployed by the NPF aimed at repairing its battered image at the international level.

2.2. Corporate Reputation/Image Management

Image is the reputation or perception of a person, group or corporate body held by others often as a result of what they (the corporate body) do or have done. According to Udeze, Okoro and Agbo (2010) image is the totality of impressions people have about company, an individual and an organisation. Corporate image is the immediate mental picture that audiences have of an organisation and can be fashioned more quickly through well-conceived communication programmes. The desire to have a good image and reputation is premised upon the notion that, in the event an organisation has a good image, its products and services are patronised and the morale of workers boosted. For Imadonmwiyi and Ekienabor (2019), managing an organisation's image demands a more rational approach hence the need for suggestions as to know how the organisation can enhance its performance through better management of its corporate image. While some organisations have a clear and specific image with which they want to be identified with, others may not have but consciously agree upon target image (Agbonifoh & Oshagbemi, 2007).

The concepts of organisational reputation and organisational image have been defined and used in a highly similar manner throughout previous organisational image management literature. The reason for the high interrelatedness of the concepts is that they are both focused on how external publics perceive an organisation. Massey (2015) argues that both organisational reputation and organisational image are concerned about how stakeholders perceive the organisation, however, they differ in terms of stability; organisational reputation is a more stable and long-term understanding of the organisation while organisational image is more unstable, vulnerable and

dependent on external factors. Thus, time and stability are key components in distinguishing organisational image from organisational reputation.

Managing the organisational image is a constant process, where dialogical communication with stakeholders is one of the core elements because "an organisational image is the product of discourse between an organisation and stakeholders" (Massey 2015). Pynnönen (2018) clarifies what is meant by dialogue between organisations and external stakeholders in the context of image management in that the notion should not be confused with a conversation occurring between an organisation and a customer. Rather, Massey (2015) posits that it is a dual process where the organisation projects a desired image to the external stakeholder environment who in turn, interprets the projected image. The way this process becomes dialogical is when the organisation reacts to the feedback from the external stakeholder environment and adjusts their further strategic communication accordingly.

The organisational image itself is the product of the projection of the image and the interpretation of it (Massey, 2015). In line with the foregoing, the organisational image can be argued to be a product of negotiation and fit a constitutive view of communication. In the constitutive view of communication, communication is considered as meaning creation. On the other hand, Parent and Foreman (2007) hint that, the actual strategic process of organisational image management is communication as transmission where the messages are passed from a sender to a receiver. The process becomes cyclical when the messages are filtered through a feedback loop before being sent out by the sender again. To clarify, an organisational image is created through negotiation and meaning-making while managing the organisational image is a process where the internal stakeholders aim to project a certain image to the external stakeholder environment, making the communication a transmission of messages. In this study, the communication related to organisational image management will be viewed as communication as transmission of messages from sender to receiver.

Corporate identity, corporate communication, and feedback are key variables in the process of managing corporate image. Corporate identity is the reality of the corporation, the unique individual personality of the company that differentiates it from other companies. Corporate communication has also been described as the aggregate of sources, messages and media by which the corporation conveys its uniqueness or brand to its various audiences (Imadonmwiyi & Ekienabor, 2019). Feedback refers to the reaction or response expected from the audience of corporate communication – in this case, the target audience, specific audience or even the general public. Corporate image is in the eye of the beholder, the impression of the overall corporation held by its several audiences. Somehow, corporate image is dependent on perception of the public (Martinez

& del Bosque, 2015; Timothy, 2016; Plazzo, 2019; Arabska, 2020; Forsey, 2020; Rubio-Andrés et al., 2021)

In public relations, activities that involve image or reputation management are considered critical goals or objectives (Pahwa, 2022). According to Campbell (2020) reputation management refers to attempts or efforts to sway or influence what and the way people see or think of a personality or brand. In respect of the foregoing position, it refers to concerted efforts by the NPF on how people perceive the force aftermath of the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. In modern times, reputation management is largely domiciled on online platforms – websites, social media among others. Based on the foregoing, Campbell (2020) avers that reputation or image management is known by a number of similar or intertwined names such as internet reputation management, online reputation management, impression management, rep management, brand reputation management, brand perception, digital reputation management, and internet reputation management. However, and in whatever form the term or concept is referenced, its primary goal is shaping public perception of a brand or an individual. Therefore, when the NPF launches campaigns to re-brand its image, reputation or influence people's perception, then reputation or image management is at play.

Reputation management is chiefly influenced by impression management – a process through which people or institutions act to control or influence the general perceptions of others about them (Schaer, 2021). It is carefully done and mainly revolves around efforts or attempts at magnifying or highlighting positive areas or aspects while downplaying those ones that are considered negatives. In other words, Schaer (2021) explained that impression management involves both conscious and subconscious moves to glorify positives while pulling down negatives. It is important for individuals, organisations or institutions because impression counts in daily dealings with others.

As an industry of the PR broad field, reputation management is huge (Whatman, 2020). In an attempt to provide further explanation of the concept of reputation management, Whatman (2020) notes that it is a process that involves activities aimed at controlling and improving people's perception about a particular brand. As used in this study, the NPF is the brand. According to Obeta (2021) the NPF is a brand and it requires serious rebranding. Obeta (2021) further explains that the police force is a brand because just like brands of other institutions, it is not a physical entity but it dwells in the mind of the citizens. Therefore, its perception by the public matters a lot as it determines how they will get cooperation – which is important to the way they perform their constitutional functions. Obarisiagbon and Omagie (2018) lend credence that public perception of the NPF, to a great extent, impacts on their performance of assigned duty especially with respect

to fighting insecurity in the country. Therefore, this study dissects efforts of the NPF aimed at improving public perception with special focus on the aftermath of the #EndSARS protest.

2.3. #EndSARS as a Social Movement

Social movements can be seen as collective efforts in forms of campaigns that may be loosely organised, yet sustained in support of a social goal – often targeted at the implementation or prevention of a change in the structure or values of society (Turner, Smelser & Killian, 2020). Social movements involve the people and are usually products of their coming together regardless of their relationships. According to Turner et al. (2020) the relationships between these people are usually not defined by specific procedures or rules but strictly based on commonly shared outlook on society. In other words, what binds members of social movement together, often times borders on their perception of the society within which they all co-habit. Since such members are drawn from diverse backgrounds, but with common goals rested upon similar perceptions, then the push is often there because social movements are often purpose-driven. It is upon this premise that social movements have been described as purposeful, organised groups that strive to work toward a common social goal (Griffith et al., 2012).

In 2020, series of campaigns in form of protest by the #EndSARS movement rocked Nigeria – mainly targeted at enforcing a social change and achieving a saner society where the rights of citizens are respected by the police force. The street protests by young Nigerians further echoed calls for the disbandment of an abusive police unit popularly known as SARS – an acronym that stands for Special Anti-Robbery Squad (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In a further report by Human Rights Watch, it was revealed that while the youths were demonstrating, the authority through security forces descended heavily with force leading to deaths and serious injuries to many of the protesters. The foregoing report has been corroborated by several other reports and scholars – with records to show that there were deaths and injuries suffered by members of the group that protested across Nigeria (Adebajo, 2021; Adelagun, 2021; Ezeamalu, 2021; Olubajo, 2021; Salako, 2021; Soyombo, 2021; Inobemhe & Santas, 2022)

Origin of the 2020 version of the #EndSARS movement can be traced to the incidences that took place on the October 3, 2020 in Nigeria when operatives of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) allegedly shot a young man at Wetland Hotel in Ughelli, injuring him. This incident was filmed and through the power of the new media went viral, sparking an outcry across social media platforms against SARS just with the use of the hashtag #EndSARS on Twitter. By 8 of October, demonstrations associated with this hashtag had begun to increase in size and number throughout Nigeria, peaking at 26 demonstration events on 13 October. On 20 October, Nigerian

security forces led by the army reportedly fired live ammunition at #EndSARS demonstrators at the Lekki Toll Plaza in Lagos who had sat down on the road to peacefully protest against police brutality, reportedly killing at least 15 persons.

The youths otherwise referred to as "Young Nigerians" are still reeling from the shock and after effects of the government's heavy-handed response to issues surrounding the protests. Military officials have rejected claims that they killed unarmed protesters, alleging that soldiers had only fired blank bullets (BBC, 2020). The reaction has widened the distrust between young Nigerians and the government. After the 3 October 2020 shooting of an unarmed man, for example, police sources denied the incident despite video evidence to the contrary, reporting instead that the victim was arrested and sustained injuries when he jumped out of a police patrol car (Concise, 2020). It is important to reiterate that members of the Nigeria public did not buy into the story purportedly sold to them by the police authority.

It is noteworthy that #EndSARS was beyond a mere push by the Nigerian youth to bring an end to police brutality as it extends to broader calls for social justice in the world's most populous black nation (Okechukwu, 2020). According to Okechukwu (2020) even after the formal announcement of the disbandment of the police unit, the hashtag #EndSARS continued to trend across Twitter gaining global reach and garnering close to 30 million tweets within the 48 hours of its first use. Most significantly, the protest was used by youths to send a message to the nation and her leadership that they matter, and the #EndSARS was used to vent anger. Following the attack on members of the movement which resulted in deaths and injuries to many (Human Rights Watch, 2021), the authority or security forces including the police stared at the humongous task of rebranding its image to ensure acceptance by the populace – especially the youth who makes up the bulk of the Nigerian population.

3. Review of Related Literature

The image of Nigerian Police Force (NPF) has not been favourably branded among most citizens of the country and the international community. This is owing to the fact that the Nigerian Police Force has been accused and found wanting of high level of corruption and extortion (Ibrahim, 2019). For example, citizens who commute daily on Nigerian high ways are forced to bribe police officers before they can be allowed to proceed on their journeys. This is coupled with the issue of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) that has over the years struggled with bad relationship with the citizens of the country. The relationship between citizens and police personnel at all levels cannot be described as cordial. Kolawole (2019) lends credence that the relationship between the police and the people of Nigeria is not good.

This fundamental problem is traceable to lack of a well-structured or organised communication system or channel through which the police force can engage with the people. As a result of this poor communication framework, Nigerian citizens prefer not to disclose sensitive information to police personnel while they carry out task of investigating crime and other criminal cases (Ajisafe & Odunayo, 2020). Poor communication framework is responsible for the unfriendly relationship that currently exists between the NPF and the citizens – and this has serious implications on the negative image crisis that is brewing among police officers in the country.

According to Odinkalu (2004) the concept of image stands for everything a police officer is and does. The police officer's image and that of its organisation is largely influenced by the behaviour and practices exhibited by the personnel in daily discharge of their duties. This is further established or enhanced by the kind of relationship police officers have with members of the public. According to Massey (2015), the external stakeholder environment is in a constant flux. Several variables, including market dynamics, social issues, political issues and technological issues have the potential of affecting the image of an organisation. Again, by virtue of the dynamic nature of the stakeholder environment, organisations can find themselves in a situation where their image has been tarnished. Such scenario plays out with the NPF and the Nigerian public.

It is also noteworthy that there are other factors responsible for a battered image or reputation. Eleonu and Winston (2020) in a study found out that one of the factors that has accounted for the bad image in the Nigerian police force is the militaristic element or tendency inherited by the organisation from the colonial powers – this posture has portrayed the police as using the instrumentality of "force" on members of the public in order to achieve compliance to government laws and regulations. Knowingly or unknowingly, this mentality has made the police officers to apply force, brutality and coercion to its activities of policing. Therefore, this belief has promoted human rights abuses of all kinds among the rank and file of the force. It is as a result of this argument that several people are calling for the government to rename the NPF like it did to the Nigerian Prisons Service.

Relatedly, it has been noted that Nigerian police force is grossly lacking in terms of professionalism – and despite constitutional and legal provisions stipulating the functions of the police to the citizens, the police continued to carry out its activities as if the Nigerian state is still under the colonial government (Ogunwale, 2004)). According to Oduah (2021) the police force and its personnel has been accused and subsequently indicted for use of force, brutality, corruption and unfairness in the treatment of citizens in the country. It is based on this inhuman and violations of citizen's fundamental human rights by the Nigerian police that the public perception of the image of the force has remain unfavorable among most people in the country.

Other scholars and writers such as (Adegoke, 2014; Edet, 2017; Babalola, 2017; Ayito-go, 2020) blamed the government on the poor remuneratıon given to Nigerian police staff as the bane of its battered image crisis. As is said in Nigerian parlance, "the take home pay of a police officer in Nigeria cannot take him home". So far, the Nigerian government has deliberately not encouraged the officers by increasing their salaries. Nigerian police officers are poorly paid – and this has led many of the officers to resort to collecting bribes on the high ways to augment their meager pay check. This is coupled with lack of available resources and tools to work effectively. Due to poor condition of service, lots of police officers are resigning from the organisation to seek for better jobs elsewhere.

In a study of public perception of the police and crime-prevention in Nigeria, Ajayi and Longe (2015) examined the age-long image question regarding the negative perception accorded by the Nigerian police by citizens. Through survey research technique, the study elicited data from the respondents and found that Nigerian police officers had poor relationship management with the public, whose protection formed the basis for their hiring in the first instance. In other words, the police has not related well with the people whose lives and property they got jobs to protect. Findings of the study further showed that several human rights violations were perpetrated by the police in the cause of their duties hence the populace has lost confidence on the force with respect to the mandate to protect their lives and property.

Corroborating the above findings, The Human Right Watch (2010) study on Nigerian citizen's perception of the country police force showed that most Nigerians see the police as "indigent, despicable, and devilish based on testimonies from several citizens' experience with the police organisation". The study recommended that the image of the Nigerian police force should be rebranded because the process is seen as the surest way to ensure a better image is created. On the basis of the review, it has been established that the Nigerian police force has a negative image crisis beginning from the colonial days. Against this backdrop, it is imperative that government carry out strategic reforms in the organisation so that the image of the NPF can be favorably branded among Nigerian citizens and the international community as well. This is important for the overall perception of the country and its citizens in the comity of nations.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged upon communication and PR theories – namely persuasion theory, and two prisms out of Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations. The two prisms are the public information model and two-way symmetric model. As a common belief among research scholars, persuasion theory (just like other communication theories) draws its strength from, and

is founded upon Aristotle's ideas that culminated in rhetorical theory of communication (Asemah, 2011). The theory proposes that attitudes, belief and behaviour of individuals can be influenced by another individual through communication – especially one with the intent to persuade. Therefore, once persuasion is the intention, then there is the possibility that human behaviour can be shaped.

In most human activities and organisations, persuasion is seen as an important factor when the target is to influence, modify or impact the behaviour, attitudes and the entire belief of an individual or a group of individuals. Therefore, it can be said that "persuasion is human communication designed to influence others, by modifying their beliefs, values and attitudes" (Ugande, as cited in Asemah, 2011, p. 348). Asemah (2011) further opines that the task can be actualised through the transmission of messages that must be carefully planned, structured and well delivered. The theory is relevant to this study because it sought to ascertain the public relations efforts put forward by the NPF aftermath of the #EndSARS as part of broader strategies to persuade the people and also repair its battered image following years of abuse of people's rights. Events that followed the protest also created an atmosphere that needed a conversation which can only be achieved through communication – and such must be grounded on persuasion.

Public information model was first proposed by James E. Grunig and Hunt, developed from the earliest to the mid-20th century with its main concern on ways to ensure that only truthful information is provided about an organisation to its public (Zeeman, 2020). Such information may include information with respect to the identity of the organisation or institution, warning messages to the public, success stories of the institution or organisation, and personalities considered to be important to the organisation. According to Asemah (2011) the public information model is unidirectional – meaning it is a one-way communication effort. In public information model, emphasis is often placed on the trustworthy capacity of the messages whilst sharing accurate information meant to provide useful details or information without care for any form of publicity. Part of Zeeman's (2011) note is that public information model can be useful in crisis management – as it is expected that only PR experts should draft and execute messages meant for programmes aimed at providing accurate information to the public.

The second prism or model upon which this study is hinged is that of a two-way symmetric model of Grunig and Hunt's four PR models. According to Asemah (2011) the models presupposes that both source/sender and the recipient (which is the public) share initiative and power in equal proportion. The main aim of this model is to find a common ground to bring the organisation and their various publics together, primarily to establish mutual understanding. Asemah (2011) further explains that "the two-way symmetric models of public relations practice

use research not only to shape messages, but also, to change the organisation's behaviour when it is in disharmony with important publics" (p. 355). The model recognises the power of feedback and emphasises that through PR programmes or projects, there can be an atmosphere that breeds mutual understanding between and among stakeholders – for example, the one between the police and members of the public. Mutual understanding has the powers to occasion change in attitudes of people once it is built upon factors such as honesty, truthfulness and genuine intention. This model is relevant to this study because it sought to know ways through which the NPF established mutual understanding and genuine reconciliation aftermath of the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria.

5. Methods

Conceptual analysis research approach is the method adopted for this study. This approach to research provides for a treatment of concepts as categories of events, objects, relationships and properties (Furner, 2004). It was further explained by Furner (2004) that the method has to do with providing meanings of a given concept through specifying and identifying specific conditions under which phenomenon or entity can be classified. In other words, providing explanations to concepts and putting them in perspective. This conceptual analysis is in accordance with the position of Furner (2004) as the main concepts used in this study were placed side-by-side for better understanding. This study looks at the PR and image management strategies adopted by the NPF after the events of the #EndSARS protests that took place in Nigeria in 2020.

6. Discussion
6.1. Public Relations and Image Management in Modern Times

From time immemorial, public relations practitioners have always championed the quest to ensure latest technology is deployed to help organisations or institutions improve relationships with their diverse publics (Rodman, 2006). In line with the foregoing, Rabiu (2013) observes that the assertion is true as that has been the case with specialised media such as magazines, radio, and television as well as the era of modern technology. In the same vein, as the world goes digital, technological and media-oriented, activities of public information and relations are seen as integral and significant to police operations and successes (Motschall & Cao, 2002). A unique angle from which this can be seen is that of immediacy and interaction. On one hand, new technologies provide the needed speed to get any information across, and on the other hand, a room is provided for immediate feedback – a function that empowers interaction between the audience and the police. It is one of the new ways police reach out to the people.

In line with the above, the NPF just like every other institution elsewhere is taking advantage of modern technologies in its PR. Point Park University (2021) avers that Law Enforcement

Agencies (LEAs) are taking advantage of some modern pieces of technology – such as social media, K-9 cameras, gunfire locater, crime mapping, drones, hand-held translator, DNA phenotyping among others. However, one of such technologies occasioned by the innovation is that of social media technology reputed to be useful to LEAs in diverse ways – and most specifically useful in the PR activities of the police. According to Point Park University (2021) social media has opened a door for LEAs to develop and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the citizens to whom they have a duty to protect. This is in addition to the use of the platforms for investigation of cases and raising awareness among members of the public. However, it is noteworthy that the strategy adopted or utilised by the NPF with respect to PR revolves around that of communication as espoused by Anatusi (2013).

The NPF also takes advantage of the new media technology as can be seen with the use of various social media accounts. For instance, the verified Twitter handle of the NPF is @PoliceNG (account with over 1.9 million followers) through which the Nigerian Twitter community gets update on police activities in the country. Whereas, certain tweets from the account are targeted at the general public (external publics), there are certain posts also directed at keeping officers and men of the force (internal publics) informed on activities of the organisation that concern them. On Facebook, the NPF has quite a number of accounts – with the most prominent being "Nigeria Police Force" – a verified page with over 770 thousand followers. Members of the public take advantage of the interaction capacity of social media to lend their voices to policing – a move that has largely positioned the police as an open and transparent organisation. This is in line with the assertion of Bullock (2018) that social media is perceived as platforms that engender transparency and openness whilst affording the citizens the opportunity to take part in public policing. The foregoing is in line with Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetric model that takes feedback as an important mechanism in the communication process between an organisation and its public. It is seen as a basis for establishing mutual understanding – a thing the NPF desires most in modern times to enlist the cooperation of the people in a bid to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in their policing efforts.

6.2. The Nigeria Police Force and Public Relations Efforts

Scholars have continued to stress on the importance of PR units in police work. According to Grossi (2020) a PR department is important to a police organisation for so many reasons chief among which are building a positive public image, monitoring the online reputation of the organisations, and assisting with crisis management. Specifically, Grossi (2020) avers that it is expedient upon LEAs to deploy PR strategies to establish a positive relationship with the community they serve. Similarly, Zems (2016) reiterates the importance of police public relations in

policing – especially in the area of its function as a tool for sustaining and maintaining a mutual relationship between the police and members of the public. Zems (2016) further posits that the NPF understands the importance of public relations – and that is the reason behind the replications of the department or units in its major formations throughout the Nigerian federation. In the NPF, the unit is responsible for press releases, issuing statements while suspects are paraded, among other several activities. Therefore, PR is a significant aspect of any police force or institution poised to strengthen relationships.

According to Smith (2020) public relations tools can be used to (among other things) make society better – and that however, and whatever efforts made by public institutions, businesses and non-profit organisations, it is still possible for a profession to be tarnished by "the bad apples in the barrel" (p. 15). The foregoing means that regardless of organised efforts by an institution – private or public, there are always bad elements with such organisations that will always act in ways that diminish their public image. Smith (2020) however, reveals that the society at large could still benefit from public relations in eight prominent ways – among which are reputation, civic awareness and survival. With respect to its reputation function, Edwards (2022) notes that public relations generate favourable publicity, encourage a working relationship with like-minded organisations and institutions, and develop programmes towards the public good – thereby helping to maximise the people's support while minimising opposition.

On the civic awareness function of public relations, Smith (2020) reveals that PR can be viewed from the angle where agencies of government and lawmakers take advantage of available tools to promote services and programmes to the constituents. Specifically, Smith (2020) reveals that the security apparatus especially the military also make use of the available tools of public relations to recruit, entrench and foster public support, providing information on progress to the people (families, legislators and officers and men) through periodic reports. Another relevant function of public relations as outlined in Smith (2020) is that of survival – where it aids institutions or organisations work by reversing negative opinions in varied situations, and even survive lawsuits.

In like manner, the NPF has made several efforts and put structures in place towards ensuring public relations activities are on-going. For example, Woyengikur and Obinichi (2019) explain that the Nigerian police force employed or adopted several communication strategies to interface with the populace in the country. According to them, some of these strategies include media relations, community relations, employee relations, corporate identity/image, sponsor relations and protocol relations to communicate and engage with members of the public on vital security issues that concerns Nigerians. This becomes imperative because tackling crime both

within and outside the Nigeria Police force requires engagements from all stakeholders in the social system. In addition, owing to the battered image of the police force, it became necessary for the NPF to adopt or utilise varied PR measures to arrest the situation and get the cooperation of the people. This aligns with persuasion theory because it presupposes that PR can be used to bring about change in attitude, beliefs and behaviour of members of the public. If the police intend changing the attitudes and behaviour of members of the public towards it, then deliberate attempts must be made to ensure that persuasion is factored into its communication efforts.

Furthermore, Nkwocha (1999) identifies the public relations tools press releases, conferences and seminars, open door meetings with community or some stakeholders, organising of shows and special events employed by the public relations department of the Nigerian police force to ensure they constantly keep in touch with the citizens. The public relations department utilises these tools to update the public on the activities of the police force. More recently, the Nigerian police force formations have taken advantage of the opportunity provided by the development in new media technologies to engage and interact with members of the public. It is now common to see the public relations department deployed all kinds of social media handles as communication channels to reach out to the Nigerian people. This development has boosted the efforts of the PR department or unit across formations of the Nigerian police force in keeping with the trend of using modern technological gadgets to enhance their communication system. This is useful considering that they are constantly in battle with the age-long image question that has battered its image in the country.

6.3. EndSARS and the Unique Twist to Public Relations in Nigeria: Focus on NPF

#EndSARS protest actions taken throughout Nigeria provided government with specific bits and bytes of information that improve their understanding of what the public or a specific segment of the public (that they particularly care about) wants. The attractiveness of the information encapsulated in protest can best be understood when looking at representatives' information environment (Wouters & Walgrave, 2017). Protests against police brutality previously have arisen in Nigeria, as advocates and researchers have documented extensive evidence of human rights abuses by SARS officers and other NPF personnel (Ulo, 2021; Etim et al., 2022; Inobemhe & Santas, 2022).

According to Lawal and Ibrahim (2021) the character of SARS and the failure of the police authorities to rein it in reflects the inept nature of the police as an organisation and the lack of solutions by the government, the public disenchantment with the activities of SARS also impacts negatively on the citizens' trust and confidence in the whole police as an organisation and government in general. Situation of #EndSARS and events that heralded the protest changed a lot with

respect to PR, and since the NPF was the epicenter of the entire movement, the challenges became humongous. For example, the PR department of the NPF continued to emphasise the need for the citizenry to support the police regardless of the #EndSARS crisis.

Based on the foregoing, it is evident that the Nigerian Police Force can regain it shattered public image when it greatly changes the attitudes of its personnel, mode of operations and levels of handling information, situations and the general public. This is so because public relations represent an important promotion and communication instrument. Although it is less often used, it has a significant potential in raising public awareness and creating preference for a certain product on the market, as well as in repositioning and maintaining products on the market. Olariu (2017) identified main instruments of public relations that are capable of rebuilding a better image for the Nigerian Police to include publications, demonstrations, news, discourses, activities for public service, written or audio-visual materials, means of constructing corporate identity and telephone services. The foregoing aligns with the position of public information model because if the police relates with the public in a manner that is deemed truthful and purge itself of all forms of manipulations, its image can be rebuilt and the needed trust regained.

However, PR goes beyond just identifying strategies and deploying them. Olariu (2017) also argues that, the planning of public relations activities involves establishing public relations objectives, choosing the appropriate messages and means to transmit them, as well as evaluating the results. A major mass promotion instrument is represented by the activity of public relations – creating good relations with various existing categories of the public, obtaining a favourable media representation, creating a company image in the public perception, and judiciously managing or removing the negative effects of rumours, accounts or unfavourable events that are harmful to the firm. According to Olariu (2017), the Public Relations Department can partly or entirely fulfil any of the following functions: maintaining relations with the press or mediating these relations: creating and placing in the press valuable information deemed as newsworthy in order to attract the attention toward a person, product or service.

Meanwhile, worthy of note are the seven stages of organisational image and reputation management as acknowledged by Orzekauska and Smaiziem (2007) as cited in Oluwasola (2016) namely:

a. Backgrounding police image.
b. Analysing internal and external environment: identifying and evaluating stakeholder.
c. Determining desirable image for the police.
d. Measuring present image of the police.

e. Identifying police image through research.

f. Preparing a plan for reducing gaps between present and desirable image (programs for "curing", shaping or modernising image). These stages are highly instrumental to repositioning the public perception and image of the Nigerian Police force which can be done through effective professional public relations practice. Oluwasola (2016) stresses that applying public relations principles to restore police image requires visible policing which involves four key elements namely: adequate funding, preparedness, addressing institutional inadequacies and a changed disposition of officers to unprofessional conducts and the Nigerian populace. This, when instituted through sustainable and strategic public relations practices will definitely endear the police to members of the public thereby reducing or erasing all together the bad image of the force.

Conclusion

The study concludes that, indeed, the police in Nigeria have been grappling with image or reputation problems from time immemorial – and a time came when the force was more resolute to rebrand. Having also gone through the challenges occasioned by the incessant cases of police brutality and the attendant image issues, the NPF was without choice rather than to utilise PR strategies to solve the challenges. A case in point is that of the aftermath of #EndSARS protest where the force required (more than at any time in history) the instrumentation of PR to repair or manage its reputation or image – one that was badly damaged following series of action taken before and during the period under review.

The study also draws conclusions that the NPF adopted a series of strategies – but pointed to that of communication as the most significant as the force could not afford to sit idle and do nothing to save its image and reputation (especially in the eyes of right thinking members of the society). However, the force through the use of social media and modern technologies deployed the strategy to keep the people informed and engaged with respect to the reforms kick-started by way of response to the demands by members of the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. Therefore, we can say that the use of new media technologies aided the NPF in its PR efforts aftermath of the protest in the country. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and the rest proved useful in this regard.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of this study, the recommendations outlined below may prove useful:

1. That the NPF must now (more than ever) realise that there is need to continue to work tirelessly to repair its battered image. It is necessary because, by and large, the people have demonstrated that they care so much about men and officers of the police force in Nigeria through their #5for5 demands. One way to achieve this is to constantly partner media organisations and civil society groups to embark on campaigns so as to build or repair its image and to solidify the relationship between the police and the people.

2. The government should ensure that police officers and other law enforcement agents are held accountable for any action that runs afoul of the law or code of ethics of the profession. One way to achieve this is to strengthen institutions to have internal mechanism that could weed-off and punish erring officers and men of the force to serve as deterrent to others. It can also be achieved through the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at strengthening policing in Nigeria.

3. The police should learn to collaborate more with the people. This can be achieved by building a better image for itself and then occasioning the requisite trust needed to maintain and solidify the relationship that will be built. That way, there will be a commensurate improvement in policing just as a better and favourable image will be established at both local and international level.

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