

Exploring the Perspectives of Selected Public Relations Professionals on the Made-In-Nigeria Campaign

Ogunyombo, Oludare Ebenezer
Department of Mass Communication
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun state
08023878200; 09030988689
dareoguns2000@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploratory study that examined the perspectives of selected public relations professionals in Lagos state, Nigeria on the Made-in-Nigeria campaign. The study was necessitated by the discordant tunes emanating from Nigerians about the project that indicates lack of mutual understanding of the campaign between the government and the people. Using an in-depth interview to gather data from 10 selected PR professionals, the thematic pattern in their responses showed that the PR professionals viewed the made-in-Nigeria initiative as laudable. However, they berated the lack of clear objectives with which the campaign may be measured from the project initiators. They faulted the stakeholders' engagement and communication strategies used in propagating the campaign and identified these as reasons for the poor acceptance and execution of the project. Source credibility was also a major issue identified by the respondents as the proponents of the initiative appear not to be committed to the goal of the campaign in terms of their 'words and actions' which is majorly due to the non-engagement of professionals to handle the campaign. Based on these findings, it was recommended that the government should engage public relations and other relevant professionals to articulate a robust and effective strategy rather than simply appointing choice individuals who may not be able to provide a sustainable and enduring campaign engagement programme to generate public interest in the initiative.

Key words: *Communication Strategies, Made-in-Nigeria (MiN), National Development, Public Relations, Stakeholders Engagement*

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

One of the important economic goals of any country is to ensure that its export margin is higher than its import as this will not only boost foreign reserves but also solidify the strength of the nation's currency. The currency will not be overly influenced by market determinants such as prices and exchange rates. However, in 2013, Nigeria's international trade was 92 percent import and 8 percent export. Despite the immense business prospects, the Nigerian economy is currently under-utilized and undiversified. In spite of the availability of a ready market and labour (due to population size), investors are hesitant to invest in the country due to the host of problems plaguing the manufacturing sector such as the lack of electricity and inconsistent policies.

Additionally, the issue of trust in Nigeria made products pose major challenges to economic development in Nigeria. Although some goods are manufactured locally, there exist a high dependency on imported or foreign products among Nigerians. What influences an average Nigerian consumer's perception of product quality is the product's country of origin and the perceived higher quality of such products. To meet up with such 'foreign demands', some manufacturers often produce locally made goods, deceptively package such goods with foreign labels and sometime sell at higher prices (NOI Polls, 2016).

To address these gaps in the economic landscape and rekindle Nigerian's believe in indigenous products, President Muhammadu Buhari's administration as part of its 'change agenda' launched the *Made-in-Nigeria* (MiN) campaign. The initiative is also meant to address the issue of dwindling global prices of crude oil, which may affect the overall economic interest of Nigeria on the long run. In 2016, the Nigeria Economic Summit Group (NESG) headlined the "Made-in-Nigeria" campaign as the theme of the year's summit (Nigeria Economic Summit Group, 2016).

Within the concept of development and social change, the steps taken by the Federal government to develop the Nigerian economy is in line with Moemeka (2012) description of development "as a movement (change) from existing conditions or situations that are no longer considered conducive to societal or group goals and aspirations to those that can meet expected societal or group goals and aspirations" (p. 25). Rogers cited in Nnayelugo and Nwafor (2015) agrees that development process must have a reflection of participatory governance to be effective. Roger thus defines development as "a widely participatory process of social change in a society intended to bring about both social and material advancement, including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities for the majority of the people through their gaining of greater control over their environment". (p.165) Such participatory governance towards socio-economic development is capable of resulting in an overall social change which Moemeka (2012) described as "actions taken to reduce or eliminate the non-conductive or negative side effects of social and physical development with the ultimate goal of achieving positive change that will enable better conditions of living and human relationships" (p.60).

However, there appears to be some discordant tunes among stakeholders on the Made-in-Nigeria campaign. Reuben Abati, a Special Adviser on Media and Publicity to former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan noted that the Made-in-Nigeria campaign is "not as simple as just buying Nigerian goods. It is not about trending hashtags, slogans or propaganda but a decision to move this country beyond the ongoing knee-jerk, desperate elite war of position within the political spectrum and see what can work for the people's benefit" (*Buzz Nigeria*, para. 6, 8, 19). Within the concept of public relations defined as "the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisations leaders and implementing planned programmes of actions which will serve both the organisation and public interest" (Nwosu, 2011, p. 151), there appears to be issues with the communication and stakeholders engagement on the campaign. Exploring the perspectives of public relations professionals, in this instance is of interest in this paper.

1.2 The *Brand Nigeria* Debate

According to Okoli (2013) "brand is the tangible and intangible attributes of a product, service or place (destination) as acknowledged by the conscious consumer public. It comprises the names, logo, colour values, price packaging associated with an article of commerce" (p.83). Branding thus become a conscious and strategic efforts in maintain these elements in a particular product in order to make it attractive the buyers. Thus, re-branding is defined as a conscious attempt to reconstruct the quintessential brand attributes of a product with a view to restoring its uniqueness or redeeming its image/identity. In terms of national re-branding initiative in Nigeria, it is a typical instance of place or destination rebranding. It is an attempt to create a new favourable image in replacement of an extant but unfavourable one.

Notably, prior to President Buhari's administration, governments at different times have initiated campaigns at branding and rebranding Nigeria. Keggku (2011) noted that in July 2004, under the President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, the Nigeria image project known as *Branding Nigeria* was launched by the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation. The aim was to promote national brand asset including business, products, people, sports, culture and cities in Nigeria to the rest of the world and position Nigeria as a leader in Africa's development through a Business Support Group (BSG). These campaigns subsequently metamorphosed under different names like *Heart of Africa*, *Proudly Nigeria* and *Re-branding Nigeria*. Incidentally, these initiatives have not gone without challenges. For an example, Igyor (2011) notes that "the *Heart of Africa Campaign* became an international showcase that targeted audiences in New York, London and Paris at expense of the Nigerians who should have been the audience" (p.195).

Keghku (2011) also noted that the several attempts made have been challenged by the high level of corruption, which has permeated the fabrics of the Nigeria nation thus hindering the nation's socio-economic growth and development. Osho (2011) agrees that Nigeria faces the challenge of negative perception because of bad behaviour and failure at all levels of governance in the country. Although Keghku (2011) advises that the re-branding project of Nigeria should only be seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself, Ogedengbe (2009) argues that the re-branding projects have been affected because the proponents have used more of propaganda rather than public relations strategies that would have helped. Okoli (2013) in his assessment, notes that approaches to the re-branding campaign in Nigeria are mostly reactive and propagandist. The campaigns have been more of a face saving exercise rather than exercises meant to better the lots of the people. Kolawole (2016) agrees that "the Made-in-Nigeria project is a child of circumstance born by the oil revenue crunch and the need to protect Nigeria's forex reserves" (para. 3); whereas not too much attention has been paid to the quality of the made-in-Nigeria product resulting into scepticism among Nigerians. This opinion was reflected in the *Vanguard* editorial of March 2, 2017 which states that:

It is quite disappointing that this campaign is not being majorly headlined from the office of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, perhaps as part of this regime's package of "change" ... Instead, the use of foreign-made goods and services by leading members of the regime are so obvious, even in the face of severe foreign exchange crunch. The campaign is being inchoately picked up by concerned individuals...This campaign requires a central arrowhead, and only the Presidency can provide leadership, using all organs of the Federal Government to fan its embers to total ownership by the citizenry. Nigerians are showing their patriotic instincts and readiness to be part of it. The growing popularity of producing and consuming Nigerian rice is an encouraging case in point. We strongly believe that if all Nigerians get into this inward-looking bandwagon, Nigeria's journey to self-sufficiency and prosperity would have begun. Let the President lead us.

In summary, Abubakar (cited in Iloani, 2016) and Kayode (2017) agree that Nigeria has to get the branding objectives right because the essence of Made in Nigeria is not about running adverts, making insincere claims and paying lip-service; but it is about creating value and harnessing resources to create wealth and competitive advantage. It is not about cameo media appearance and making hollow statements about a "Nigerian Dream".

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Several governments in Nigeria at some point or the other have initiated different programmes aimed at addressing socio-economic issues in the country. Laudable as these projects are, there have been concerns about how the objectives are harnessed and communicated to the various stakeholders within the ecosystem. Majorly affected are projects that require that the people make decisions to change certain behaviour or attitude. The Made-in-Nigeria campaign by the President Muhammadu Buhari's administration appears to be witnessing the same challenges going by the discordant tunes from stakeholders at the leadership and followership levels. Mutual understanding on the objectives of the project may be lacking based on feedbacks from these stakeholders. As a profession, public relations is saddled with the responsibility of establishing such mutual understanding and establish a relationship that will promote the collective good.

According to Keghku (2002), public relations practice and management is a veritable tool for economic growth and development and indeed aids the success of all policies of government, organisations or individuals. Public relations helps in utilizing communication in all facets, and developing policies by providing sensitive judgement about human relations, weighing the probable effects of various alternatives and expressing those policies. Public relations provides input to the Federal Government and general patterns of public opinion hence, there can be no satisfactory implementation without first understanding the philosophical leanings of the publics. Despite the relevance of public relations in policy formulation and implementation, little is known about the views of the PR professionals or the PR Institute in Nigeria on the issues affecting the made-in-Nigeria campaign.

Thus, the focus of this paper is to probe the issues from the perspectives of public relations professionals and establish the themes with the aim of identifying areas of interventions on the project.

1.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The main objective of this study is to access the perspectives of public relations professionals on the made-in-Nigeria campaign and establish themes on issues affecting the campaign particularly in terms of stakeholders engagement and communication strategies. Based on the foregoing, this study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. How do public relations professionals perceive the Made-in-Nigeria initiative?
2. What are the perspectives of public relations professionals on the stakeholders' engagement strategies of the Made-in-Nigeria campaign?
3. What are the perspectives of public relations professionals on the communication strategies of the Made-in-Nigeria campaign?
4. What are the perspectives of public relations professionals on the major limitations of the Made-in-Nigeria campaign?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This paper adopted a qualitative method using in-depth interview with an interview guide. An in-depth interview is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, programme or situation. It is useful in getting detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviours and exploring new issues in depth. It helps to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view on a situation and explore interesting areas for further investigation. It provides more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys (Berry, 1999; Boyce & Neale, 2006; Ya'u & Nababa, 2016).

2.2 Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling was used in selecting the 10 respondents for this study. Tongco cited in Talabi, Ogundeji & Adedowole (2016) stated that purposive sampling is the most effective when studying certain cultural domain where knowledgeable experts are involved. By the nature of their training, public relations professionals are experts in stakeholder's engagement and development communication. Their role spans the social, political, economic and cultural life of people in any society; hence the need to explore their perception on the subject matter. The criteria for selection is based on the antecedents of the respondents in terms of their leadership roles, their years of work experience and recognition within the Nigeria public relations industry.

3. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

An in-depth interview using an interview guide was used to elicit responses from the 10 public relations professionals that were purposively selected. The average age of the respondents is 53.6 years while the average years of experience is 23.3 years. They were 6 males and 4 females. The names of the respondents have been replaced with codes to protect their identity. They are coded as follows: MiNR1, MiNR2, MiNR3, MiNR4, MiNR5, MiNR6, MiNR7, MiNR8, MiNR9 and MiNR10. In line with the research objectives, thematic analysis was used in analysing the data generated from the respondents. In thematic analysis, Anderson (cited in Meribe and Oke, 2017) states that the researcher groups and distils from the texts a list of common themes in order to give expression to the community of voices across participants.

The purpose of thematic analysis is to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset that provide an answer to the research question being addressed. Patterns are identified through a rigorous process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development and revision. Thematic analysis is theoretically-flexible. This means it can be used within different frameworks, to answer quite different types of research question. It suits questions related to people's experiences, or people's views and perceptions (The University of Auckland, 2018). The data are presented below:

3.1 Made-in-Nigeria is a laudable project without clear objectives

The pattern of responses from the interviewees showed a consensus that the made-in Nigeria campaign is a laudable project by the government. The respondents agreed that the project is right at this time, particularly with the quest for economic recovery from the recession period. For example, respondent MiNR1 stated that "it is a laudable initiative, very welcome especially at this time in our development". Respondent MiNR2 supported stating that "it is a good way to go. We all know that we have to have a product base, a real effector and that is one of the ways we can be self-sustainable". However, laudable as the project is, the respondents believe it remain abstract in the view of the intended audience because there are no clear objectives. For instance, respondent MiNR4 said that the campaign is "good but not sufficiently substantial". Respondent MiNR5 added that "the intentions are noble but at best it is a brandishing of a slogan and at worst it is non-inclusive, without a compelling reason to believe".

The respondents further queried what is different in this campaign, as against the earlier campaigns with the same slant. For instance, respondent MiNR6 asserts that "we have always had one form of made-in-Nigeria campaign. However, what are the objectives of the MiN campaign as we have it now? We have always had campaigns come and go but without clear objectives". Respondent MiNR9 further argued that "I think the campaign is gaining weight now not because its messages resonates with Nigerians but due to recession. Nigerians are simply constrained to look inward".

3.2 Ineffective stakeholders' management and communication strategies

The respondents are of the opinion that the stakeholders' management and communication strategies employed by the government on the MiN project is below per, as required for a project of such magnitude. Their assessments is majorly informed by the past and current experiences of the respondents in stakeholders' management as a public relations function particularly on a large scale of policy engagement from which the respondents drew conclusions on what should have been an ideal stakeholder's engagement strategy. For instance, respondent MiNR3 observed "a lot need to be done in terms of the involvement of stakeholders. Bodies like the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) should be engaged to design campaign the will capture the essence of the campaign better". Respondent MiNR4 agreed that "the government needs to do more than it is presently doing. Nigerians need to be persuaded to take ownership and this must be a top-down approach".

The content generation, framing of the narratives and choice of media, in view of the respondents is not adequate. Respondent MiNR5 opined that “the narrative has not been framed well to compel the target audience to buy into the dream of the campaign. The communication objective in simple terms is lost”. Respondent MiNR1 agreed to the loose of the communication objective as she agreed that “I am not aware of any stakeholders initiative adopted for the engagements on this initiative, especially as it concerns communication...there is communication gap between the government and the people that should benefit from the incentives from the campaign and that is where public relations comes in”. Respondent MiNR2 probed further stating that “there has not been any communication strategy from the Federal government as far as strategic engagement is concerned”. Respondent MiNR7 concurred that “you need to get the buy-in of PR professionals. Internationally, that is how campaigns are done to get the buy-in of the stakeholders”. The respondents agreed that non-professionals will give their peripheral knowledge which may not go far in helping the campaign gain the needed mileage because the approaches to the project must emanate from the government, the agencies and institutions that are involved. For that reason, respondent MiNR9 asserts that “that the communication approaches appear too cosmetic. The promoters need to evolve 360° communication strategy for an effective campaign and not only concentrate the messages on the pages of the newspapers”.

3.2 Issues with distrust, integrity and source credibility

The respondents were in agreement that there are issues with source credibility. By source credibility, the respondents aver that the government and its social agents are not to be trusted because they (government functionaries) appears not to be committed to the course of the made-in-Nigeria campaign. The respondents questioned the sincerity and integrity of the government in this regard. For instance, respondent MiNR7 asked that “are the leaders showing good examples to the followers in terms of their commitment towards achieving the objectives of the made-in-Nigeria campaign?” Respondent MiNR8 agreed that “the initiative is not backed by an effective action that you know including the drivers of the project”. Respondent MiNR2 added “I believe it is not as engaging as it should be. It is almost like a mantra of the government, they are not as committed as they can be”. Respondent MiNR1 summarised it thus “I do not think the government is actually serious. Even though they are, they are not showing that seriousness. The body language of the people is not showing their consent of the made-in-Nigeria initiative and that reflect a gap in communication”.

The respondents identified some instances which depicts some of the credibility issues. Respondent MiNR6 said “the government is not sincere. For instance, the President still travel abroad for treatment”. Respondent MiNR8 also noted that the “absence of governance integrity and not attending to the needs of the people will definitely weaken the efforts to instil in the people the sense of patriotism...There appears to be so much luxury and enjoyment within the corridor of powers but much hardship to suffer in the public space”.

As a panacea, the respondents advised that the government need to improve its image to grow its credibility in order to engender the desired support. Respondent MiNR4 advised that “the government needs to do more than its presently doing...There must be demonstrable and commensurate actions by the government...More will have to be done to persuade Nigerians to believe in this course. There must be absolute trust and confidence from the people regarding the campaign”. Respondent MiNR8 agreed that “if there is a sober approach from the leaders, it will be easier for followers to align with the objectives. Unfortunately, that is not happening...” Respondent MiNR2 also stated that “it is not about mouthing it, it is about walking the talk”.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The overall objective of this study is to explore the perspectives of public relations practitioners on the Made-in-Nigeria campaign of President Muhammadu Buhari. The aim is to examine the reasons for the discordant tones expressed among some stakeholders on the MiN campaign as established in the literatures reviewed.

Perception of the Made-in-Nigeria campaign

From the study, it may be inferred that public relations professionals perceived the MiN initiative as a laudable project although not novel. The well-worn perception of some of them about the project is because at some point or the other, successive governments in Nigeria had one form of such programmes, which are usually not followed through. This confirms the assertions of Okoli (2013) that an underlining attribute of most of the re-branding campaign in Nigeria is that they are mostly reactive and propagandist in their approach. They have been more of a face saving exercise rather than that meant to better the lots of the people.

Strategic stakeholders' engagement for the Made-in-Nigeria campaign

The respondents perceive the stakeholders' engagement of the MiN campaign as below par. Generally, they believe the government is not doing enough to articulate an effective stakeholders' engagement, which would have been better driven with strategic public relations. They were unanimous on the fact that the government should have engaged professional to achieve a holistic campaign. This gap is affecting the ability of Nigerians to take ownership of the campaign. This finding confirms with Ogedengbe's (2009) argument that the re-branding projects have been affected because the proponents have used more of propaganda rather than strategic public relations to achieve the objectives. Apparently, the engagement approaches of the government has not captured the description of an effective development communication according to Okunna (2002).

Okunna describes effective development communication as creating awareness and providing knowledge about a development project as well as winning the acceptance of the people whom the project is meant for (the target audience). It involves getting them to accept and support the things being done by the development agents to solve their development problems.

Communication Strategies of the Made-in-Nigeria campaign

The respondents argued that the communication strategy for the MiN campaign is not adequate. Apparently, among other factors, the inadequacies may have been responsible for the gaps noticed the stakeholders' engagement. Because the government appeared to be treating all stakeholders as the same, they employed a generic approach in their communications. Such approach have limited the 'customized communication' required to address the specificity of the different categories of the stakeholders. A major challenge was established in the manner of recruitment of the agents for the campaign and the credibility of the proponents of the campaign within the government.

Most of the agents were found not to be professionals in the area of public relations and development communications. More so, the proponents of the campaign within the government has been described as not sincere hence, the populace do not take their messages seriously. This findings is consistent with the observation Keggku (2002) that most development programmes in Nigeria have not been handled by professionals who can assist with developing policies through their professional assessments of the society and weighing the possible effects of various alternatives on those policies. Taking a professional approach to development programmes is important because there can be no satisfactory implementation without first understanding the philosophical leanings of the publics the programme is designed for.

Overall limitations of the Made in Nigeria campaign

Generally, limitations of the Made-in-Nigeria campaign as they may be deduced from the study are:

- Lack of confidence in the ability of the government to manage the campaign objectives and tactics which has resulted in the poor management of the people's expectations;
- Lack of sincerity on the part of the government to lead by example particularly in the areas of improving and patronizing Nigeria education and health facilities. In other words, there has been a source credibility issue in the perception and adoption of the messages on the campaign;
- Engagement of journalists who are not trained in public relations practice and strategic stakeholders management at the helms of strategies and communication for the MiN campaign;
- Lack of customized stakeholders' engagement and communication approaches; and
- Perceived low quality of made in Nigeria products and the insatiable quest of Nigerians for foreign products.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It may be concluded from this study that although public relations professionals perceive the MiN campaign as good, they have reservations on the stakeholders' engagement and the communication strategies. The professionals also questioned the sincerity of the government in pursuing the objectives of the campaign and meeting up to the expectations of the populace. To improve the perception of the MiN campaign among the various stakeholder segments, the following are recommended:

1. The government should engage professionals in all segments affected by the campaign to have a holistic approach to achieving the objectives.
2. Public Relations professionals and other development communication experts should be engaged to articulate stakeholders and communications strategies that will speak to the different segments of the stakeholders.
3. The government and its agents should demonstrate sincerity to the course of the MiN campaign e.g. by patronising and developing facilities such as in health and education in Nigeria.
4. Because this study is limited in the scope of respondents, it is recommended that an expanded study should be conducted to address the perception of more public relations professionals across other states to test the validity of the submissions in this study.
5. A further study may be conducted to deeply probe the various elements of the present communication tools been used by the government in other to modify and get the best results.
6. A further study may be conducted with government agency saddled with propagating the MiN campaign to probe the MiN engagement strategy document with the aim examining the approaches in line with the observations and recommendations of respondents in this study.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study provides additional resources in the areas of strategic development communication and strategic stakeholders' management. For the policy makers and development agents, it provides professional insights into the need for effective communication and wide stakeholders' consultation to achieve an effective policy formulation and execution, particularly when the quest is for a major social change and an ideological shift among the populace.

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