



Public Relations and Managing Post-election interpersonal conflicts among citizens during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria overheated the polity, generated sentiments and hate speeches which divided people and affected their personal relationship. This paper, therefore, examined how public relations could be deployed in managing interpersonal conflicts among people in Choba, as a result of the election. Three objectives were formulated. The theories used were cognitive dissonance and frustration aggression. Survey design including a focus group discussion helped in extracting the data. The population of the community was put at 5281 while the sample size was 361. four persons were used for the focus group discussion. The study found out that public relations could be used to manage the interpersonal conflicts through dialogue, public enlightenment, jingles among other findings. It recommended that the Nigerian Pinstitute of Public Relations (NIPR Rivers Chapter) should be the organization to drive the reconciliation of the interpersonal conflicts in 2023 general election using interpersonal and mass communication activities to douse a lot of ill feelings arising from the elections in the community.

Keywords: Public Relations, managing, post-election, interpersonal conflicts

INTRODUCTION

Elections are emotional which require one citizen or the other to support or be against a candidate, aspirant or party. In garnering votes; ethnicity, religion and other ethnocentric behavior or attitude maybe exhibited. This may affect cordial relationship between individual citizens. Electioneering in some cases may employ hate speeches which are against a section, ethnic or religious groups, sexual orientation and so on. Even when citizens want to be neutral, vituperations poured on their groups are difficult to stomach. This brings reactive tendencies which could be latent or active against the perpetrators individually or the groups they belong.

Worse still after the elections such feelings die hard. It affects the winners and the losers. The hitherto, good relationship existing between citizens maybe strained. This may manifest in keeping malice against opponents and proponents. It may also affect business relationship and co-operation in many endeavours. In extreme cases may lead to violence.

There is the need to bring together individuals, groups and people adversely affected by the election in the same page to move ahead and reconcile their differences and if possible the consequences. The conflicts arising from elections may affect friends, relations, acquaintances and so on who have lived harmoniously together and are now diametrically opposed to one another, thereby generating “we and them syndrome”.

In this case public relations technique may come to the rescue. One of the functions of public relations including communications is to manage conflicts and crises (Aligwe & Alegu, 2018). Also public relations builds relationship among people (Revani-Gilkalaei, 2008). Conflicts appear in many dimensions. Of concern in this paper is interpersonal conflicts between individuals in the society; such as may have risen among individuals as a result of the 2023 general elections. Studies have been done about different conflicts but little or no studies have been conducted on elections generating interpersonal conflicts in relationship among people, which public relations can be deployed to resolve.

Therefore, this paper examined how public relations can be utilized in managing strained interpersonal relationship among people in Choba community, Port Harcourt, as a result of the just concluded 2023 general elections. The objectives of the study were to:

Identify political issues that strained the interpersonal relationship among people in the community;

Find out ways communication about the elections triggered conflicts interpersonally among the people

And unravel how public relations could be used to manage the interpersonal conflicts among people as a result of the 2023 general elections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper was anchored on two theories: cognitive dissonance theory and frustration aggression theory. According to Cooper (2019) the cognitive dissonance theory states that individuals will alter behavior or attitude when personal conflict arise from new stimuli. Also, they have the tendency to adjust their attitude and behaviour to revert to the previous perception and values. The personal relationship among people in the community can change in form of their attitude and behaviour, arising from issues of the general elections which produce a dissonance as compared with their pre-existing perception and belief which had harmonious and good personal relationship (consonance). With the use of public relations, they can reduce the discomfort or reverts to achieve consonance.

There are two basic principles: one due to the discomfort in perceptions, values and actions, attitude and behavior will change (dissonance).

The individuals will adjust his attitude and to achieve consonance. When an audience is presented with information that is contradictory to their personal beliefs or value (dissonance). The information will either motivate them to act or avoid a situation that create dissonance. The PR practitioner to achieve favourable change in behaviour or attitude must present to the audience with adequate information that will allow him to achieve consonance and reduce discomfort (dissonance).

FRUSTRATION AGGRESSION THEORY:

It states that aggression is the result of blocking or frustrating a person's effort to attain a goal (Breuer & Elson, 2017). It means that the goal of enthroning a candidate or party is frustrated through communication such as hate speeches and so the individuals or citizens react through aggression in their interpersonal relationship if they cannot attain their goal of their candidate or party winning.

CONFLICTS

There are many definitions of conflicts ranging from being a clash, disagreement, opposition to battle. Aligwe and Alegu (2018) define conflict as a clash or disagreement among individuals as a result of differences in thinking, attitude, understanding and interests. It is different from crisis which is a time of difficulty, uncertainty and danger. Conflicts may lead to crisis. They contend that there are many types of conflicts such as intra-personal conflict where there is a double personality within a person; interpersonal where there is a clash between a person or few persons. Another is a conflict between persons belonging to a group which is called group conflict. There is also the direct conflict as seen in riots. Another type is symmetrical conflict which is embarked by the state overtly and asymmetrical conflict which is covert. There are open conflicts which democracy provides through different voices while suppressed conflicts exist in closed political systems.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations approach is vital to resolve disputes and misunderstanding. That is why the British Institute of Public Relations defines it as deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and the public (Ilepeju, 2003; P.4).

It is in the public interest to reconcile the aggrieved persons as a result of the elections that is why editors of public relations news of New York define it as a management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization with the public interest and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance (Ilepeju, 2003, P.5).

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Public relations is used to manage conflict (Laderach, 1995) states that public relations helps our complex pluralistic society to manage conflicts reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among individuals, groups or institutions. Igben (1997) clarifies that public relations strategies are effective in conflict management such as dialogue, mediation, negotiation, arbitration, community relation and many other others. Supporting this assertion, Anaeto and Solo-Anaeto (2009) identified four public relation's strategies such as collaboration, negotiation, mediation and arbitration.

METHODOLOGY

The research designs that were used in this paper were survey and focus group discussion. The population of the community was estimated by NPC in 2016 as 5281. Krejcie and Morgan template was used to determine the sample size which stood at 361. The composition of the focus group consisted of two practitioners and two lecturers in Public Relations, while the sample technique used was cluster sampling technique in which two villages out of four, Okocha and Owhipa were selected through balloting and 361 were selected. The instruments used were the questionnaire and the focus group guide. A four-point Likert scale was adopted and the method of analysis were the weighted mean score and explanation building technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

PRESENTATION OF DATA

The quantitative data are presented as follows:

TABLE 1: Community members and post-election interpersonal conflict

S/N	Statement	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Affected by post-election conflict	288	82.3
2.	Not Affected by post-election conflict	62	17.7
TOTAL		350	100

TABLE 1 shows that a large number of members of the community had their relationship with one another affected by the general election.

TABLE 2: Political Issues that strained Interpersonal Relationship

S/N	ITEMS	TOTAL	WMS	DECISION
1.	Zoning	288	3.02	Agreed
1.	Competence	288	2.4	Disagreed
1.	Comments made by candidates	288	2.99	Agreed
1.	Manifesto and agenda	288	2.2	Disagreed

Table 2 shows that zoning and comments made by the candidates generated strained interpersonal relationship among citizens or individuals in the community.

TABLE 3: Ways/Nature of communication that triggered interpersonal conflicts among citizens

S/N	ITEMS	TOTAL	WMS	DECISION
1.	Hate speeches of candidate about individuals	288	3.01	Agreed
2.	Praise-singing of candidates	288	2.63	Agreed
3.	Abuse of candidates	288	2.82	Agreed
4.	Arguments about the candidates	288	2.05	Disagreed
5.	Others	288	2.02	Disagreed

TABLE 3: indicates that hate speech, praise-singing of candidate, abuse of candidate are ways /nature of communication that triggered interpersonal conflicts and citizens. Logical arguments about the candidates did not cause friction among citizens.

QUALITATIVE DATA

The focus group discussion stressed that public relations can reconcile individual citizens whose relationship got soured as a result of the 2023 general elections. It should use face-to-face communication and mass communication to that regard. It pointed out that public relations practitioners should use dialogue, public enlightenment and jingles. Another option is to adopt win-win situation for everybody. The losers will not suffer any form of deprivation and marginalization. An inclusive government would help achieve reconciliation and integration of citizens whose relationship got strained.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

1. ISSUES THAT STRAINED RELATIONSHIP:

Issues that strained the relationship more were zoning which some said were unfair. This brewed a lot of acrimony. Also, comments made by the candidates against their opponents, their ethnic groups and religion and so on embittered citizens. Aneto and Solo-Anaeto (2009) said such careless comments brew hatred and misunderstanding. It creates dissonance in the minds of the victims of the conflicts.

2. ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION:

On the aspect of communication, hate speech generated more conflicts than other ways of communication which support or against their ethnic or religious group, abuse and praise-singing which are other emotive ways of communication generated conflicts among citizens but logical arguments did not. Laderach (1995) is of the opinion that the kind of communication undertaken in the society is the genesis of many conflicts. This leads to aggression and frustration of the victims.

3. ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS:

The focus group discussion agreed that public relations could help reconcile individuals affected; by interpersonal communication and mass communication which practitioners should elect to do through organizing dialogue forums, negotiation and arbitration among individuals in the community. Use of mass communication through public enlightenment, jingles in the radio and television as well as advertisements in the newspapers, magazine and billboards and social media. Intertwined in the communication should include win-win situation, no deprivation or marginalization and the encouragement of inclusive government. Igben (1997) averred that the role of public relations in managing conflicts is dependent on its strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Zoning should be discouraged as it is anti-democracy
2. Hate speeches and other emotive campaigns should be minimized in the media and thus reduce interpersonal conflicts among citizens.
3. Public Relations Practitioners through the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) should play active role in bringing about or providing solutions to the interpersonal conflicts among the citizens in the communities or sections of the country.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

This work dealt with interpersonal conflicts rather many previous studies that were about symmetric and asymmetric conflicts. The community was studied because of bickering and fear of the consequences from the government in power and provided a little example of what a larger scenario could be. The focus group discussion was considered in that many may not understand what public relations is all about. Only the practitioners know better about its potency.



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