



PUBLIC PERCEPTION ON THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES FOR PEACE-BUILDING DURING POLITICAL ACTIVITIES IN NIGERIA

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Cite this article:

Kalu, C. O., Igyuve, A., Akase, T. M. (2024), Public Perception on the Role of Public Relations Strategies for Peace-Building During Political Activities in Nigeria. British Journal of Mass Communication and Media Research 4(3), 93-105. DOI: 10.52589/BJMCMR-GPH2O5BR

Manuscript History

Received: 14 Aug 2024

Accepted: 31 Oct 2024

Published: 8 Nov 2024

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ABSTRACT: *The study set out to assess public perception of the role of public relations strategies for peace-building during political activities in Nigeria. The population of the study were electorates in the six Areas Councils of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. The study was supported by the excellent theory. A quantitative research approach was used. The findings revealed among others that public relations strategies used in peace-building during the 2023 general elections in FCT include dialogue, mediation, negotiation, arbitration, community relations, intercession, intervention, inquest, conciliation, adjudication, use of the mass media, public view and propaganda devices. Thus, the study recommended that the application of public relations strategies in peace-building during election-related matters in Nigeria should take a holistic and truthful approach by accommodating divergent views from the different segments of Nigerian society. Also, proper utilisation of the different types of media by public relations practitioners is imperative in bringing about peace during elections in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Public Relations, Peace-building, Strategies, Politics, Role, Perception.



INTRODUCTION

Public relations remains one of the best approaches used for peace-building across the globe. Peace advocates usually adopt public relations strategies to broker peace between and among warring parties. According to the Public Relations Agency (2022), public relations (PR) in peace discourse seeks to achieve a state of tranquillity and harmony among disagreeing parties, with no violence or war. The Agency went further to maintain that public relations peace mediators do engage the principles of public relations to maintain harmonious relationships among areas and people affected by conflicts. Due to the impact of public relations on peace-building efforts, it has become an international tool for resolving conflicts.

Jane and Clara (2009) see public relations as the communication of an intended message that aims to result in a shift in the audience's attitude (towards a person, brand, event, conflict etc). Fraser (2007) contends that PR is a practice of managing and disseminating information from an individual or an organisation (such as a business, government agency, or a non-profit organisation) to the public to influence their perception. Public relations as Ibrahim (2018) observes is a field of communication and conflict as a phenomenon; both are society-oriented having humans as a centre of focus. Edafejirhaye and Alao (2019, p.1) corroborate that "in every society, there is no such thing as conflict in the absence of humans. If human beings generate conflicts in the societal context in which they exist, they also invariably need some balance in a conflict position to ease up or ameliorate the negative effects of conflict. One of the balancing measures communication scholars offer as an effective panacea to conflict management is the application of public relations strategies". Human beings who are the objects of strategic public relations are more complex; it is, therefore, believed that strategic public relations are faced with the challenges of unravelling and simplifying the complexity of human nature to ensure sound understanding between actors in conflict (Ibrahim, 2018).

Public relations strategies from the above viewpoint are the skilful application of public relations strategies in addressing negative situations to convert such to positive essentials for the benefit of humanity.

One of the crisis areas that Nigeria has been struggling to contain through the application of public relations approaches is peace-building during political activities. In the case of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, public relations played by local, regional and international organisations could be said to have successfully mitigated the negative impact, which could have undermined the goal and objectives of the 2023 general elections. This aligns with the perspective of Ajala (2011) cited in Ngusha and Chile (2015), which emphasises that public relations aims to convert negative situations into positive outcomes through knowledge. Additionally, public relations can effectively capture public attention through effective communication strategies, counter opposing arguments, and facilitate the dissemination of information and viewpoints, thereby encouraging the public to adopt favourable positions on specific issues.

Further, it is an established fact that conflict is found everywhere in society in all aspects of life where human beings interact with one another. When issues are not addressed according to the principles of fairness and justice, there is bound to be conflict. Disagreement during political activities can lead to disintegration, fighting, public assault and even death.



One of the ideas of building peace in all ramifications that have been argued over time is the deployment of public relations strategies. Using public relations strategies could effectively bring peace to societies, especially during election-related activities (Igben, 2009).

Studies on the role of public relations, conflict management and peace-building have been conducted by scholars both in Nigeria and outside Nigeria (Ojobor & Ewurum, n.d; Aliede, 2016; Ngusha & Mngohol, 2015; Oriko, 2023). For instance, the study of Ojobor and Ewurum (n.d) focused on the role of public relations in the peaceful implementation of eminent domain in Nigeria. Aliede (2016) concentrated on public relations, quest for sustainable peace and security: a reflection on the Boko Haram impasse in Nigeria. Ngusha and Mngohol (2015) paid attention to public relations strategies in managing the electoral crisis in Nigeria. The study by Oriko (2023) was on views of public relations in peace-building in Edo State. However, none of these studies focused on public perception of the role of public relations strategies for peace-building during political activities in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. Thus, this study explores the public relations strategies used for peace-building during the 2023 general elections in FCT, Abuja, Nigeria and the impact of PR peace-building strategies during the 2023 elections on the respondents.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Public Relations and Communication Imperative Ingredients for Peace

Public relations as a universal concept are anchored on philosophical principles for achieving individual and organisational objectives. Substantially communication-oriented, it has gone beyond means of attaining harmonious relationships between an entity and its various publics to a veritable and reliable tool for societal harmonisation, transformation, reformation, rehabilitation, restoration, resuscitation and rejuvenation. These are possible due to the inherent qualities and features of the practice and professional.

It is variously defined from divergent perspectives from whatever angle anyone looks at it. However, Black quotes Rex Harlow, an American professional public relations practitioner, as summing it up, after analysing 472 different definitions, as:

...a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools, (Black, 2016, p.4)

As loaded as it is, this definition underlines the wide coverage and scope of public relations, its indispensability in organisational management and its usefulness to responsible and responsive corporate entities. Organisations which embrace the practice of public relations can hardly be taken unawares as it has sufficient mechanisms for alertness and foresightedness provisions essential for spotting possible areas of conflicts ahead of their surfacing to cause havoc within and among members of a group or organisation, the definition seems to state.



Furthermore, the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) 1982 say: "Public relations help our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony." It is, therefore, a necessity in complex, sophisticated and complicated societies like Nigeria whose religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, political and social differences bother on a high level of sensitivity often resulting in intolerable relationships as exemplified by political impasses in Nigeria. Public relations are, therefore, required as a soothing balm to assuage and comfort frayed nerves at any level of human relations and as well impact the right information to the people.

To attain cordiality between the government and the people, some factors are pertinent to ensure and certify the forging of a long friendly and mutually beneficial relationship between the two parties. They are the 'memoranda of understanding' or questions that should agitate the mind as such contract is entered into and on which such relationships should be pivoted. They are means of offering the parties assurance, confidence and credence to trust the deal and each other. Halleyesus (2020) lists several such considerations among which are: "The ability of the parties to adapt in the relationship; The balance of power; Whether people are trying to be constructive; Whether people are open about things; Each party's level of commitment to the relationship; How cooperative each party is; The credibility of the different parties; Whether synergy is produced in the relationship and How intimate or frosty the relationship is".

Communication constitutes a substantial component of any managerial decision, from planning to implementation, no matter the organisation or its level. Indeed, the extent of the success of any organisational activity is highly contingent on the level of the effectiveness of the communication and information components of its decisions, choice of audience and media, their application, management or execution. This is more so with the often divergence of some organisational audiences' backgrounds and orientations. Under this circumstance, the meticulous, creative and professional utilisation of communication tools in interacting with the target market and the audience wins the race, no matter the issues at stake. Some of the critical steps to be taken have to do with strictly adhering to communication principles as evolved over the years by communication and public relations experts and authorities.

Most of the time, public relations programmes, campaigns and projects involve attitudinal and behavioural change. It is the same case in this discourse where the campaign must centre on "successfully revising the negative dispositions, attitudes, behaviours, viewpoints and opinions..." as Alison (2012) notes. What political differences require is attitude reorientation; as he insists that "...when the problem is that of attitude and behaviour, communication is the right prescription and answer. Any solution to this kind of problem "substantially must be communication-driven". Ozoh (2005) further elaborates: Accordingly, required are packages with sufficient communication components, which must not only be comprehensive but also professionally conceived, planned, packaged and implemented. This is in readiness for a massive mobilization of the people and will provide the opportunity for the utilization of persuasive and motivational strategies as is the case in other social issues: HIV/AIDS, child labour and trafficking, prostitution, and kidnapping, among others. In affecting changes in people's attitudes and behaviours, these measures are tested and trusted, (Ozoh, 2005, p. 56).

Described by UNESCO (1980, p.14) cited in Schirch (2008) as an "exchange of news and messages and an individual and collective activity embracing all transmission and sharing of



ideas, facts and data”, communication is at the centre of man’s progress. It is the grease for lubricating society, a strategic instrument for ensuring informed, rational, reasonable and responsible decisions at individual, collective, organisational and government levels. As a result, whatever is selected as the methods, techniques and tactics for tackling any challenge: preventive, curative or consolidative, must be serious efforts geared towards the effective planning, producing and packaging of the communication components. They are the key determinants of the eventual success or failure of the entire programme and campaign. As Kevin (2018) suggests, effective treatment of crisis-related matters, “Needs to be based on consultation and collaboration with different sets of actors which frequently have different interests, for example, local, national, regional, international interests, government, media, governmental, non-governmental, civilian, military.”

Also, scholars have conducted studies in this regard. Ojobor & Ewurum (n.d) investigated the topic “Role of Public Relations in Peaceful Implementation of Eminent Domain in Nigeria”. It adopted the case study research technique to assess the *Kelo v. New London* case, *Francis Okafor & Ors. v. A.G. Anambra State & Anor* case and *Berman v. Parker* issue. The research findings showed that public relations is a significant tool in the peaceful implementation of eminent domain in Enugu North in particular and Nigeria in general. It was recommended that through the adjustment of the Nigerian Constitution as it concerns land use, more troubles of land tussles would be averted in Nigeria.

Also, Anatsui & Ogunita (2015) adopted a quantitative research design to examine the topic “Public Relations Proactive Approach: Effective Institutional Conflict Management”. The objectives were to assess how Public Relations proactive approaches are effective in managing conflict situations; to establish that a proactive approach of public relations principle is the best philosophy for addressing issues that can lead to crisis for national growth and sustainability, and to identify and discuss the underlying causes of conflict in Nigeria Universities. The findings of the study revealed that Nigeria as a state prefers spontaneous moves towards crisis resolution rather than practical steps. The research concluded that the only way crisis management will be effective in Nigerian universities is when the underlying sources of conflict are addressed and ameliorated through adopting and applying proactive principles of public relations. It was suggested that through the setting up of a grievance procedure by which the members of the institution can make any complaint formally, crisis can be managed. Also, via the displaying of a suggestion box, as will motivate the people to voice out their grievances safely.

In the same vein, Aliede (2016) studied “Public Relations, Quest for Sustainable Peace and Security: A Reflection on the Boko Haram impasse in Nigeria”. Descriptive analysis was employed to review the literature. The study adopted the Frustration and Aggression theory, Frank Jefkins’ Transfer Process model and the Relationship Management theory. Findings showed that PR is an important strategy in dealing with conflict. The study therefore, advised the government’s use of professional public relations practitioners and consultants; training and retraining of media and communication practitioners on global best practices of coverage of national security issues, and preparedness with reliable strategic action plans for effective management of future crises like the Boko Haram insurgency.

In a related development, Ngusha & Mngohol (2015) researched “Public Relations Strategies in Managing Electoral Crisis in Nigeria”. The study employed Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Data was collected through the content analysis method. It was



established that right from the return to democracy in 1999, politicking has become a do-or-die affair; and often, not in the interest of good governance. The government agents responsible for sensitising Nigerians on the consequences of electoral violence using public relations messages have left much to be desired in the execution of the herculean task. Given this, the study recommended the consistent application of public relations strategies through the involvement of interest groups like civil societies, the media and the general public to educate Nigerians on the consequences of electoral violence on the social and economic lives of the people, among others, as solutions.

The study by Oriko (2023) was on “Views of Public Relations in Peace-building in Edo State”. The aim of the research was to ascertain the impact of public relations through effective activities in promoting peace and harmony in society. The study was anchored on Systems theory and Transfer model theory, while survey research design was used to collect data. The findings revealed that public relations was highly relevant in the society in peace-building initiatives. It was concluded that Public relations activities are indeed necessary and relevant in the society for peacebuilding. The researcher, therefore, recommended that the government should endeavour to use public relations effectively to promote peace in society.

Further, Chiakaan et al. (2021) examined “Political Public Relations as a Tool for Combating Vote Buying in Nigeria for Development Purposes”. The aim of the study was to identify political public relations approaches that can be applied by the government and other bodies responsible for conducting elections in Nigeria to mitigate and eliminate vote buying. The study adopted a qualitative approach in the contextual analysis of data collected specifically from secondary sources. System theory was used. The results revealed that vote buying has become synonymous with elections in Nigeria. It was further found that the factors responsible for vote buying in Nigeria, included poverty, lack of education, high cost of buying forms to contest elections, and many others. The study concluded that, where votes are purchased by political parties and candidates, the essence of elections as a credible leadership selection process is often put on the line. Another disadvantage associated with vote buying is that the practice can produce leaders who have questionable characters and are not the actual choice of the masses. Where this practice is condoned, this can lead to bad governance and, ultimately, underdevelopment. It was recommended that good governance and enough sensitisation campaigns as political public relations strategies for combating vote buying in Nigeria.

Abubakar & Yahaya (2017) carried out a study on “Public Relations Perspectives on Electoral Reforms as a Panacea for Consolidating Nigeria’s Democracy”. Adopting the qualitative research technique, it was found that public relations over the years has been a unifying factor in accelerating Nigeria’s democracy, sustaining its need for periodic elections and encouraging the conduct of fair, free, and transparent elections by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The researchers concluded that there are many advantages associated with the process of electoral reforms, and PR does assist in this regard. The research recommended that governments at all levels should consider periodic electoral reforms as a strategy for development and as such; they should ensure that only people with proven track records take charge of electoral reform committees.

Ejiofo et al. (2021) investigate “Public Relations Strategies: A Veritable Tool for Conflict Resolution, Peace Building, Democracy and National Development”. The study adopted the qualitative research strategy. The study established that peace-building was a good approach to sustainable conflict resolution and national development. The study recommended that



public relations officers should establish a conflict resolution and peace-building centre in every state in Nigeria. It was further suggested that public relations should always consciously insist on the philosophy of meeting the public expectation in conflict resolution/peace-building and democracy as a *sin-qua-non* to the success of Nigeria's public relations practice. Achieving this means every policy must always be sensitive to public needs and expectations for national development.

The researchers also advocated that there should be adequate information and communication from the parties involved in a conflict situation to enable public relations officers to use their professional expertise to resolve conflict and enhance peace-building and democracy. Equally recommended was for public relations practitioners should be in closer and regular contact with internal and external target publics when a conflict situation arises. The researchers, in addition, suggested that public relations practitioners should ensure that truths are told in resolving conflict without compromise to any party. The integration and implementation of effective public relations strategies in the Ministry of Information are inevitable given the present rates of conflicts in Nigeria were also put forward as a recommendation. Lastly, the study advocated that there should be a regular evaluation of policies' impact on public relations with a view to re-modifying in order to meet public expectations.

Furthermore, the study is situated with the Excellent Theory. The Excellence Theory is the first general theory of Public Relations (PR) (Littlejohn, 2009). The theory was a result of a 15-year study of best practices in communication management (Grunig, 2000) known as the Excellence Study. The Excellence Theory is a theory of excellence and effectiveness in PR and communication management. The theory specifies how PR makes organizations more effective, how it should be organized and managed for it to contribute to organizational effectiveness, and how to determine the monetary value of PR (Grunig, 2002).

The Excellence Theory first explains the value of PR to an organization and the society in which it operates. This value is based on the quality of relationships an organization has with its stakeholder public (Grunig, 2002). The theory asserts that for PR to contribute to an organization it must be part of strategic management (Grunig, 2008). According to the theory, for an organization to be effective, it must solve the problem and satisfy the goals of both the manager and stakeholders. Organizations must identify their various publics who are affected by the decisions taken by the organization or those who want the organization to solve a problem important to them. To identify these publics, the organization must scan the environment. This is PR's contribution to strategic management (Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

The theory also suggests that organizations must communicate symmetrically with their public. This facilitates the cultivation of quality, long-term relationships with them. Through symmetrical communication, the organization is likely to set and achieve goals desired by both the organisation and its public (Grunig & Grunig, 2008) since a good Relationship is essential and crucial to the survival of the organization. Grunig and Grunig (2008) explained that this is because a good Relationship reduces costs incurred in unfavourable circumstances like litigation, regulation, legislation and negative publicity.

It also reduces the risk of making decisions which may have adverse effects on different stakeholders and increase the chances of the organization producing goods or services needed by various stakeholders and ultimately its base. In addition to explaining the value of communication to an organization, the Excellence Theory provides four broad categories of



the characteristics of an Excellent PR function which is how the PR function should be organized to attain maximum value (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). These characteristics are in the broad areas of PR as a management function, roles, models and the organization of the communication function.

Maintaining an excellent PR apparatus as a peace advocacy organisation has become relevant over the past years. Almaz (2016) asserts that the use of PR in peace maintenance is not a new practice. An example is made of ancient Greece, where public speaking became the tool for stabilising peaceful transition during electioneering. In Rome as well, peace mediators used rhetoric inspiring men to canvass for peaceful political activities. During the French Revolution, the revolutionists used the power of influencing the public to overthrow the monarchy.

PR has several functions which come in handy during electioneering times. In the recent past, when the mass media was not as widespread, often, what was known in one part of the country, did not reach other areas. However, with the evolution of communication, being able to manage information has become very important. A PR function like research, social media management and environmental scanning are activities peace ambassadors can harness in their communication efforts.

Though the use of rhetoric and other forms of PR has almost always played a role in advocating for peace, it has become more systematically entrenched. Peace actors need PR experts to help spread their activities. Hence, this theory was considered relevant for the study.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the quantitative research approach. The study purposively selected 67 respondents from each of the six Area Councils in Abuja. These are Abuja Municipal Area Council, Gwagwalada, Kuje, Abaji, Bwari and Kwali Area Councils. Thus, the total number of respondents is 402. The choice of selecting 67 respondents was for even representation. Availability sampling technique was employed in the distribution of the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was determined through the test-retest method by administering the questionnaire to individuals who have good knowledge of PR strategies and peace-building. This was repeated in three different locations, and when the results returned, it showed that the instrument was reliable in collecting the data. Validation of the questionnaire was ascertained via submission to experts in the field of communication. Suggestions and directions given were strictly adhered to in the final draft of this questionnaire before distribution. Data was presented through Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Strongly Disagree and Disagree measuring scale and computation was through criterion mean, which was put at 4 points and above is the accepted result, while 2 points is the rejected result, in addition to the use of frequency and percentage charts.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

A total of 402 copies of the questionnaire were distributed out of which 379 were returned and found valid for analysis. Graphical representation is as illustrated in the Chart below:

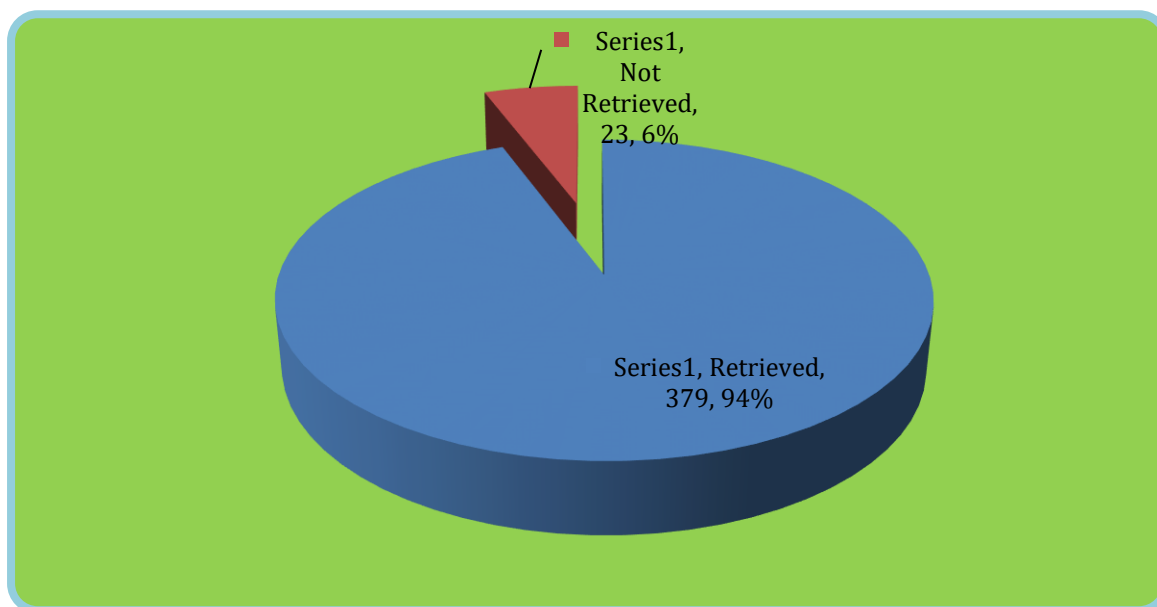


Figure 1: Analysis of Response Rate

Table 1: Public Relations Strategies Used For Peace-Building during the 2023 General Elections in FCT, Abuja, Nigeria

Options	SA	A	SD	D	UD	Total	Mean Rating	Decision
Lecture series/interactive sessions	111	208	18	23	19	379	3.9	Accepted
Flyers, media engagements via television, newspapers, radio and the social media	77	268	15	11	8	379	4.0	Accepted
Branded T-shirts, posters, jotters, face caps and vehicles	109	236	9	14	11	379	4.1	Accepted
Football competition	84	261	11	17	6	379	4.0	Accepted
Intercession, inquest, adjudication, public view and propaganda devices	93	219	21	32	14	379	3.9	Accepted
Cultural and contemporary musical performances by upcoming artists in different geopolitical zones of Nigeria	106	231	16	8	18	379	4.0	Accepted

Star guest appearances by notable Nollywood actors and other peace ambassadors	99	234	21	16	9	379	4.0	Accepted
Dialogue, mediation, negotiation, arbitration, and community relations	109	231	13	17	9	379	3.9	Accepted
Joint effort and round table discussion	115	211	18	13	22	379	4.0	Accepted
Unbiased third-party involvement and settlement	99	220	15	26	19	379	3.9	Accepted

The finding above indicates that the respondents have knowledge of different PR strategies used in political crisis management.

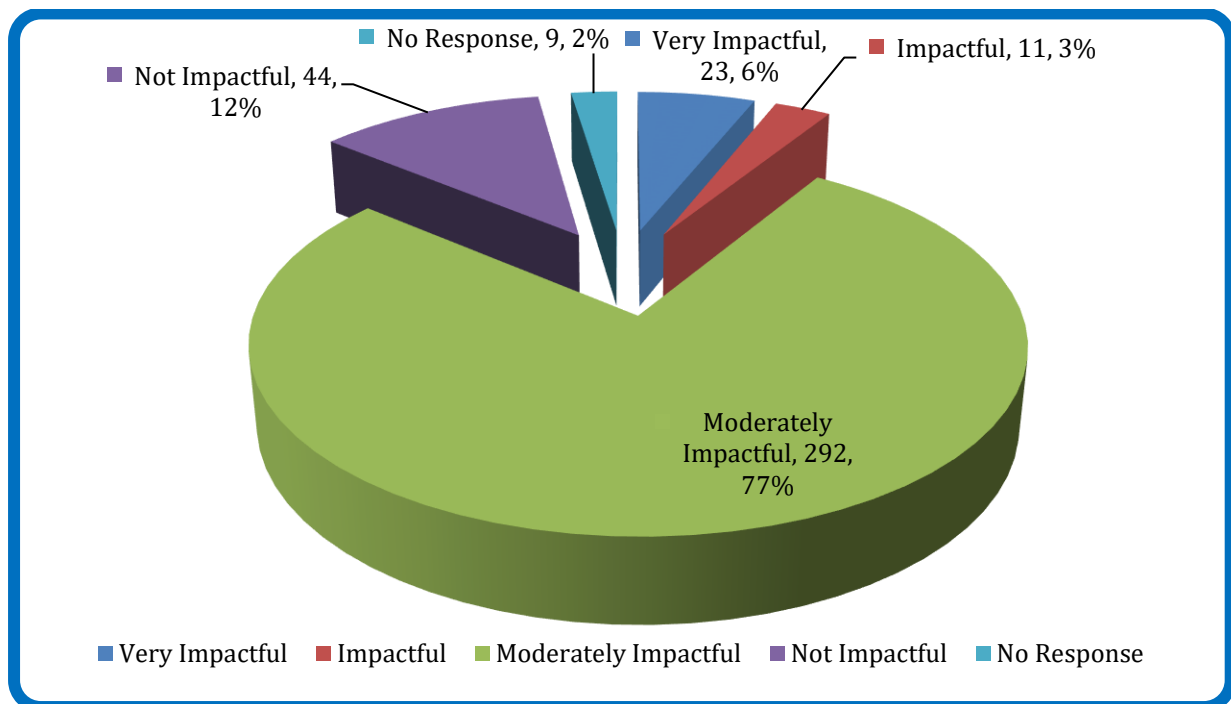


Figure 2: Impact of PR Peace-Building Strategies during the 2023 Elections on Respondents

The data above implies that PR strategies are gradually enhancing the knowledge of the respondents concerning peaceful conduct during elections in Nigeria.



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Evaluation of the data revealed that most of the participants identified the various PR strategies used to maintain peace during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria including dialogue, mediation, negotiation, arbitration, community relations, intercession, intervention, inquest, conciliation, adjudication, use of the mass media, public view and propaganda devices. Others are a joint effort, round table discussion, unbiased third-party involvement and settlement (Table 1 above). The finding aligns with Ojobor and Ewurum (n.d), which stipulates that public relations was a significant tool in the peaceful implementation of the eminent domain crisis in Enugu North. An earlier finding by Aliede (2016) equally affirmed that PR is an important strategy in dealing with conflict in all its ramifications. The result of the study also justifies the adoption of the Excellent Theory, which explains communication strategies crisis managers use to solve conflict.

Further findings indicated that the PR strategies used for peace-building during the 2023 general elections had minimal impact on the respondents (Figure 2 above). The implication of this is that PR methods are steadily improving the knowledge of the respondents concerning being peaceful during election-related matters. The finding agrees with that of Ngusha and Mngohol (2015), who established that government agents responsible for sensitising Nigerians on the consequences of electoral violence using public relations messages have not done enough.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Knowledge is a growing phenomenon. With this, the study has contributed implications on the growing concern of crisis during election matters not only in Nigeria but across the globe. Scholars have also studied and examined the impact of PR communication strategies in peacebuilding. However, none of these studies concentrated on public perception of the role of public relations strategies for peace-building during political activities in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. This implies that this study may be helpful for the researchers to understand PR and peace education and enlightenment from the viewpoint of people in Abuja, Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this study has been on public perception of the role of public relations strategies for peace-building during political activities in Nigeria. From the findings, the study concludes that public relations strategies used in managing political conflict in Nigeria include dialogue, mediation, negotiation, arbitration, community relations, intercession, intervention, inquest, conciliation, adjudication, use of the mass media, public view and propaganda devices. These PR strategies have been applied to solve political crises in the country such as the Niger Delta problems, the Eminent Domain conflicts, Boko Haram, peacebuilding in Edo State, combating vote buying, and electoral reforms, to mention but a few. Therefore, the application of public relations strategies in bringing about peace during elections in Nigeria should take a holistic and truthful approach by accommodating divergent views from the different segments of Nigerian society. Also, proper utilisation of the different types of media by public relations



practitioners is imperative in solving political conflicts in Nigeria. Equally, government and non-government agents saddled with the responsibility of using PR strategies in educating the public about peaceful conduct need to intensify efforts.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Scholars in the future should build on the strengths and limitations of this study for enhanced peace-building during election issues using the instrument of public relations. A further study could examine the communication strategies of the National Peace Commission of Nigeria as regards election matters. The population of such a study could be drawn from two states in each geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The study equally suggests that a comparative study between African communication systems and conventional means of disseminating information and education about peace could be an interesting area to explore. This could adopt a qualitative research approach. Studies in the future could also examine communication contents in print media regarding peace-building before, during and after elections not only in Nigeria but across the world.

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