



The Role of Research in Contemporary Public Relations Campaigns: A Case of Nigeria's *Change-Begins-with-Me* Rebranding Initiative.

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Abstract

Nigeria's *Change-begins-with-me* campaign is aimed at instilling discipline and patriotism among the citizenry. Though it is intimately tied to the electioneering campaign mantra of the All Progressive Congress (APC), it took the Federal Government 15 months after taking over office to unfold this national rebranding initiative, thereby presupposing that the initiators of the campaign were not really prepared for it. This paper, therefore, aims at evaluating the empirical and theoretical role of research in this public relations campaign, from *implementation checking*, that is ensuring the target audience is reached; to *in-progress monitoring*, that is ensuring the campaign goes on as originally intended; and ending with *outcome evaluation*, which involves assessing the impact the campaign so far has. The survey research method was used within-depth interview of 100 respondents and 10 top Government officials involved in the campaign. Hebert Kelman's processes of opinion change, Fritz Heider's attribution theory and Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory formed the theoretical framework for this study. Findings show that adequate research was not applied at all phases of the initiative; and to ensure this trend is reversed, it was recommended, among others, that the operators should be more research-oriented in the monitoring, evaluation and implementation of the campaign.

Keywords: Campaign, *Change-begins-with-me*, public relations, rebranding, research, and attitudinal change.

Introduction:

As at 2016, Nigeria's population was estimated by the National Bureau of Statistics to be around 178.5 million people although the United Nations' projection put the figure as high as 186 million, thus placing the country as the most populous in Africa and the eighth in the world (www.worldpopulationreview.com). There are more than 250 tribes/ethnic groups in Nigeria, with the country's culture being shaped by these diverse ethnic groups. In addition to ethnic consideration, the people's attitude is largely influenced by their political leanings and religious beliefs.

Normally, people do things either the right way, by acting in accordance with the laws of the land or the wrong way, when they violate them. However, in Nigeria, where there has been a general decline in the level of discipline and morality through the years, the people have developed an attitudinal approach which is uniquely Nigerian – neither right nor wrong! To the average Nigerian citizen, there is nothing wrong in such attitudes as throwing garbage on the streets even if these have to block the gutters, urinating by the roadside or on somebody's fences, writing on the walls and currency notes, disobeying traffic regulations to the detriment of other road-users, acting impatiently and selfishly at public places thereby creating chaotic scenes, disrespecting elders and disregarding women and children, cutting corners in order to make more gains than normal from business deals, expecting and demanding inducement before performing one's official duty, supporting and encouraging hooliganism, cultism, cronyism and "godfatherism" as means of political expediency, etc. These and other negative traits, including corrupt practices such as bribery, misappropriation of funds, mismanagement and waste of public resources, contract scams, and advance fee fraud (also known as 419), which many Nigerians easily imbibe and exhibit, have given the country and its citizenry a bad image among saner and better cultured nations of the world.

As a result, many foreign nationals are suspicious and scared of doing business with Nigerians, including those that are circumspect and sincere. Nigerian citizens are usually subjected to intensive scrutiny

and sometimes, dehumanised treatments by foreign immigration and customs officials who handle the arrival and departure checks at international airports and other embarkation/disembarkation points. Those living in foreign countries have become subjects of indiscriminate attacks. For instance, in South Africa, one of the reasons Nigerians were exposed to xenophobic attacks which claimed about 116 lives, according to Popoola (2017), is:

Erroneous impression that every Nigerian is a criminal: With the type of news being spread in the country, most of the citizens [of South Africa] have the impression that most Nigerians are criminals, and criminals do not deserve to be treated with mercy....

Nigerians travelling to the Holy Land of Saudi Arabia on pilgrimage are not exempted from attacks arising from suspicion based on their nationality. Recently, two Nigerian pilgrims from Nasarawa State were reportedly brutalised by Customs officials at the Prince Muhammad Bn Abdulaziz Airport in Medina, which resulted in the Saudi authority officially apologising to the government and people of Nigeria (Tukur, 2017). Nigeria's image abroad has further been destroyed by official conspiracy of the international community against her citizens. Many of them are thrown into prisons for trumped-up charges, which were shoddily investigated; and while there, many were denied access to medical treatments while some had mysteriously died and their organs allegedly harvested. In the Vanguard editorial of October 3, 2017, the following sordid picture was painted:

Cases of Nigerians languishing in prisons abroad are on the increase. Latest statistics revealed about 170,000 Nigerian citizens are rotting away in jails all over the world. The figure reflects a sharp increase from that of 2012, which was estimated at 16,300, including those on death row.... Most of the current 170,000 are serving terms for drug and human trafficking and sundry immigration offences.

The above cases, though very sad and disturbing, are regular narrations of the hostile treatments meted out to Nigerian nationals

by their international hosts, which arose as a result of the negative perception they have about the average Nigerian. Worried by this negative image foisted on the nation by the general indiscipline and unpatriotic acts of some Nigerian citizens, the All Progressive Congress (APC), during the 2014/15 electioneering campaigns, promised change and national re-orientation, which would ultimately instil a sense of justice, equity, fairness, peace, good neighbourliness and patriotism in all Nigerians. In a bid to fulfil this promise, President Muhammadu Buhari launched the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign on Thursday, September 8, 2016 to engage Nigerians towards attitudinal change on how to conduct themselves and relate with the larger society in a positive and definitive way and manner that promotes “change at home, change in the work place, change at traffic junction, change at traffic lights, etc.”

Statement of the Problem:

Though the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign is intimately tied to the electioneering campaign mantra of the political party in power, it took the Federal Government 15 months after taking over office to unfold this national rebranding initiative. This delay in the campaign launch presupposes that the APC-led Federal administration that initiated this campaign and had indeed used it as a major issue during their electioneering campaign, did not consider it an urgent matter that needed immediate attention.

Objectives of the Study:

This paper broadly aims at evaluating the empirical and theoretical role of research in this national public relations campaign, in order to meet the following specific objectives:

- (1) To find out if the initiators of the campaign had adequately planned for it;
- (2) To evaluate the extent to which the campaign and its messages have so far impacted on the attitude of Nigerians as they were meant to; and
- (3) To assess if the eventual outcome of the campaign can be as was originally envisaged.

Research Questions:

Based on the objectives above, the following research questions were formulated for the study:

- (1) How adequate did the initiators of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign plan for it?
- (2) To what extent have the campaign and its messages so far impacted on the attitude of Nigerians as they were meant to?
- (3) And has the eventual outcome of the campaign been as was originally envisaged?

Research Methodology:

The survey research method, which involves obtaining data from the field for accurate and objective description of existing phenomenon, was used for this study. The survey involved the administration of questionnaires on 50 randomly sampled respondents drawn from the municipal area of Abuja, the Federal capital, and 50 from Calabar, capital of Cross River State of Nigeria, bringing the total of questionnaires to 100. The respondents were reached by means of in-depth interview. Also, ten (10) top Government officials involved in the campaign – six from the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture and four from the National Orientation Agency (NOA) – were interviewed to help in providing additional and supplementary data.

Theoretical Framework:

Hebert Kelman's processes of opinion change, Fritz Heider's attribution theory and Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory were used as the theories for this study. In Kelman's theory of 1958, he had described three types of opinion change, which are *compliance* (whereby a person acts in response to the message he receives without any challenge), *identification* (which happens when the recipient of the message accepts it because a person who is a social leader that he looks up to is in support of that idea), and *internalisation* (which occurs when an individual adopts an induced behaviour which he perceives as rewarding and congruent with the value system). According to him, the three processes are a function of the following determinants of influence: (1) the relative importance of the anticipated effect; (2) the relative power of the influencing agent; and (3) the pre-potency of the induced response. The aim of this study

fits into the expectations as envisaged by these determinants of influence.

For Fritz Heider's attribution theory, the main concern is with the psychological processes through which people attribute causes to behaviour. He identified such attribution as *dispositional*, which is internal, that is influenced by the individual's personality traits, attitudes, motives and beliefs *orsituational*, which is external, that attributes behaviour to factors in the situation. Watson and Hill (1993, p.8) further explain: "We may, for example, blame a person's failure to gain employment on his/her laziness (dispositional attribution) or on the state of the economy (situational attribution)." This theory is significant to the study at hand and would help to identify why some Nigerians behave the way they do. Is their negative behaviour moulded by their natural, cultural and personal disposition or is it influenced by situational factors that they daily live within the country? And is the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign properly configured to address the attitudinal deficit identified in the behaviour of some Nigerians? This is important especially in the light of the argument by Hilgard et al (1975) that dispositional attribution can be difficult to change and that people are unwilling to discard dispositional attributions even when such are discredited.

Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, propounded in 1957, is also considered as relevant to this study. The theory, which has stood the test of time, is based on the assumptions that (1) humans are sensitive to actions that are inconsistent with their beliefs; (2) recognising the inconsistency causes dissonance which motivates the person to resolve the dissonance and restore balance; and (3) the dissonance can be resolved by changing one's previous ideas and attitudes, changing the way one views, remembers or perceives action, and avoiding the source of dissonance. Embarking on the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign recognises that there is dissonance in the way some Nigerians behave and what constitute the core national values. The campaign uses message to reach the mass audience, and as stated by Baran and Davis (2012, p.181), "information that is not consistent with a person's already-held values and beliefs will create a psychological discomfort (dissonance) that must be relieved...." Arguing further, Watson and Hill (1993, p.59)

note that for these messages to be successful and the dissonance relieved, there is need to ensure that they “are often well ‘laundered’ in order to reduce their potential offensiveness.” In line with the spirit of this theory, the study at hand, therefore, seeks to ascertain the effectiveness of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign messages and their effect on those they are directed at.

The *Change-begins-with-me* as a Public Relations Campaign:

Public Relations, as defined by the (British) Institute of Public Relations (IPR), is “the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics” (Jefkins and Yadin, 1998,p.6). The focus of public relations is to elicit mutually favourable behaviour. The type of change sought, according to Center et al (2012, p.2) may be: motivate new behaviour, reinforce existing positive behaviour or modify negative behaviour.

A campaign, on the other hand, is seen by Watson and Hill (1993, p.24) as “a term most often used in the media studies context to refer to a conscious, structured and coordinated attempt at persuading those members of the general public who utilise the mass media.” Akpan (1990, p.92) defines public relations campaign, therefore, as “part of the communication process or a continuing operation aimed at passing out useful information which is designed to convert people from a state of ignorance to that of awareness regarding that which is to be shared.”

Every campaign has its specific and overt aims to reach and influence its targeted population. There are key features a campaign should have. These, according to McQuail (2005, pp.474-5), are: first, the originator of the campaign is almost always a collectivity which, in the *Change-begins-with-me*, is a government rather than an individual. Second, a campaign is often concerned with “directing, reinforcing and activating existing tendencies towards socially approved objectives.” Third, a campaign usually consists of many messages distributed through several media, “with the chances of reach and effect varying according to the established nature of the channels and the message content.”

At the official launch of the *Change-begins-with-me* initiative, Nigerian President Buhari, in his address, had identified that there were negative behaviours prevalent among Nigerians which, as asserted by Center et al, needed to be modified. He, therefore, gave the following as reasons for embarking on this campaign:

There is no doubt that our value system has been badly eroded over the years. The long-cherished and time-honoured, time-tested virtues of honesty, hard work, punctuality, good neighbourliness, abhorrence of corruption and patriotism, have given way in the main to dishonesty, intolerance, unbridled corruption, and widespread impunity.

As can be deduced from the above, there was, indeed, something that needed to be changed in the attitudes of Nigerians. A campaign, with the cardinal aim of educating and enlightening Nigerians to appreciate the values of accountability and integrity as well as instilling discipline and patriotism in them, was needed as the instrument to drive this dream in order to achieve its purpose.

Based on the above prescriptions, the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign properly fits in as a public relations campaign. This is because, as enumerated by interviewees at the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, the campaign aims at motivating new, acceptable behaviours of discipline, patriotism, good neighbourliness, uprightness, accountability, and national pride; reinforcing the existing positive behaviours of enterprise, steadfastness, natural intelligence, and strength of purpose; as well as modifying the negative behaviours such as selfishness, tribal sentiments, religious bigotry, corrupt tendencies, get-quick syndrome, and other attitudinal malaise among Nigerian citizens.

The media tools engaged for the execution of this campaign, according to responses from staff of the National Orientation Agency in the our interview with them, include billboards, posters, handbills, radio and television jingles, newspaper and magazine articles, films, drama, and music. Advocacy visits to educational institutions,

churches and mosques as well as special groups in business and the professions were also given by the interviewees as the means being used to sensitise the citizens to adapt to positive values. Public lectures, workshops and symposia are other avenues identified by those interviewed as additional means whereby issues bordering on the campaign are discussed and relevant messages passed on to the public. For a public relations campaign to be effective, Seitel (2017) proposes a campaign plan that has the following components:

- i. Backgrounding the problem
- ii. Programming the approach:
 - Identifying target audience
 - Considering research methods
 - Selecting specific messages and appeals
 - Considering communication vehicles
- iii. Activating the plan
- iv. Evaluating the campaign.

As can be seen here, research is an important element in a public relations campaign. Baran (2012, p.359), while distinguishing between administrative research, which “concerns itself with direct causes and effects” and critical research, which “looks at larger, possibly more significant cultural questions,” says this about the latter: “... asking questions about what kind of nation we are building, what kind of people we are becoming – would serve our culture better.” The pertinent question to ask here, therefore, is: Did the initiators of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign engage in proper research before the take-off of the campaign? Finding an answer to this question is the main focus of this paper.

Public Relations Research:

Research, as defined by Davis et al (2010, p.5), is “the activity of conducting intellectual investigations into the observable world.” Public relations research, as any other research, is always driven by a desire to improve the human condition, and helping human beings make sense of their world. Center et al (2012, p.3) place research at the beginning of the campaign process because it helps to “gather intelligence, in order to understand the variables in the case.” They also place it at the end, referred to as evaluation, since it ensures that effectiveness of the entire exercise is guaranteed.

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Basically, public relations research, according to Cebalt, in Asemah et al (2017, pp.321-2), has the following objectives:

- (a) To collect information that public relations professionals need to have and to know how to do their jobs more effectively;
- (b) To obtain benchmark data regarding the views of key target audience groups;
- (c) To plan, develop or possibly, refine a public relations ... programme or activity;
- (d) To track or monitor programmes, activities or events that are or can be important to the institution;
- (e) To evaluate the overall effectiveness of a particular public relations ... programme or activity, by measuring outputs and outcomes against a predetermined set of objectives;
- (f) When facing a sudden and unexpected crisis, to put the issues involved into proper perspective through emergency monitoring or polling; and
- (g) When circumstances allow, to provide appropriate support in publicising or promoting a specific programme, activity or event.

Research is used to identify and define the problem(s) any public relations campaign seeks to address, and test the suitable strategies to be adopted. It helps to couch the proper messages, and choose the most effective media for a campaign. It allows for impact on the target audience to be measured, and refocusing to be made where weaknesses and threats in execution of the campaign are identified.

The Role of Research in the *Change-begins-with-me* Campaign:

In assessing the impact of the campaign, public relations researchers are interested in three levels of effect, namely:

- **Cognitive level**, which attempts to find out how the audience learnt from the public relations campaign;
- **Affective level**, which measures the changes in attitudes, opinions, or perceptions of the targeted population; and
- **Conative level**, which assesses the actual behavioural changes in the people as a result of their exposure to the public relations campaign messages and activities.

Successfully testing the effect can only be feasible when regular evaluation researches are carried out during the course of the

campaign. These researches help to judge the effectiveness of the campaign planning, its implementation, and its impact. To, therefore, carry out a continuous and effective evaluation research, the following phases are identified:

- i. Pre-campaign phase
- ii. Implementation checking phase
- iii. In-progress monitoring phase
- iv. Outcome evaluation phase.

The last three phases above are the propositions of Baskin, Aronoff, and Lattimore (1997).

Pre-Campaign Phase:

Every public relations campaign must have measurable goals, which are set from results of research studies carried out before the campaign commences. Every goal should be subjected to evaluation and this should be a continuous process since one phase of the campaign usually blends into the next. The results of evaluation can be useful in the ensuing cycles of the campaign. This is where the first research question, “How adequate did the initiators of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign plan for it?” comes in.

From records at the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture (FMIC) and used in a news analysis by Dele Bodunde of the News Agency of Nigeria in December 2016, a poll was carried out at the commencement of the initiative on the question: Do you think the *Change-begins-with-me* re-orientation campaign came at the right time? The result showed that 73 percent of respondents recorded “Yes,” 24 percent “No” and four percent “Indifferent” though the number of respondents involved in the exercise was not disclosed, and the percentages used here did not add up. However, this result is not in sync with the position of respondents in this current study. Posing the same question used by the FMIC to our 100 respondents, a total of 19 percent said “Yes” and 81 percent said “No.” Asked why they responded the way they did, 69 percent of those that answered “Yes” gave as their reason the delay in the campaign’s take-off, 15 months after the swearing-in of the new president .This, therefore, confirms that the initiators of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign did not adequately plan for it.

The main purpose of this paper, however, is not to necessarily assess the situation of things at the pre-commencement stage but to properly situate the place of research in the implementation of the campaign vis-à-vis the outputs or results of each of the activities so far executed. How adequate did the initiators of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign plan for it?"

The Implementation Checking Phase:

During the implementation phase of any public relations programme, the major focus is on the monitoring of activities laid out in the campaign plan. This phase aims at ensuring that the campaign messages successfully and effectively reach their target audience. To start with, respondents were asked, "Do you know of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign?" A total of 88 percent say "Yes" while 12 percent say "No." Out of those that answered in the affirmative, a further question was asked to find out if they believe the executors of the campaign carried out this very important implementation checking research responsibility? Their answers were: 41 percent "Yes," 56 percent "No" and three percent had "No idea."

As a follow-up question, respondents were asked: How do you assess the adequacy of the campaign messages? The responses were: 13 percent "Very Adequate," 29 percent "Adequate" and 58 percent "Inadequate." From these data, it can be observed that though many Nigerians know about the campaign, its messages have not effectively reached the target members of the public as they should.

The In-progress Monitoring Phase:

At this in-progress monitoring stage, which is where the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign currently is, Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p.414) explain, "Shortly after the campaign starts, researchers check to see if the programme is having its intended effects. If there are unanticipated results or if results seem to be falling short of objectives, the programme might be modified." It is here that the second research question, "To what extent have the campaign and its messages so far impacted on the attitude of Nigerians as they were meant to?" is to be addressed.

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Based on the understanding of what the in-progress monitoring stage involves, respondents were asked was: Have you felt the impact of the campaign in terms of positive change in the attitude of Nigerians? Their answers were – 46 percent “Yes,” 45 percent “No” and nine percent “Undecided.” The implication of this is that Nigerians are almost equally divided as to the success or failure of the campaign.

For those who believe in the success of the campaign, the follow-up question was – “If yes, why?” Their responses included that the country’s leadership has more integrity, the anti-corruption war is being waged with great vigour, Nigerians are beginning to be more conscious of doing things right, and there is more accessibility to budget information. But for those that answered in the negative, their reasons were - many citizens are still involved in shady deals thereby being jailed in foreign lands, corrupt practices by public officers are still rife within government circle, impatience and unruly behaviour by Nigerians continue to rule the day, the environment gets filthier, sectionalism has become more pronounced, among others.

The Outcome Evaluation Phase:

The third and last research question for this study is “And has the eventual outcome of the campaign been as was originally envisaged?” Findings under this outcome evaluation phase are used to answer this question. It should be noted that at the completion of each task in the campaign schedule, an outcome evaluation is carried out to assess the results so far recorded. The findings are used to make changes while preparing for the succeeding activities. Respondents were, therefore, asked: Do you think adequate research has been carried out so far in the course of this campaign? Their responses were “Yes” – 46 percent, “No” – 51 percent, and “Don’t know” – three percent.

Though the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign is yet to be concluded, it was, however, necessary to assess the impact of research on the progress of the campaign since there were several tasks that had been carried out, such as choice of media type to use, selection of campaign messages and identification of audience mix. Different researches should, therefore, have been conducted at the completion

of each of these decisions made to determine how impactful the general campaign had been.

From respondents' reactions obtained, more than half of them believe that this did not happen. As a result, the campaign is still running with almost the same momentum it began in September 2016. The impact of the campaign in terms of positive change in the attitude of Nigerians is still not adequately felt. Even President Buhari, from his utterances at different fora, is still unsatisfied with, and maybe disillusioned by, the responses of Nigerians to his administration's "change" gospel.

This means that the "*Change-begins-with-me*" campaign has not generated enough awareness and impact that should positively change the attitude of the citizenry. Yet, the executors of the campaign have not done enough research to identify the weak links, which would have made them to rejig the campaign machinery and make it more effective towards meeting the campaign's objectives.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The simple conclusion made from findings of this study is that the campaign executors have not adequately applied research at all phases of the *Change-begins-with-me* initiative, and that behaviouristic attributes of many Nigerians have hardly changed for the better. Therefore, in order to record more positive impact of the campaign on Nigerians, especially in the area of attitudinal change, the leaders and citizens must agree to vigorously work together for the good of the country. And for this to happen, the following recommendations are made:

- (i) The operators of the *Change-begins-with-me* campaign should be more research-oriented in the monitoring and evaluation of its implementation;
- (ii) A more positive response of the target population to the campaign through visible attitudinal change needs to be vigorously pursued by identifying the weak areas of the initiative through research and strengthening them wherever necessary;

- (iii) The campaign messages should be recalibrated and disseminated for a more purposeful and impactful effect to be generated therefrom; and
- (iv) And the media channels through which the campaign is being run should be realigned and reinvigorated so that a more effective and efficient reach of the audience can be achieved.

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