



## INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES ON PUBIC ACCEPTANCE OF IMO STATE GOVERNMENT PROJECTS

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### ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine the influence of public relations strategies on the Owerri Metropolis public's acceptance towards the Imo state government projects. Key objectives raised were to x-ray the perception of Owerri Metropolis residents to the public relations strategy used on them for the acceptance of Imo state government and identify the influence of public relations strategy of the Imo state government project acceptance on Owerri Metropolis residents. The study was anchored on the media ecology theory, while Survey research design was adopted for this study. A population of 589,564 was used to represent residents in Owerri Metropolis. Wimmer and Dominic online sample size calculator was used to arrive at a sample size of 384. Multi-stage sampling technique was used to sample out the exact respondents used for the study. The instrument for data collection for the study was questionnaire. Findings revealed that Owerri Metropolis residents are highly exposed to and knowledgeable of the government's public relations project strategy for Imolites acceptance of the government and that the residents have not been influenced directly, so they are indifferent about the government's public relations project strategies. It was concluded that the current Imo state government public relations project strategies are not effective to make Imolites living in Owerri Metropolis to accept the government. The researcher recommended that the public relations personnel employed by the government can do better to see to it that the goal towards the Imo state government is actualized and the people happy with the current government.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Public Relations Strategy, Public Acceptance, Imo state government, Imolites, Projects

### Introduction

Public relations is "practically as old as society" Patrick Jackson, a publisher of the public relation society of America (PRSA) asserts that public relations arose from the basic need of building and improving human relationship. Thus, public relation has been practised even if only amateurish, since the beginning of mankind. In ancient societies, human communication was limited by space and time. Due to the absence of modern technology, the potentials and application of public relations increased as societies became more urbanized, civilized and complex (Henry et al., 2021).

Like any other industry, public relations have been impacted by politics, war, technology and social change. It's special because it's the intersection of business, science and unadulterated human experience. The most common example of this is when PR's influence on public opinion and consumer engagement is acknowledged, along with a need for more precise scientific measurement of its impact on financial performance (Coetzee, 2019).

Public relations provide an institution or people publicity to their audiences through issues of public interest and news that does not need any direct payment. Such activities are like talking in seminars, working with the media and employee communication. These are things that are not tangible and that is what makes it different from advertising. Public relations can be used to create communication among employees, customers, voters or the public at large (Ivy Panda, 2023). As Rensburg and Cant (2003, p.34 as cited in Henry et al., 2021) indicate that public relations exist in every company and institution, irrespective of whether or not the company or institution wants it. Within an organisation, activities such as phone calls, newsletters, public letters including its everyday encounter with its publics, to name only a few, form a perception and an image in its publics' minds about the organisation. Various images come into the public's minds based on how the organisation has identified itself to the public (Onowa, 2013).

The planning of public relations activities involves establishing public relations objectives, choosing the appropriate messages and means to transmit them, as well as evaluating the results. A major mass promotion instrument is represented by the activity of public relations (Anggreni, 2018; Matyek et al., 2022). Public relations is used to create good relations with various existing categories of the public, obtaining a favourable media representation, creating a company image in the public perception, and judiciously managing or removing the negative effects of rumours, accounts or unfavourable events that are harmful to the firm (Coetzee, 2019). This is what the Imo state government has taken advantage of to make Imolites to accept the current and upcoming government that rules and will rule the state.

The Imo State government among other strategies, employ the services of their public relations personnel to push forward the projects of the Imo state government to the people so as to change the perceptions of the Imolites towards the government and to even make them accept the government and all the government stands for and plans to do currently and in the future.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Public relations has helped and continues helping organisations and governments to look better before their publics. Most times, it even makes the public love and start accepting the deeds of the organisation or government. The Imo state government haven been surrounded by several public relations persons take advantage of public relations to make Imolites and Nigerians accept the government and their projects. The public relations persons working with the Imo state government have come up with several strategies all aimed at compelling the people to accept the states government and their erected projects.

The problem however is that it is possible that most Imolites do not know that these public relations strategies are for them to accept the government and their projects. It is as well possible the public relations strategies of the Imo state government is over-announced, and obviously overexaggerated to the point that Imolites just get turn off by all these acts and strategies.

Upon the premise, the researchers choose to undertake this study to ascertain the influence of public relations strategy on the Owerri Metropolis residents' acceptance of Imo State Government projects.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were framed for this study:

1. What is the level of exposure of Owerri Metropolis residents to Imo State government projects?
2. What is the knowledge level of Owerri Metropolis residents to the public relations strategies of the Imo State government?

3. What is the perception of Owerri Metropolis residents to the public relations strategies used for the acceptance of Imo State government?
4. What is the influence of public relations strategies of the Imo State government project acceptance on Owerri Metropolis residents?

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview of Public Relations**

According to Rodsevich (2022), the strategic management of communication between an organisation and its various stakeholders, such as the general public, media, investors, employees, and other pertinent parties, is known as public relations. Furthermore, it entails developing persuasive message, utilising media channels, planning events, and interacting with stakeholders.

The Public Relations Society of America (2024) stated that “public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” Furthermore, Forsey (2023) explained that it is a strategic communication from an organisation to the public to maintain or cultivate public image and/or respond to public discourse. It involves creating compelling messages, leveraging media channels and engaging stakeholders to influence perceptions, shape public opinion, and achieve organisational objectives.

### **Public Relations in Nigeria**

Public relations practice in Nigeria was introduced from Britain through the vehicle of colonialism; public relation became an important element in public communication in the colonial days. The government felt the need for another branch of communication which would convey subtly, its feelings to the people without really going through the rigours of mental composition of communication acts. In 1963, the Nigerian Institution of Public Relations (NIPR) was established as a regulatory body for public relation practice in Nigeria (Henry et al., 2021).

The responsibility of the public relations unit is to protect the image of the organisation to the general public. The public relation practice was designed to protect the image of the organisation, plan and execute all its approved public relations programmes. Corporate organisations have been embarking on public relations to create and maintain a mutual understanding with their publics.

### **Empirical Review**

Olariu (2017) conducted a study titled, “The use of public relations in projecting an organisations positive image” which was a theoretical approach on the importance of using public relations in helping an organisation to project a positive image. The study of the impact information has on the image of organisations seems to be an interesting research topic. Practice has proved that the image of institutions has a patrimonial value and it is sometimes essential in raising their credibility. It can be said that an image is defined as the representation of certain attitudes, opinions or prejudices concerning a person, a group of persons or the public opinion concerning an institution. In other words, an image is the opinion of a person, of a group of persons or of the public opinion regarding that institution. All specialists agree that a negative image affects, sometimes to an incredible extent, the success of an institution. In the contemporary age, we cannot speak about public opinion without taking into consideration the mass media as a main agent in transmitting the information to the public, with unlimited possibilities of

influencing or forming it. The plan for the PR department starts with its own declaration of principles, which describes its roles and contribution to the organisation.

In the same vein, a study was conducted by Henry et al. (2021) entitled “The Role of Public Relation in Building Corporate Image: A Study of First Bank of Nigeria Plc, Calabar” which focuses on the impact of public relations in building corporate image in First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar. This research identifies how public relations can help in maintaining high acceptable corporate identify, corporate image and corporate communication. The survey research method was used in this study as the population was picked amongst the internal and external publics of First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar. Copies of questionnaire were administered to the respondents to elicit information that helped in the organization of data and presentation. The research showed that public relations can help in uplifting the image of First Bank of Nigeria Plc Calabar. The researchers recommended among other things that public relation efforts must ensure that they equally protect and build the image of the firm. This will help create an enabling ground for effective and mutual relationship between the staff, costumer and the general public.

Also, Onowa (2013) did a study entitled “The role of public relations in building a sustainable corporate image: a study of Benue state Internal Revenue Service (BIRS)” which was set out to investigate how public relations can be used to build and sustain the corporate image. Consequently, the researcher employed the survey research method to investigate. Findings revealed that public relations can build and sustain the bureau’s corporate image, although BIRS has not recognized other public relations strategies but is confine to customer relations services. It further shows that, the bureau has not really involved in community relations services. As a result, the community members could not appreciate the kind of relationship that exists between the agency and its host community. Based on these findings, the study concludes that for public relations to be very effective in building and sustaining the bureau’s corporate image, the bureau should embark on different programme, knowing that image building is not a product of just one good action but a totality of good practices put forth by an organisation. The researcher recommended among others that the agency should accord great recognition of public relations by establishing an in-house department with qualify professional staff who would ensure efficiency in initiating and executing tactical public relations programmes that will give surety to the bureau’s image. Also opinion research should be constantly carried out to understand the publics’ perception of the bureau and to evaluate the efficacy of the existing programmes which will help the bureau or to either maintain or change its programmes.

Furthermore, Bhargava (2010) conducted a study on the trends in the application of various Internet tools in the public relations practice of New Zealand and the impact these have on certain key aspects of the practice such as skills, encroachment, gender balance and ethics. A mixed methods approach including an online survey and semi-structured in-depth interviews has been followed. An attempt has been made to answer the research questions with the aid of the data collected from 133 survey respondents and ten interview participants. The findings revealed that there are considerable variations in the use and application of the different online tools in the New Zealand public relations practice. This discrepancy was found to have been influenced by the area of work and experience of the practitioners along with their knowledge of the Internet and the organizational environment they operated in. Further, it appears that practitioners do not have a full grasp of the nature of online tools and their scope of utilisation in the practice. Areas of further investigation have been highlighted and recommendations have been made for the future researchers to help aid a better understanding of online public relations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This work was anchored on Media Ecology theory. The founder of this theory believes that peoples’ way of life would be changing due to media evolution (McLuhan, 1964). The future of communication media

will influence our life as many industries currently transform their own communication system to a whole new level such as video conferencing with people in the other parts of the world. According to the profunder of this theory, new media has allowed “users become consumers and producers”. Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube now serves as a platform to transform predictions into reality. Therefore, consumers have more way to share their, opinion and interaction with others. In conclusion, PR practitioners must be able to control the flow of communication in order to engage consumers and employees effectively and as well achieve their set goals.

According to McLuhan and Power (1989) as cited in Macnamara, (2005), during McLuhan’s time, as he had predicted, people are now both producers and consumers of information when using the new media. Recent studies found that the social media can deliver information or message much more easily and efficiently than traditional media, therefore PR practitioners have changed their way of distributing. Thus, the flows of communication are altered from one way communication to two-way communication to interact with the public. According to McLuhan and Power (1989) as cited in Macnamara, (2005), during McLuhan’s time, as he had predicted, people are now both producers and consumers of information when using the new media. Recent studies found that the social media can deliver information or message much more easily and efficiently than traditional media, therefore PR practitioners have changed their way of distributing.

Thus, the flows of communication are altered from one way communication to two-way communication to interact with the public. From this point of view, McLuhan’s theory can explain why and how the lives of PR practitioners, consumers and organisations will be changed by social media and how media’s evolution will continue controlling the flow of communication. However, his theory has also shown that this is why PR practitioners, organisations in particular, must learn how to use digital devices like the social media in communicating with strategic audiences effectively (Mulhern, 2009).

The relevance of this theory is that it has helped to prepare peoples mind on the change in technology which as well can be utilised properly through social media, blogs, portals, twitter etc. This is what a current public relation practitioner utilizes effectively, using any visible and modern means in communicating and informing their target consumers/fans on their beliefs and services. This is the next level in public relations growth which should be planned towards and used adequately.

## **Research Methodology**

Survey research design was adopted for this study. The area of study was Owerri Metropolis, Imo State. Owerri Metropolis comprises Owerri North, Owerri Municipal and Owerri West. The population of the study consist of residents of Owerri Metropolis. Wimmer and Dominick online sample size calculator was used to determine the sample size for the study which was 384. Multistage sampling technique was adopted for the study. At the first stage, the researcher out listed all Local Government Areas in Owerri Metropolis; Owerri municipal, Owerri North, and Owerri West. Second stage, the researcher out list the various communities in the out listed Local Government Areas. At the third stage, the researcher randomly selected 4 communities each from the three Local Government Areas in Owerri metropolis. At the fourth stage, the sample size was divided by 12 villages that were randomly selected, which is seen as  $384/12 = 32$ . At the fifth stage, 32 materials were distributed to the respondents in the twelve communities in Owerri metropolis, Imo state. Questionnaire was the instrument for data collection for this study. There are two sections of the questionnaire, both with closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was validated by experts in Mass Communication department, Imo State University, Owerri. Quantitative approach was used for the data analysis.

**Data Analysis and Presentation**

The researcher distributed 384 copies of questionnaire to residents living in Owerri North, West and Municipal. The researcher was however able to retrieve the 379 copies of the questionnaire from the respondents. This accounts for a 98.7%, which is very valid and acceptable to be used for this study’s data analysis and presentation.

**Research Question One:** What is the exposure of level of Owerri Metropolis residents to Imo state government projects?

**Table 1: Are you exposed to Imo state government projects?**

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	379	100
No	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The above table data revealed that all the respondents are exposed to Imo state government projects in the state. This implies that most Owerri Metropolis residents are aware and exposed to the government’s projects.

**Table 2: At what level are you exposed to these Imo state government projects?**

Options	Frequency	Percentage
High	174	45.9
Moderate	112	29.5
Low	13	3.4
Can’t say	80	21.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The above table data showed that at 45.9% that most respondents agree that they are highly exposed to Imo state government projects. This implies that Owerri Metropolis residents are highly exposed to the Imo state government projects.

**Research Question Two:** What is the knowledge level of Owerri Metropolis residents to the public relations strategies of the Imo state government?

**Table 3: Do you know that Imo state government has been constructing several road networks in the state?**

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	351	92.6
No	0	0
Can't say	28	7.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The above table data showed that 92.6% of the respondents are knowledgeable about the Imo state government road network construction. This implies that Owerri residents are so knowledgeable about the Imo state government projects and constructions.

**Table 4: What is your level of knowledge to these Imo state government projects public relations strategies for Imolites acceptance?**

Options	Frequency	Percentage
High	96	25.3
Moderate	179	47.2
Low	24	6.3
Can't say	80	21.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The above table data showed that at 47% the respondents could say that they were moderately knowledgeable about the Imo state government projects public relations strategies to make Imolites accept the government administration. This implies that Owerri Metropolis residents are moderately knowledgeable to the Imo state government projects public relations strategies for Imolites acceptance of the current government administration.

**Research Questions Three:** What is the perception of Owerri Metropolis residents to the public relations strategy used on them for the acceptance of Imo state government?

**Table 5: I think that all the road projects of Imo state government is not to make us accept the government but as a result of the governments statutory responsibility to the citizens of the state**

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	101	26.6
Agree	180	47.5
Disagree	62	16.3
Strongly Disagree	36	9.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The finding from the above table showed that 47.5% of the respondents think that all Imo state government road projects are not a way to make the government get the peoples acceptance.

**Table 6: Imo state projects are a way of pushing forward the goals of each administration and their parties’ acceptance for another political election tenure in the nearest future**

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	158	42
Agree	84	22.1
Disagree	66	17.4
Strongly Disagree	71	18.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The above table finding revealed that 42% of the respondents think that Imo state projects are ways of pushing forward the goals of each administration and their parties’ acceptance for another political election tenure.

**Research Questions Four:** What is the influence of public relations strategy of the Imo state government project acceptance on Owerri Metropolis residents?

**Table 7: The public relations strategy of the Imo state government has made some loose minded persons to accept the current government for what they will stand to gain individually from the government.**

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	90	23.7
Agree	104	27.4
Disagree	98	25.8
Strongly Disagree	87	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024



From the above table data, we found at not more than 27% that the respondents are indifferent on whether the government's public relations strategy has convinced some loose minded Imolites into accepting the current government for what they will individually gain from the government.

**Table 8: Imo state government public relations project strategies has not changed much of Imolites belief in the current government.**

<b>Options</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly Agree	104	27.4
Agree	120	31.7
Disagree	97	25.6
Strongly Disagree	58	15.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>379</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

The above table data revealed that above 31.7% of the respondents agreed that Imo state government public relation project strategies has not influenced much changes on the beliefs of Imolites towards the current government.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Findings showed at a great degree that Owerri Metropolis residents are highly exposed to the several projects of the Imo state government in and around the state, from the road constructions, Imo skill-up, exterior decoration of the state landscape etc. Olariu (2017) concurs that we cannot speak about public opinion without taking into consideration the mass media as a main agent in transmitting the information to the public, with unlimited possibilities of influencing or forming it.

Finding got showed that Owerri Metropolis residents are highly knowledgeable about the state government's constructions and projects. Owerri residents are however moderately knowledgeable to the governments public relations strategies aimed at making the people accept the government's administration. Henry, et al. (2021) study concurs that most Nigerians are knowledgeable about organisational public relations strategies as it uplifts the reputation of the organisation.

The findings got showed that most Imolites who live in Owerri Metropolis believe that the government good projects are a show to prove their government achievements, make their parties known, to get good and favourable image and possible acceptance, however, they believe that these governments' public relations strategies are not sufficient to make most Imolites to accept the government while heartedly. Morozan's (2008) study opine that communication through public relations offers multiple ways of expressing the organisation's intentions, position and achievements, of getting feedback from the public by establishing interactive connections between different social entities. The choice theory supports this study's finding in that the people have a choice to perceive individual or government PR strategies in good light or rejects it.

The finding got with regards to what influence the governments public relations strategies has had on Imolites acceptance of the government showed that Imolites are basically indifferent and not directly influenced by most of government projects, however, it has made them to partly believe that there is yet

hope in the current government as it plans on making things a bit better than it has been. Olariu (2017) adds to this study's finding that a negative image affects, sometimes to an incredible extent, the success of an institution.

## Conclusions

The researchers concluded that the current Imo state government public relations project strategies are not effective to make Imolites living in Owerri Metropolis to now accept the government.

## Recommendations

The researcher made the following recommendations:

1. The projects of the Imo state government should be broadcast and made public using all the media outlets in and around Imo state, this can create a better image of the current government, which will then over time make the people to start liking the government.
2. The Imo State government should come up with a more compelling public relations strategy to make the people accept its administration without much doubt.
3. Imolites should at some point appreciate the Imo state government by liking and accepting the government if not for anything for the youth empowerment initiative it started since 2023 till date.
4. The public relations personnel employed by the government can do better to see to it that the goal towards the Imo state government is actualized and the people happy with the current government.

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