PUBLIC RELATIONS AND IMAGE BUILDING: PATHWAYS FOR INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION INCLUSIVENESS AND IMAGE RECOVERY IN NIGERIA

Chigozi Eke[1]* & Muideen Opeyemi Adeyemi[2]

[1,2]Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

*chigozi_eke@uniport.edu.ng

ABSTRACT: This study ascertained public relations and image building as pathways for the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) inclusiveness and image recovery in Nigeria. The study anchored on the image restoration and agenda-setting theories. This study adopted a qualitative research approach and the population consisted of 17 public relations officers at the INEC in Rivers State and public relations experts in the Department of Public Relations and Advertising at the University of Port Harcourt. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to obtain the study samples. The study adopted thematic method of data analysis. The findings revealed that the current public relations strategies employed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have been partially effective in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding their image, as they have managed to increase transparency and engagement through targeted communication campaigns and stakeholder interactions; however, persistent challenges such as allegations of electoral malpractice, inconsistent messaging, and limited reach in certain demographics continue to undermine the overall effectiveness of these efforts, indicating a need for more comprehensive and inclusive approaches. The study concluded that while INEC's current public relations strategies have made some progress in mitigating negative public perceptions and enhancing their image, the presence of ongoing challenges, such as perceived electoral malpractices and inconsistent messaging, suggests that these strategies have not yet fully achieved their desired impact. The study recommended that INEC should adopt a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to its public relations efforts, focusing on consistent messaging, greater transparency, and expanded outreach to all demographics

Keywords: Public Relations, Image Building, Independent National Electoral Commission, Inclusiveness, Image Recovery

INTRODUCTION

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria has faced significant challenges concerning its public image, especially after the 2023 general elections. The public perception of INEC has been marred by allegations of bias, inefficiency, and corruption, which have eroded trust in the electoral process. According to a report by Nwafor and Emecheta (2023), these issues have led to widespread scepticism among Nigerians regarding the credibility of election outcomes. This study seeks to examine the role of public relations (PRs) in reshaping INEC's image and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process. Public relations play a critical role in shaping the public image of organisations, particularly those in the public sector such as INEC. PR strategies, including media relations,

stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication, are essential for managing public perception and building trust. As noted by Olaniyi and Adebayo (2023), effective PR can help INEC communicate its commitment to transparency and fairness, thereby enhancing its credibility. This underscores the need for the INEC to adopt comprehensive PR strategies to rebuild its image.

Inclusiveness in electoral processes refers to the extent to which all eligible citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or gender, can participate in elections. INEC's ability to ensure inclusiveness is crucial for its image recovery. Okoro and Nnamani (2023) posit that perceptions of inclusiveness are linked to the legitimacy of electoral bodies. Therefore, promoting inclusiveness through targeted PR campaigns can help INEC regain public confidence. Stakeholder engagement is a key PR strategy that involves building and maintaining relationships with various stakeholders, including political parties, civil society organisations, and the electorate. An INEC's engagement with stakeholders can serve as a pathway to image recovery by ensuring that diverse voices are heard and considered in the electoral process. According to Akinwale (2023), inclusive stakeholder engagement is essential for fostering trust and cooperation, which are critical for INEC's image rebuilding efforts.

Crisis communication is another vital aspect of PR that the INEC must prioritise to recover its image. Given the controversies surrounding past elections, INEC needs to develop a robust crisis communication plan that addresses issues promptly and transparently. Eze and Agbo (2023) argued that, effective crisis communication can mitigate the impact of negative events on an organisation's image. For INEC, this means being proactive in addressing electoral disputes and misinformation. Media relations are central to shaping public perception, making them a crucial element of INEC's PR strategy. Positive media coverage can enhance the INEC's image, whereas negative reports can further damage its reputation. The INEC must work closely with the media to ensure accurate and balanced reporting on electoral matters. Ojo (2023) suggested that, media engagement can help demystify the electoral process and build public trust in INEC's operations.

In the digital age, social media has become a powerful tool for image building. INEC can leverage social media platforms to communicate directly with the electorate, counter misinformation, and promote transparency. According to Ibeh and Nwosu (2023), social media offers a unique opportunity for public institutions to engage with citizens and foster a sense of inclusion. For INEC, the active and strategic use of social media can be instrumental in its image recovery efforts. Allegations of bias and corruption have been significant factors contributing to INEC's tarnished image. Addressing these allegations through transparent investigations and accountability measures is crucial for image recovery. As highlighted by Afolabi and Ogunleye (2023), public perceptions of fairness and integrity are fundamental to the legitimacy of electoral bodies. INEC must therefore prioritise transparency and accountability in its operations to rebuild trust.

Voter education is another pathway for enhancing inclusiveness and improving INEC's image. Educating the electorate about their rights and the electoral process can help reduce apathy and increase participation. Aluko (2023) argued that voter education campaigns can empower citizens and foster a sense of ownership in the electoral process. For INEC, investing in comprehensive voter education initiatives can contribute to a more inclusive and credible electoral process. For INEC's PR strategies to be effective, there must be ongoing

monitoring and evaluation to assess their impact on public perception. Monitoring tools such as public opinion surveys and media analysis can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of PR initiatives. As noted by Onu and Chukwu (2023), regular evaluation allows organisations to adjust their strategies in response to emerging challenges. INEC must therefore establish a robust system for monitoring and evaluating its PR efforts.

Collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs) can increase INEC's PR efforts by leveraging the credibility and reach of these organisations. CSOs can serve as intermediaries between INEC and the public, helping to communicate INEC's commitment to fairness and inclusiveness. Adesina (2023) emphasises the importance of partnerships between public institutions and CSOs in image building. For INEC, such collaboration can play a significant role in restoring public trust. Public relations offer a viable pathway for INEC to recover their image and promote inclusiveness in Nigeria's electoral process. By adopting comprehensive PR strategies that include stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, media relations, and voter education, INEC can rebuild trust and enhance its credibility. Furthermore, addressing allegations of bias and corruption with transparency and accountability is crucial for image recovery. It is recommended that INEC continue to monitor and evaluate its PR efforts and collaborate with CSOs to maximise the impact of its image-building initiatives. This study lies in its potential to provide valuable insights into how strategic public relations efforts can enhance the image and inclusiveness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria, fostering greater public trust, transparency, and engagement in the electoral process, which are critical for democratic consolidation and the credibility of elections in the country.

Statement of the Problem

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of Nigeria, as the body responsible for overseeing elections, is crucial to the sustenance of democracy in the country. However, in recent years, INEC's public image has been significantly tarnished by allegations of electoral misconduct, bias, and inefficiency. These issues have not only eroded public trust but have also cast doubt on the legitimacy of the electoral process. The 2023 general elections, in particular, brought these challenges to the forefront, with widespread accusations of corruption, voter suppression, and the manipulation of results. The resulting public outcry has highlighted a pressing need for INEC to address these image issues urgently. Public relations (PRs) are vital tools for any organisation looking to build and maintain a positive image, particularly in the face of public scrutiny. For INEC, the role of PR is even more critical, given the sensitive nature of its mandate and the importance of public perception in ensuring the legitimacy of elections. Despite efforts to engage with stakeholders and the media, INEC's PR strategies have often fallen short of effectively countering negative narratives and restoring confidence in their operations. This inadequacy has perpetuated a cycle of distrust, with each election further deepening public scepticism.

Inclusiveness is another significant concern that INEC must address as part of their image recovery efforts. The perception that certain groups are marginalised or excluded from the electoral process has further damaged INEC's credibility. Ensuring that all eligible citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or gender, can participate freely and fairly in elections is crucial for restoring public trust. However, INEC has struggled to communicate its commitment effectively to inclusiveness, leading to widespread disenfranchisement and voter apathy, particularly among marginalised communities. Given

these challenges, there is a clear and urgent need for a comprehensive PR strategy that not only addresses the negative perceptions surrounding INEC but also actively promotes inclusiveness in the electoral process. This study seeks to ascertain the pathways through which PRs can be leveraged to rebuild INEC's image and restore public confidence in Nigeria's electoral system. By examining the effectiveness of current PR strategies and identifying areas for improvement, this research aims to provide actionable recommendations for INEC to enhance its image and fulfil its mandate of conducting free, fair, and credible elections.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to evaluate the public relations and image building: pathways for Independent National Electoral Commission inclusiveness and image recovery in Nigeria. The objectives are as follows:

1. examine the effectiveness of the INEC's current public relations strategies in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding their image.
2. explored the role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing INEC's credibility and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process.
3. assess the impact of crisis communication on mitigating the effects of controversies and allegations of bias on the INEC's public image.
4. identify public relations strategies that can promote greater inclusiveness and restore public trust in INEC's management of elections.

Research Questions

1. What is the effectiveness of the INEC's current public relations strategies in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding their image?
2. What is the role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing INEC's credibility and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process?
3. What is the impact of crisis communication on mitigating the effects of controversies and allegations of bias on the INEC's public image?
4. What are the public relations strategies that can promote greater inclusiveness and restore public trust in INEC's management of elections?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Public Relations and Organisational Image Management

Public relations (PRs) are a strategic communication process that organisations use to build and maintain a positive image with their target audiences. Effective PR practices involve crafting and disseminating messages that align with an organisation's values and goals, thereby shaping public perception. In the context of organisational image management, PR plays a critical role in ensuring that an organisation is viewed favourably by its stakeholders. According to Olaniyi and Adebayo (2023), the success of PR efforts in image management depends on the consistency and transparency of communication, as well as the organisation's ability to respond to public concerns in a timely and effective manner. This is especially

crucial in today's digital age, where information spreads rapidly, and where public sentiment can shift quickly. Moreover, PR strategies in organisational image management are not just reactive but also proactive, aiming to build a reservoir of goodwill that can cushion against the impact of potential crises. Organisations that consistently engage in positive PR activities, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, tend to have stronger, more resilient reputations. As highlighted by Ibeh and Nwosu (2023), a well-managed organisational image can lead to increased trust, customer loyalty, and overall brand equity. In contrast, poor image management can result in a loss of credibility and public trust, which are difficult to restore once compromised. Public relations plays a pivotal role in organisational image management by fostering effective communication strategies that enhance public perception, build trust, and maintain a positive reputation, with tactics such as media relations, crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement proving essential, though organisations must continuously adapt to the dynamic media landscape and address challenges like misinformation and evolving public expectations (Okoro & Ekeanyanwu, 2022; Nwosu, 2023).

Stakeholder Engagement in Electoral Processes

Stakeholder engagement in electoral processes is crucial for ensuring the credibility, transparency, and inclusiveness of elections. This involves the active participation of various stakeholders, including political parties, civil society organisations, voters, and the media, in the planning, execution, and monitoring of electoral activities (Nwafor & Emecheta, 2023). Akinwale (2023) noted that effective stakeholder engagement fosters a sense of ownership among these groups, which is essential for building public trust in the electoral process. When stakeholders feel that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed, they are more likely to support the outcomes of the election, even in the face of minor disputes or irregularities. In addition, stakeholder engagement helps identify and mitigate potential risks in the electoral process, such as voter disenfranchisement, electoral violence, or fraud. By involving stakeholders at every stage of the process, electoral bodies can anticipate and address issues before they escalate into larger problems. This collaborative approach not only enhances the legitimacy of the election but also strengthens democratic governance as a whole. Okoro and Nnamani (2023) noted that the inclusion of diverse stakeholders is key to ensuring that electoral processes are perceived as fair and just, thereby promoting political stability and social cohesion. Stakeholder engagement in electoral processes is crucial for fostering transparency, inclusivity, and trust, with key actor such as political parties, civil society organisations, and electoral commissions playing significant roles in ensuring accountability, voter education, and the promotion of peaceful elections, though challenges such as limited public participation and insufficient dialogue between stakeholders continue to hinder the effectiveness of this engagement (Akindele & Ayeni, 2022; Obasi, 2023).

Crisis Communication and Reputation Recovery

Crisis communication is a critical aspect of public relations that addresses with the strategies an organisation employs to address and manage fallout from a crisis. The primary goal of crisis communication is to protect and restore an organisation's reputation by providing timely, accurate, and transparent information to the public. As emphasised by Eze and Agbo (2023), an effective crisis communication plan should include predefined messaging, clear communication channels, and designated spokespersons to ensure a coherent and coordinated response. In the context of reputation recovery, how an organisation handles a crisis can significantly influence its public image and long-term credibility. Reputation recovery post-

crisis involves not only addressing the immediate concerns of stakeholders but also implementing corrective actions to prevent future crises. This may include public apologies, policy changes, and engagement in positive PR activities to rebuild trust. The ability to recover from a crisis is largely dependent on the organisation's preparedness and the effectiveness of its communication strategy. Studies, such as those by Hecht (2023), indicate that organisations that engage in proactive crisis communication and are transparent about their mistakes tend to recover their reputations more quickly and effectively than those that are slow to respond or attempt to conceal issues. Crisis communication is vital for reputation recovery, as it involves timely, transparent, and strategic messaging to manage public perception, mitigate damage, and rebuild trust after a crisis, with key elements such as honesty, consistency, and responsiveness being crucial for effective recovery, although organisations often face challenges in controlling narratives in the fast-paced media environment and addressing stakeholder concerns (Adeyemi & Ogundele, 2022; Johnson, 2023).

Inclusiveness in Electoral Administration

Inclusiveness in electoral administration refers to the efforts made by electoral bodies to ensure that all eligible citizens have equal opportunities to participate in the electoral process. This involves addressing barriers to participation, such as voter suppression, lack of accessibility, and discriminatory practices, which disproportionately affect marginalised groups. Aluko (2023) suggested that an inclusive electoral administration is fundamental to the legitimacy of elections and the overall health of democracy. When electoral processes are inclusive, they not only reflect the will of the entire electorate but also contribute to political stability and social cohesion. Moreover, inclusiveness in electoral administration requires active voter education and outreach to ensure that all segments of society, including minorities, women, and people with disabilities, are informed and empowered to vote. This also involves implementing policies and practices that eliminate physical, legal, and systemic barriers to voting. As noted by Valencia (2023), inclusiveness is not just a matter of equity but also of efficacy; elections that are truly inclusive tend to have higher voter turnout and greater public trust, which are critical for the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. Inclusiveness in electoral administration is essential for ensuring that all segments of society, particularly marginalised groups such as women, persons with disabilities, and minority communities, have equitable access to the electoral process, with reforms like voter education, accessible polling stations, and gender-sensitive policies helping to promote broader participation, though persistent barriers such as cultural biases and logistical challenges continue to hinder full inclusivity (Ibrahim & Olawale, 2022; Adamu, 2023).

Post-2023 Election Analysis

Post-election analysis in Nigeria typically focuses on assessing the electoral process, the performance of candidates, and the reactions of the electorate. The 2023 general elections were marked by notable improvements, including the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which enhanced the credibility of the voting process. However, there were still significant challenges, such as reports of electoral violence, logistical issues, and delays in result transmission. These factors contributed to some public dissatisfaction and allegations of vote manipulation (Duruji et al., 2023). Another critical aspect of post-election analysis revolves around voter participation and the implications for Nigeria's democratic trajectory. Despite

INEC's efforts to ensure free and fair elections, voter turnout was relatively low, hovering around 29% in many regions, reflecting a growing disillusionment with the political system (Oni et al., 2023). This low engagement indicates that more work is needed to restore public trust and encourage political participation, particularly among young Nigerians who make up a large portion of the electorate. The post-election analysis of Nigeria's 2023 general elections highlights both improvements and challenges, with the introduction of the BVAS technology bolstering the credibility of the electoral process, while issues like electoral violence, logistical delays, and low voter turnout—around 29%—underscore persistent obstacles to democratic consolidation and public trust in the political system (Duruji et al., 2023; Oni et al., 2023).

Theoretical Review

Image Restoration Theory

Image restoration theory, propounded by William Benoit in 1995, offers a framework for understanding how organisations and individuals respond to crises that threaten their reputation. The theory outlines five main strategies for image restoration: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification (apology). These strategies are designed to repair an entity's image by addressing the specific nature of the accusations or crises it faces. The theory assumes that communication is key in shaping public perception and that strategic messaging can mitigate the negative effects of a crisis.

One of the central tenets of the theory is that the choice of strategy depends on the context of the crisis and the audience's perception. For example, in situations where the public perceives a high level of responsibility on the part of the organisation, strategies such as corrective action or mortification may be more effective. However, the theory has faced criticism for its perceived linearity and its assumption that one strategy can be universally effective. Critics argue that the theory does not fully account for complex situations where multiple strategies may need to be employed simultaneously or where external factors, such as media influence or stakeholder involvement, may alter the effectiveness of the chosen strategy (Benoit, 1995; Hecht, 2023). The theory provides a framework for understanding how organisations respond to crises that damage their reputation. The theory suggests that when an organisation's image is under threat, it must employ specific strategies to restore its reputation. These strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification (apology). This theory is highly relevant to the study, as it offers a lens through which to analyse INEC's efforts to rebuild their image following the negative public perceptions that have arisen from allegations of electoral misconduct and bias.

Agenda-Setting Theory

The theory was first introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 during their study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election. The theory posits that the media plays a crucial role in determining which issues are perceived as important by the public. This suggests that while the media may not tell people what to think about, it significantly influences what they think about by giving prominence to certain issues over others. The core tenet of Agenda-Setting Theory is the idea that media coverage creates a public agenda, which in turn influences the policy agenda of political and social institutions.

The theory is based on the assumption that media consumers are not passive but are instead influenced by the amount and nature of coverage that issues receive. This theory has been widely applied in various fields, from political communication to public relations, demonstrating how media coverage can shape public discourse. However, Agenda-Setting Theory has been criticised for oversimplifying the relationship between the media and the public. Critics argue that the theory does not adequately account for the audience's active role in interpreting media content or the influence of other factors, such as personal experience and social networks, in shaping public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Valencia, 2023).

The theory posits that the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception by highlighting certain issues and downplaying others. This theory is pertinent to the study because it emphasises the importance of media relations in the INEC's public relations strategy. By effectively engaging with the media, an INEC can influence the narrative surrounding its operations, ensuring that positive aspects of its efforts are brought to the forefront while addressing and correcting negative perceptions. The theory underscores the need for INEC to actively manage its media presence to set a favourable agenda that enhances its credibility and promotes inclusiveness.

Empirical Review

Olaniyi and Adebayo (2023) carried out a study on "Public Relations Strategies for Enhancing Credibility in Public Institutions." This study evaluated the effectiveness of PR strategies in restoring the credibility of public institutions in Nigeria, with a specific focus on media relations and stakeholder communication. The researchers employed a mixed-method approach, combining surveys of public opinion with in-depth interviews of PR professionals within various public institutions. The findings revealed that targeted PR campaigns, particularly those emphasising transparency and proactive communication, significantly improved public perception and trust in the institutions studied. The reviewed study and the current study are related as both studies focus on public relations and increasing credibility and image recovery on public institutions, but differ in the areas of objectives, scope and methodological approach.

Akinwale (2023) did a paper on "Stakeholder Engagement in Nigeria's Electoral Process." This study examined the impact of stakeholder engagement on the credibility and inclusiveness of electoral processes in Nigeria. The study utilised a qualitative approach, conducting focus group discussions with representatives from political parties, civil society organisations, and electoral bodies. The findings revealed that active and inclusive stakeholder engagement contributed to greater transparency and public trust in the electoral process, highlighting the importance of involving diverse groups in election planning and execution. The reviewed study and the present study are related as both studies hinge on public relations and Nigeria electoral process, but the area of divergence is on the objectives, scope and methods.

Eze and Agbo (2023) conducted research on "Crisis Communication in Nigeria's Electoral Process." This study assessed the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies employed by Nigeria's electoral bodies in mitigating the damage to their reputation during electoral controversies. The researchers used a case study approach, analysing the communication tactics employed by INEC during the 2023 general elections. This included content analysis of official statements, press releases, and media coverage. The findings indicated that while

timely and transparent communication helped reduce negative public perception, inconsistent messaging and a lack of accountability measures weakened overall crisis management efforts. The reviewed study and the pioneer study are related as they centre on crisis communication and Nigeria's electoral process. The difference is on the area of objectives, scope and methodology.

Aluko (2023) carried out a study on "Voter Education and Electoral Participation in Nigeria." The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of voter education initiatives on the inclusiveness and participation rates of marginalised groups in Nigerian elections. The study employed a quantitative approach, using surveys to gather data from voters in various regions of Nigeria, particularly focusing on underrepresented communities. The findings showed that well-targeted voter education campaigns significantly increased voter turnout and participation among marginalised groups, thereby enhancing the overall inclusiveness of the electoral process. The reviewed study and current study are related as both studies aim at Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) but both studies differ in the area of objectives, scope and methods.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and an in-depth (intensive) interview method was employed. In-depth interviews provide respondents with freedom in answering questions and an opportunity to provide in-depth responses (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011; Asemah *et al*., 2012). The research population consisted of 17 (seventeen) public relations officers and professional experts in the unit of public relations in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Rivers State, Nigeria and public relations experts in the Department of Public Relations and Advertising at the University of Port Harcourt. The choice of the category of respondents was informed by the nature of this study, which required knowledge of public relations and image building: pathways for independent national electoral commission inclusiveness and image recovery in Nigeria, as those outside these public relations experts may not have knowledge of the information. Therefore, purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to obtain the study samples. Purposive sampling is strategic and involves an attempt to establish good correspondence between research questions and sampling. Hence, the researchers then asked respondents to suggest other public relations experts who may also qualify for the research study (snowballing). Six (6) public relations professionals were identified and were interviewed in this study. The selection of six public relations professionals for an interview out of seventeen is justified by the need for focused, in-depth insights while ensuring a manageable sample size for qualitative analysis. Given the extensive expertise within the group, six professionals can provide a diverse yet concentrated range of perspectives on key issues without overwhelming the interview process. This number allows for sufficient representation of different sectors, levels of experience, and PR specialties, while also maintaining an efficient and focused data collection process. Additionally, selecting six participants allows for a balance between breadth and depth in responses, ensuring the quality of insights without diluting the analysis or complicating the synthesis of findings. This sample size aligns with best practices in qualitative research, which often prioritise smaller, more manageable groups to enable deeper exploration of topics. The study adopted a thematic method of data analysis to analyse the data gathered from the in-depth interviews.

Data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings

Themes were deduced deductively following the research objectives. The following themes were deduced: the effectiveness of INEC's current public relations strategies in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding their image; the role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing INEC's credibility and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process; the impact of crisis communication on mitigating the effects of controversies and allegations of bias on INEC's public image; and public relations strategies that can promote greater inclusiveness and restore public trust in INEC's management of elections. These are presented and discussed below:

Effectiveness of the INEC's current public relations strategies in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding its image: This section begins with an understanding of the effectiveness of the INEC's current public relations strategies in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding their image. When asked, all the interviewees believed that "the independent national electoral commission (INEC) has faced significant challenges in managing its public image, particularly in the wake of widespread criticism over the conduct of elections in Nigeria. To address negative public perceptions, the INEC has employed several public relations (PR) strategies, including proactive media engagement, public awareness campaigns, and the use of digital platforms for transparency." The majority of the interviewees agreed that "by actively engaging with the media, the INEC aims to control the narrative around its activities, providing timely updates, clarifications, and responses to issues raised by the public and the press. This strategy has helped mitigate misinformation and fostered a degree of trust among some segments of the populace who value prompt and clear communication from the electoral body."

Another interviewee stated that, "despite these efforts, the effectiveness of INEC's PR strategies in fully rebuilding its image remains mixed. While its engagement on social media platforms and collaboration with civil society organisations has improved the transparency of the electoral process, there is still a pervasive scepticism among the public." Additionally, other interviewees acknowledged that "this scepticism is largely rooted in the lingering memories of past electoral malpractices and perceived inefficiencies, which have not been entirely dispelled by current PR efforts. Moreover, the commission's reactive rather than proactive approach in certain instances, such as during election day crises or postelection litigations, has often left the public with the impression that the INEC is more concerned with damage control than with addressing the root causes of electoral issues."

Confirming that, one of the interviewees reported that "to increase the effectiveness of its PR strategies, INEC needs to focus on long-term reputation management rather than short-term crisis management. This would involve consistent community engagement at the grassroots level, where trust in the electoral process is often weakest, and the integration of more participatory communication strategies that involve the electorate in the electoral process." Additionally, the interviewees added that "INEC must work to ensure that its actions align with its communication; the credibility gap can only be closed if the public perceives tangible improvements in the conduct of elections. By aligning its PR strategies with concrete actions and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, INEC stands a better chance of rehabilitating its image and restoring public confidence in Nigeria's electoral system."

Role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing INEC's credibility and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process: This section examines the interviewees' views on the role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing INEC's credibility and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process. All the interviewees agreed that "stakeholder engagement plays a pivotal role in enhancing the credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and fostering inclusiveness in Nigeria's electoral process." The interviewees added that "by actively involving a broad spectrum of stakeholders—ranging from political parties, civil society organisations, and the media, to religious groups, traditional leaders, and the electorate—INEC ensures that diverse perspectives are considered in electoral planning and execution." One of the interviewees asserted that "this inclusive approach not only helps to build trust among the various stakeholders but also facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the electoral process across different segments of society. When stakeholders feel that their voices are heard and their concerns addressed, it enhances their confidence the INEC's ability to conduct free, fair, and credible elections."

Moreover, another interviewee reported that "stakeholder engagement contributes significantly to transparency and accountability, which are critical to INEC's credibility. Regular consultations and dialogues with stakeholders provide opportunities for the electoral body to explain its policies, processes, and decisions, thereby reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings and misinformation. This open communication fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders, who are more likely to support and defend an electoral process they feel they have helped shape." Additionally, another interviewee stated that "involving stakeholders in election monitoring and observation roles ensures that the electoral process is scrutinised from multiple angles, reducing the chances of irregularities and increasing the public's confidence in the outcomes."

Finally, the majority of the interviewees agreed that "stakeholder engagement is essential for fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process, particularly for marginalised groups such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities. By partnering with organisations that advocate for these groups, INEC can tailor their voter education programs and electoral policies to address their unique challenges and barriers to participation. This ensures that the electoral process is not only inclusive but also representative of Nigeria's diverse population. Such inclusiveness is vital for the legitimacy of the electoral process, as it reassures all citizens that their participation matters, thereby strengthening the overall democratic fabric of the nation. Through sustained and meaningful engagement with stakeholders, INEC can build a more credible, transparent, and inclusive electoral system that reflects the will of the people."

Impact of crisis communication on mitigating the effects of controversies and allegations of bias on INEC's public image: This section assessed the Interviewees' opinions on the impact of crisis communication on mitigating the effects of controversies and allegations of bias on the INEC's public image. All the interviewees agreed that "crisis communication plays a critical role in mitigating the impact of controversies and allegations of bias on the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) public image. In an electoral environment as volatile as Nigeria's, where public trust in institutions is often fragile, the manner and speed with which the INEC responds to crises can significantly influence public perception." The interviewees suggested that "effective crisis communication involves promptly addressing issues, providing accurate information, and demonstrating transparency, all of which help to manage and control the narrative. When INEC successfully employs these strategies during crises, it can prevent misinformation from

spreading, reduce public anxiety, and protect its reputation from long-term damage." However, the interviewee raised concerns that "the effectiveness of INEC's crisis communication strategies has been inconsistent. In some instances, INEC has managed to swiftly counter allegations of bias or misconduct by providing clear evidence and explanations, thereby quelling public discontent. For example, by quickly addressing discrepancies or technical failures during elections and engaging in dialogue with concerned parties, INEC has been able to demonstrate its commitment to impartiality and fairness." The majority of the interviewees reported that "this not only mitigates the immediate impact of the controversy but also helps in restoring some degree of public trust. On the other hand, delayed or inadequate responses to crises have sometimes exacerbated negative perceptions, leading to widespread scepticism about INEC's ability to conduct free and fair elections."

Additionally, one of the interviewees reported that "to increase the impact of crisis communication on its public image, INEC needs to adopt a more proactive and strategic approach. This involves anticipating potential crises, preparing response strategies in advance, and training its communication team to handle high-pressure situations effectively." Moreover, other interviewees added that "INEC should focus on building a reservoir of goodwill through consistent and transparent communication even when there is no crisis. When the public perceives INEC as consistently transparent and accountable, they are more likely to give the commission the benefit of the doubt during times of controversy. By strengthening its crisis communication mechanisms, INEC can better manage the fallout from controversies and allegations of bias, ultimately preserving and even enhancing its public image."

Public relations strategies that can promote greater inclusiveness and restore public trust in INEC's management of elections: This segment highlights how public relations strategies can promote greater inclusiveness and restore public trust in INEC's management of elections. When asked, one of the interviewees reported that "promoting greater inclusiveness and public trust in the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) management of elections requires the implementation of targeted public relations (PR) strategies that engage all segments of the population." Another interviewee added that "one key strategy is comprehensive voter education campaigns that are accessible to diverse audiences, including marginalised groups such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities. The INEC can collaborate with civil society organisations and local influencers to tailor messages that resonate with these groups, ensuring that they understand their rights and the electoral process. By making voter education more inclusive, INEC can empower all citizens to participate actively in elections, fostering a sense of ownership and trust in the electoral system."

Additionally, one of the interviewees said that "another important PR strategy is to enhance transparency through regular and open communication with the public. The INEC should utilise multiple channels, including social media, community radio, and town hall meetings, to keep the electorate informed about every stage of the electoral process. This includes updates on voter registration, candidate nominations, polling arrangements, and the handling of electoral disputes. Transparent communication not only demystifies the electoral process but also reduces the chances of misinformation and rumours, which can erode public trust. When the public is well informed and sees that INEC operates transparently, they are more likely to trust the institution and its ability to manage elections fairly."

The interviewees further noted that "INEC should prioritise stakeholder engagement as a PR strategy to promote inclusiveness and trust. By regularly consulting with political parties, civil society organisations, religious and traditional leaders, and other key stakeholders, INEC can ensure that the electoral process reflects the interests and concerns of a broad spectrum of society. These consultations can also serve as a platform for addressing grievances and building consensus on contentious issues, thereby reducing the potential for conflict and enhancing the legitimacy of the electoral process. Engaging stakeholders in a meaningful way signals that INEC values inclusiveness and is committed to upholding the democratic principles that are essential for public trust in the electoral system."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Objective One: To examine the effectiveness of INEC's current public relations strategies in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding their image.

The results revealed that, the current public relations strategies employed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have been partially effective in addressing negative public perceptions and rebuilding their image, as they have managed to increase transparency and engagement through targeted communication campaigns and stakeholder interactions; however, persistent challenges such as allegations of electoral malpractice, inconsistent messaging, and limited reach in certain demographics continue to undermine the overall effectiveness of these efforts, indicating a need for more comprehensive and inclusive approaches. This finding supports the study by Olaniyi and Adebayo (2023) that targeted PR campaigns, particularly those emphasising transparency and proactive communication, significantly improved public perception and trust in the institutions studied. The relevance of image restoration theory in assessing the effectiveness of INEC's public relations strategies lies in its focus on repairing and maintaining a positive organisational image amid public scrutiny, whereas agenda setting theory highlights how INEC efforts in communication can shape public perceptions and influence the priorities of media coverage, both of which are crucial for addressing negative perceptions and rebuilding trust. The finding implies that while some progress has been made in restoring public trust, there remain significant gaps in fully convincing the electorate of its credibility and impartiality. This partial effectiveness could lead to persistent scepticism, reduced voter participation, and increased public pressure for more transparency and accountability in future elections. To address this, INEC has to enhance its communication strategies, improve stakeholder engagement, and adopt more robust measures to tackle issues such as electoral malpractices and operational inefficiencies, which continue to undermine its image.

Objective Two: To explore the role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing INEC's credibility and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process.

The findings showed that stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in enhancing INEC's credibility and fostering inclusiveness in the electoral process, as it facilitates collaboration, trust-building, and transparency between the commission and various electoral participants, including political parties, civil society organisations, and the general public; however, inconsistencies in the depth and frequency of these engagements have sometimes led to perceptions of exclusion and mistrust among certain groups, indicating the need for a more consistent and broad-based approach to stakeholder interactions. The study of Akinwale (2023) is in consistent with this finding as it posits that active and inclusive stakeholder

engagement contributes to greater transparency and public trust in the electoral process, highlighting the importance of involving diverse groups in election planning and execution. Image restoration theory is relevant for understanding how stakeholder engagement can help repair INEC's credibility by fostering trust and transparency, whereas agenda-setting theory illustrates how engaging with diverse stakeholders can shift the focus of public and media discourse toward more inclusive and balanced representations of INEC's activities and policies. The finding implies that strong collaboration with political parties, civil society, and marginalised groups is essential for building trust and ensuring a fair and representative system, and to fully realise this, INEC need to strengthen its partnerships, increase transparency, and create more avenues for stakeholder involvement throughout the electoral cycle.

Objective Three: To assess the impact of crisis communication on mitigating the effects of controversies and allegations of bias on INEC's public image.

The findings revealed that crisis communication has a significant impact on mitigating the effects of controversies and allegations of bias on an INEC's public image, as timely and transparent responses help manage public perceptions and reduce the spread of misinformation; however, lapses in the speed and consistency of these communications have sometimes exacerbated doubts and suspicions, indicating that INEC's crisis management strategies require further strengthening to effectively safeguard its image during contentious situations. This finding aligns with the findings of Eze and Agbo (2023) who reported that while timely and transparent communication helped to reduce negative public perception, inconsistent messaging and a lack of accountability measures weakened overall crisis management efforts. In the context of crisis communication, image restoration theory is pertinent for developing strategies to manage and mitigate damage to INEC's public image during controversies, whereas agenda-setting theory is relevant as it underscores how effectively addressing crises can influence which issues are prioritised in public discourse and media coverage. The finding implies that proactive and transparent communication strategies are crucial for managing reputational risks; therefore, INEC has to implement robust crisis communication plans and ensure timely, clear, and consistent messaging to address and defuse public concerns effectively.

Objective Four: To identify public relations strategies that can promote greater inclusiveness and restore public trust in INEC's management of elections.

The results showed that effective public relations strategies that can promote greater inclusiveness and restore public trust in INEC's management of elections include implementing proactive communication campaigns that highlight transparency, engaging in regular and open dialogues with diverse stakeholders, and addressing public concerns through clear, consistent messaging; these strategies are essential for rebuilding confidence and ensuring that all voices are heard in the electoral process. This finding supports the findings of Aluko (2023) who reported well-targeted voter education campaigns significantly increased voter turnout and participation among marginalised groups, thereby increasing the overall inclusiveness of the electoral process. Image restoration theory is applicable in devising public relations strategies aimed at promoting inclusiveness and restoring trust by focusing on repairing INEC's image through transparent and engaging practices, whereas agenda-setting theory emphasises the importance of shaping the public agenda to prioritise and highlight issues related to inclusiveness and trust in electoral management.

The findings of this study have profound implications for addressing the ongoing challenges faced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), particularly in areas such as public trust, electoral transparency, and voter engagement. By utilising strategic public relations (PR) initiatives, INEC can counter negative perceptions of bias, inefficiency, and electoral malpractice, which have historically undermined its credibility. These strategies, when effectively implemented, can reshape the narrative surrounding the commission, making it appear more transparent, accountable, and responsive to the concerns of diverse stakeholders, including political parties, civil society groups, and the general electorate. This renewed image could not only encourage more voter participation but also reduce the incidence of election-related conflicts by fostering confidence in the commission's ability to deliver free, fair, and credible elections.

Moreover, the findings highlighted the critical role that inclusive PR efforts play in addressing issues of marginalisation and underrepresentation within Nigeria's electoral processes. INEC's PR campaigns can be designed to promote inclusiveness, ensuring that marginalised groups, such as women, youth, and people with disabilities, are adequately represented and have a voice in the electoral process. This would not only address long-standing concerns about the inclusivity of elections but also improve the commission's image as a forward-thinking, progressive institution committed to democratic ideals. Ultimately, the successful application of PR strategies could be instrumental in transforming INEC's public perception, reducing voter apathy, and enhancing the overall credibility of Nigeria's democratic system. Additionally, the implications of the findings suggest that adopting robust Public Relations strategies can significantly mitigate INEC's ongoing challenges, such as public distrust, perceptions of bias, and voter apathy, by fostering a more transparent, inclusive, and credible image of the commission, which is essential for improving public confidence and ensuring the legitimacy of Nigeria's electoral processes. The finding implies that these approaches are crucial for building trust and ensuring broad participation; therefore, organisations should adopt these strategies to enhance transparency and foster meaningful engagement with all community segments.

Conclusion

The study concluded that while INEC has made strides in addressing public perceptions, its partial effectiveness highlights the need for ongoing reforms and stronger engagement strategies, as the broader significance lies in the impact that a fully trusted and transparent electoral body can have on deepening democratic participation and stability in Nigeria.

The study equally established that effective stakeholder engagement is vital for bolstering INEC's credibility and promoting inclusiveness in elections, underscoring the collaborative governance in reinforcing democratic integrity and ensuring a more equitable and representative electoral process in Nigeria

This study contributed that effective crisis communication is essential for managing controversies and preserving INEC's public image, highlighting the strategic communication in safeguarding organisational reputation and maintaining public confidence in electoral institutions.

Finally, the study justified that adopting effective public relations strategies that emphasise transparency and inclusive dialogue is crucial for fostering trust and broad engagement,

underscoring the broader significance of these practices in strengthening organisational credibility and promoting equitable participation in societal processes.

Recommendations

In view of the findings from this work, the following recommendations have been made.

1) INEC should adopt a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to its public relations efforts, focusing on consistent messaging, greater transparency, and expanded outreach to all demographics.
2) INEC should implement a more consistent and widespread stakeholder engagement strategy to ensure that all groups are effectively included and represented in the electoral process.
3) INEC should enhance its crisis communication strategies by ensuring timely, consistent, and transparent responses during controversies to better protect its public image.
4) INEC should focus on enhancing transparency, engaging actively with various stakeholders, and maintaining consistent communication to rebuild public trust and ensure greater inclusiveness in the electoral process.

REFERENCES

Adamu, A. (2023). Electoral inclusiveness and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. *African Governance and Development Review, 5* (1), 34 - 50.

Adesina, T. (2023). Civil society and electoral transparency in Nigeria. *Journal of Democratic Governance, 18* (4), 147 - 165.

Adeyemi, K., & Ogundele, O. (2022). Crisis communication strategies and organisational reputation recovery: A study of Nigerian corporations. *Journal of Crisis and Risk Communication, 7* (3), 56-74.

Afolabi, O., & Ogunleye, K. (2023). Electoral integrity and public perception: The role of transparency in Nigeria's elections. *Journal of Electoral Studies, 15* (2), 85 - 102.

Akindele, R. & Ayeni, T. (2022). Enhancing stakeholder engagement in Nigeria's electoral process: Lessons and strategies. *African Governance Review, 11* (3), 120 - 134.

Akinwale, A. (2023). Stakeholder engagement in Nigeria's electoral process. *Public Relations Review, 29* (3), 201 - 217.

Aluko, M. (2023). Voter education and electoral participation in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science, 12* (1), 58 - 74.

Asemah, E. S.., Gujbawu, M., Ekhareafo, D. O. & Okpanachi, R. A. (2012). *Research methods and procedures in mass communication*. Great Future Press.

Duruji, M., Agbaje, A., & Omotola, J. (2023). Electoral reforms and the 2023 general elections in Nigeria: A post-mortem. *Journal of African Elections, 22* (1), 45 - 67.

Eze, A., & Agbo, I. (2023). Crisis communication in Nigeria's electoral process. *Journal of Media and Communication, 20* (2), 91 - 109.

Hecht, J. (2023). Image repair in the digital age: Revisiting Benoit's framework. *Journal of Crisis Communication, 10* (2), 112 - 130.

Ibeh, E., & Nwosu, C. (2023). The role of social media in public relations and image building. *Digital Communication Studies, 7* (3), 203 - 220.

Ibrahim, M., & Olawale, S. (2022). Promoting inclusiveness in electoral administration: Challenges and prospects in Nigeria. *Journal of African Electoral Studies, 12* (2), 67 - 83.

Johnson, P. (2023). Reputation management in the digital age: The role of crisis communication. *Global Public Relations Review, 10* (1), 22 - 39.

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 36* (2), 176 - 187.

Nwafor, J., & Emecheta, O. (2023). Public perception of INEC and the 2023 general elections. *Nigerian Journal of Political Analysis, 14* (2), 123 - 140.

Nwosu, I. (2023). Crisis management and reputation repair in Nigerian organisations: The role of public relations. *African Communication Review, 9* (1), 45 - 63.

Obasi, C. (2023). The role of civil society in stakeholder engagement for credible elections in Nigeria. *Journal of Electoral Studies, 8* (1), 34 - 47.

Ojo, T. (2023). Media relations and electoral integrity in Nigeria. *Media and Society Journal, 19* (3), 110 - 128.

Okoro, N., & Ekeanyanwu, N. (2022). Strategic public relations and organisational image management in the digital age. *Journal of Public Relations and Corporate Communication, 15* (2), 98 - 114.

Okoro, N., & Nnamani, R. (2023). Inclusiveness in electoral processes: A Nigerian perspective. *Journal of African Elections, 21* (1), 35 - 50.

Olaniyi, B., & Adebayo, S. (2023). Public relations strategies for enhancing credibility in public institutions. *International Journal of Public Sector Management, 36* (1), 78 - 96.

Oni, A., Adeola, F., & Olaniyi, K. (2023). Voter turnout and democratic consolidation: Post-election reflections on Nigeria's 2023 elections. *Democracy and Development Quarterly, 14* (2), 92 - 104.

Onu, E., & Chukwu, J. (2023). Monitoring and evaluation of public relations campaigns. *Journal of Strategic Communication, 11* (2), 67 - 83.

Valencia, R. (2023). Beyond agenda-setting: A critical analysis of media influence on public opinion. *Media Studies Journal, 14* (3), 87 - 105.

Wimmer, R. D. & Dominick, J. R. (2011). *Mass media research: An introduction* (9th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.