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Perception of Public Relations Officers on Government Public Relations Approaches Towards the Acceptability of COVID 19 Vaccination in Taraba State Nigeria

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Abstract

This study on *Perception of Public Relations Officers on Government Public Relations Approaches towards the Acceptability of Covid 19 Vaccination in Taraba State, Nigeria* sought to determine the level of awareness of public relations approaches used by the government in the campaign for the Covid-19 vaccine acceptance, determine how public relations experts perceive the impact of government public relations approaches in the Covid-19 vaccine campaign, identify the specific challenges faced by public relations experts in the campaign for Covid-19 vaccine and identify public relations strategies that can enhance public trust and engagement in the Covid-19 vaccine campaign in Taraba State. The study employed the survey method of research design with a population of 158. Using purposive sampling method, questionnaire was administered on a sample size of 103 respondents within the study area to elicit primary data. Findings of the study revealed that respondent perceived different public relations approachs used by government isn the campaign for Covid-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State such as information about the disease and the vaccine through mass media, using traditional communication, sponsorship of some programmes/events among others in the campaign for

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the Covid-19 acceptance respectively. The study also found that the public relations approaches by government to ensure that Covid-19 vaccination was accepted by people did not impact meaningfully on the people as they were perceived not to have agreed to come out and take the vaccination. The study concluded that the government's adoption of diverse PR strategies, including communication campaigns, media relations efforts, and collaboration with healthcare providers did not improve Covid-19 vaccine acceptance amidst hesitancy and other challenges. Finally, the study recommended among others community engagement through grassroots initiatives, involving local influencers, community leaders and healthcare providers as a way of reducing hesitancy to Covid-19 vaccine among people in Taraba State and Nigeria as a whole.

Keywords: Public Relations, Covid-19 vaccination, Government communication, Mass media

Introduction

COVID-19 is one of the most significant global health and social crises of the 21st century. The virus first appeared in late 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan and quickly became a global threat, affecting all nations. By March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, highlighting its severe impact on global health. As of May 23, 2023, the WHO reported 6,935,889 deaths due to COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2023). The pandemic has also caused unprecedented economic losses for both developed and developing countries (Chiakaan & Idi, 2023).

In the early stages of the pandemic, countries implemented lockdowns, closed borders, suspended social and religious gatherings, and enforced other measures to curb the virus's spread. Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), such as using face masks, maintaining social distancing, and regular hand washing with soap or sanitizer, were crucial in slowing the virus's progression. However, the most effective strategy to reduce mortality and morbidity remains within the capabilities of medical technology, including effective, safe, and accessible vaccines. The Pan American Health Organization (2021) emphasizes that vaccination is a key component in combating COVID-19 (cited in Chiakaan & Idi, 2023). Since the pandemic's onset, scientists and pharmaceutical companies have been racing to develop vaccines to mitigate COVID-19 (Coustasse, Kimble, & Maxik, 2021).

The global COVID-19 vaccination campaign aims to immunize people against the virus to control its spread, reduce severe cases, and restore normalcy. However, most African countries have been slower in their vaccine rollout compared to other regions. The goal is to vaccinate over 60% of the continent's population to achieve herd immunity (Ayenigbara et al., 2021). Vaccination programs in Africa face several challenges, including slow vaccination process initiation, limited funding, vaccine safety concerns, storage and regulatory issues, short vaccine shelf life, difficulty in reaching vulnerable communities, and ongoing conflicts.

Nigeria has a history of vaccine hesitancy, notably the 2003 boycott of the polio vaccination campaign in northern Nigeria (Taylor et al., 2017). This hesitancy contributed to Nigeria being one of the few countries that had not eradicated wild poliomyelitis by 2020. Scholars argue that a primary reason for vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria, particularly concerning polio and COVID-19, is the widespread distrust of the government, which is often seen as the main proponent of vaccination campaigns (Ogundele & Ogundele, 2020; Matos, Gonçalves & Couto, 2022; Afolabi & Ilesanmi, 2021; Kapp, 2004).

Taraba State, located in northeastern Nigeria, faces unique challenges in its vaccination efforts. The state is characterized by a diverse population with varying beliefs and practices, which can influence health behaviors and vaccine acceptance. Additionally, logistical challenges such as difficult terrain and limited healthcare infrastructure further complicate vaccination campaigns. Understanding the local context and the specific barriers faced in Taraba State is crucial for tailoring effective public health strategies.

Despite the seeming subsidence of COVID-19, vaccination remains highly recommended by public authorities globally. However, in Nigeria, most especially Taraba State, a lack of public trust could be a significant factor in the underwhelming success of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, compounded by issues of government credibility (Sato, 2022). Effective communication by the government is crucial to securing the health and well-being of its citizens. Public relations strategies play a vital role in disseminating accurate information, debunking myths, addressing misconceptions, and building public trust to encourage vaccine acceptance.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the perception of public relations experts on government public relations approaches toward the acceptability of COVID-19 vaccination in Taraba State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Research Problem

Vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria poses a substantial challenge to the success of vaccination campaigns, influenced by factors such as safety concerns, uncertainties about vaccine efficacy, and deeply rooted traditional beliefs. Notably, historical events like the 2003 polio vaccine boycott in northern Nigeria have ingrained a persistent reluctance towards vaccination, perpetuating struggles with diseases such as polio (Jegede, 2007). The literature highlights a significant gap in understanding the underlying causes of this hesitancy, which extends beyond polio to include recent resistance to COVID-19 vaccination (Solanke et al., 2021). A critical driver identified by scholars is the widespread distrust of government entities, particularly those advocating for vaccination (Mustapha et al., 2021).

Despite various governmental efforts, recent studies indicate that resistance to COVID-19 vaccination remains prevalent, underscoring the need for more effective communication strategies (Yahya, 2021). This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the perspectives of public relations experts on the governmental strategies aimed at enhancing vaccine acceptance in Taraba State, Nigeria. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for developing more targeted and effective public health communication strategies to overcome vaccine hesitancy.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the perception of public relations experts on Government public relations approaches towards the acceptability of COVID-19 vaccination in Taraba State, Nigeria. However, the specific objectives of the study are:

i. To determine the level of awareness of public relations experts about the public relations approaches used by the government in the campaign for the COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State;

ii. To identify the perceived public relations approaches used in the campaign for the COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State;

iii. To determine the perception of public relations experts on the way and manner public relations was used in the campaign for COVID-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State.

iv. To find out the perception of public relations experts on the impact of public relations approaches used by government in the campaign for COVID-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study

i. What is the level of awareness of public relations experts about the public relations approaches used by the government in the campaign for the COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State?
ii. What are the public relations experts perceived public relations approaches used in the campaign for the COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State?
iii. What is the perception of public relations experts on the way and manner public relations was used in the campaign for COVID-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State?

What is the perception of public relations experts on the impact of public relations approaches used by government in the campaign for COVID-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State?

Theoretical Framework

Perception Theory

The perception theory was propounded in 1964 by G.A Steiner and Berelson. They (Steiner and Berelson, 1964) defines perception as a "complex process by which people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world" perception can be influenced by an individual past experience, societal and family values, either way, stimuli are sensed differently by people.

Perception can be influenced in two different ways: structural and functional. Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso. (2008) structural influence refers to how sensory stimuli are perceived physically. As the name states, it is coordinated and usually structured. Functional influence is based on personal conviction (which is in most cases subjective), and in all cases deals with psychological factors that affect our perception. These two influences on perception (structural and functional) are related in the sense that the structural influence poses as a platform for functional influence.

There is tendency for individual to have a varying perception based on circumstances encountered, environment, sex, and lifestyle and so on. This tendency is termed *selective perception.* For this reason, messages are not interpreted in the same manner by individuals. This suggests that mass communication goes beyond just hitting a target with an arrow. The messages can reach the receiver and still fail to accomplish its purpose because its interpretation is at the mercy of the receiver. According to Severin and Tankard (2001), the process of receiving and interpreting information is called decoding. The process involves perception or the taking of stimuli through the senses and the subsequent processing of that information. The other processes similar to selective perception are: selective exposure, selective attention and selective retention.

Selective exposure is a notion built on Festinger 's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance which states that in order to reduce dissonance after making a particular decisions; people seek our information that supports their course of action. This mostly applies in cases where an individual has to take a decision which outcome he will live with for a long time like voting for a presidential candidate. Due to the arrays of personality running, an electorate tries to decide on which candidate he feels will govern well. When the decision is finally made, the vote is casted and par adventure the desired candidate wins, the electorates tries to keep finding reasons throughout the tenure that will help convince him that he made the right decision. It also applies the other way round. People expose themselves to information that is an agreement with their attitude.

Selective attention on the hand is the tendency to give audience to pay attention to those parts of a message that suits held beliefs, customs and norms. Selective retention is the inclination to memorize an aspect of information due to its relevance and to recall the information as at when needed.

Selection retention is the tendency for the recall of information to be initiated by wants, attitudes needs and other psychological factors. The selective process is often thought of as a four-ring defence mechanism with selective exposure at the fore front with others following sequentially. The defence works in a way that: if a person expects a mix of information (selective exposure), he can pay selective attention to only the parts of the message that are agreeable. If not, the person can then exercise selective perception in decoding the message. If this also fails, the person can then exercise selective retention by letting go of the irrelevant or contrary bits of information.

Perception influences decision. It is a dynamic defence that filters what is acceptable and what is not to individuals, which in this case are the public. The manner in which the public perceive media content/messages determine what they make of the messages; these stresses the major tenets of the perception theory that audience of the mass media are heterogeneous in terms of demographics, and even mentality which is as reaction on integration of many factors like culture, experience, new knowledge and so on.

The perception theory is relevant to this research work based on the assumption that the perception process is influenced by the characteristics of a stimulus, for example, the nature and content of the media. Perception varies from one individual to another. In a different way, the public relations experts can different perceptions.

Social Judgement Theory

Carolyn Sherif, Muzafer Sherif and Carl Hovland proposed the social judgment theory (SJT) as a self-persuasion theory. It is defined as the evaluation and perception of an idea based on current attitudes (Asemah, Nwanmmuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). According to this theory, an individual weighs each new idea and compares it to his or her current point of view to determine where it should be placed on the mental attitude scale. The subconscious sorting out of ideas that occur at the moment of perception is known as SJT. Human judgment is studied using the framework of social judgment theory. It's a meta-theory that guides research into cognitive perspective, or how you see the world.

Attitude change is the fundamental objective of persuasive communication. SJT seeks to specify the conditions under which this change takes place and predict the direction and extent of the attitude change, while attempting to explain how likely a person might be to change their opinion, the probable direction of that change, their tolerance toward the opinion of others, and their level of commitment to their position. The SJT researchers claimed expectations regarding attitude change could be based on the message receiver's level of involvement, the structure of the stimulus (and how many alternatives it allows), and the value (credibility) of the source.

SJT arose from social psychology and was based on laboratory findings resulting from experiments. These experiments studied the mental assessment of physical objects, referred to at the time as psychophysical research. Subjects were asked to compare some aspect of an object, such as weight or color, to another, different object. The researchers discovered that, when a standard was provided for comparison, the participants categorized the

objects relative to the aspects of the standard. SJT focuses the conceptual structure of the framework and traces its development from the roots in Brunswik's probabilistic functionalism to its present form. For example, if a very heavy object was used as the standard in assessing weight, then the other objects would be judged to be relatively lighter than if a very light object was used as the standard. The standard is referred to as an "anchor". This work involving physical objects was applied to pyschosocial work, in which a participant's limits of acceptability on social issues are studied. Social issues include areas such as religion and politics.

The traditional view of attitude neglects an individual's emotional and motivational influences as well as the social context in which the attitude(s) are formed. Meaning an individual is more likely to assume a speaker with authority will be informative, truthful, relevant, and clear. Wyer and Gruenfeld (2015) noted that much of our theoretical and empirical knowledge about social information processing has been obtained under laboratory conditions that only faintly resemble the social situations in which information is usually acquired in everyday life.

To change an attitude, first we must understand the audience's attitudes. Then we will see how it relates to the listeners' judgments of the persuasive messages. It is also essential to judge how close or far away one's position is. The next step is to shift one's position in response to the argument made. An individual adjusts an attitude once he or she has judged a new position to be in his or her latitude of acceptance. If someone judges that message to be in his or her latitude of rejection, they will also adjust their attitude, but in the opposite direction from what they think the speaker is advocating.

Sometimes, an attitude change may be incidental. In the boomerang effect, an attitude changes in the opposite direction from what the message advocates—the listener is driven away from, rather than drawn to, an idea. This explains why oftentimes fear appeals used in advertising do not work on the audience. As the threat perceived by the audience increases and the capacity to produce the desired effect is low, people will tend to do the opposite of what is advocated. Attitude change can also be influenced by immediate social environment. In the interpersonal domain, people tend to shift their attitudes to align with those of their significant others. The general picture of social influence thus remains one of conformity and alignment attitudes (Wyer and Gruenfeld, 2015). A major implication of social judgment theory is that persuasion is difficult to accomplish. Successful persuasive

messages are those that are targeted to the receiver's latitude of acceptance and discrepant from the anchor position, so that the incoming information cannot be assimilated or contrasted. This suggests that even successful attempts at persuasion will yield only small changes in attitude. SJT also suggests persuasion can occur over time with multiple messages. The theory is relevant to this study as it explains that social judgment of COVID-19 vaccination could be determined by public relations campaigns and messages of the virus and its vaccination.

Jefkins Transfer Model

The Jefkins Transfer Model provides a theoretical framework for understanding how communication can influence attitudes and behaviors (Jefkins, 1984). Developed by J. F. Jefkins, this model emphasizes the importance of effective communication in transferring messages from sender to receiver, with the goal of achieving a desired response. In the context of the study on governmental strategies to improve vaccine acceptance in Taraba State, Nigeria, the Jefkins Transfer Model can offer valuable insights into how public relations experts perceive and evaluate the effectiveness of government communication strategies in promoting vaccine acceptance.

Key Components of the Jefkins Transfer Model

1. **Sender:** In the context of the study, the sender represents the Nigerian government or its representatives responsible for crafting and disseminating communication strategies related to COVID-19 vaccination. This includes government agencies, health authorities, and public relations professionals involved in developing and implementing vaccination campaigns.
2. **Message:** The message refers to the content of communication aimed at promoting vaccine acceptance. This may include information about the safety and efficacy of vaccines, the importance of vaccination in controlling the spread of COVID-19, and details about vaccination centers and procedures. The message also encompasses the tone, language, and framing used in communication materials.
3. **Medium:** The medium represents the channels through which the message is communicated to the target audience. This may include traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers, as well as digital channels such as social media, websites, and mobile applications. Public relations experts may assess the

effectiveness of different communication channels in reaching and engaging with the diverse population of Taraba State.

4. **Receiver:** The receiver comprises the audience or target population in Taraba State who are the intended recipients of government communication about COVID-19 vaccination. This includes residents of urban and rural areas, individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds, and various demographic groups. Public relations experts may consider the perceptions, attitudes, and information needs of different segments of the population when evaluating the impact of communication strategies.

Application of the Jefkins Transfer Model to the Study

In the study on governmental strategies to improve vaccine acceptance in Taraba State, Nigeria, the Jefkins Transfer Model can guide the analysis of public relations officers perspectives on communication efforts by the government. Officers may assess the effectiveness of government messages in reaching the target audience, conveying accurate information about COVID-19 vaccines, and addressing concerns or misconceptions. They may also evaluate the choice of communication channels and mediums used by the government, considering their reach, accessibility, and engagement potential.

Furthermore, the Jefkins Transfer Model can help identify potential barriers to effective communication and suggest strategies for enhancing message clarity, credibility, and persuasiveness. For example, officerd may recommend the use of culturally appropriate language, visuals, and narratives to resonate with diverse communities in Taraba State. They may also advocate for transparent and two-way communication approaches that prioritize listening to public concerns and feedback.

By applying the Jefkins Transfer Model, the study can gain a deeper understanding of how communication strategies shape perceptions and behaviors related to COVID-19 vaccination in Taraba State. This theoretical framework provides a systematic approach for analyzing the complexities of communication processes and informing evidence-based recommendations for improving vaccine acceptance through public relations efforts.

Table 1. Respondents' Gender Distribution

Variable	Parameter	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	53	54%
	Female	45	46%
	Total	98	100%
Age Range	20-30	23	23%
	31-40	38	40%
	41-50	22	22%
	51-60	15	15%
	61 and Above	0	0%
	Total	98	100%
Educational Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	74	76%
	Master's Degree	17	17%
	Ph.D/Doctorate	0	0%
	Others	7	7%
	Total	**98**	**100%**
Occupation	Civil Servant	91	93%
	Business Man/Woman	5	5%
	Student	2	2%
	Unemployed	0	0%
	Total	98	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 1 shows that 54% of respondents were males, while 46% were females. This distribution indicates a slightly higher male participation in the survey. This gender balance is relatively even, though the higher proportion of males might reflect broader societal patterns or differences in engagement. Fundamentally, data collected here show that data were collected from both male and female respondents.

Result on Table 1 indicates that the majority of respondents (40%) were aged between 31 and 40 years. The age distribution shows a strong representation of individuals in their prime working years, which is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of PR strategies. The absence of respondents aged 61 and above highlights a potential gap in reaching older populations, who may have different communication needs and preferences.

Also, Table 1 reveals that 76% of respondents held a Bachelor's degree, with 17% holding a Master's degree. No respondents had a Ph.D., and 7% had other qualifications. This indicates a well-educated respondent group, which can influence their understanding and evaluation of PR strategies. The high level of education among participants suggests

they may be better equipped to critically assess and engage with health communication initiatives.

Data on the Table 1 also shows that 93% of respondents were civil servants. The minimal representation of business persons, students, and the unemployed suggests that the survey predominantly captured views from individuals engaged in public service roles. This occupational bias may affect the generalizability of the findings, as civil servants might have specific perspectives on government PR strategies that differ from those of other occupational groups.

Table 2. Level of Respondents awareness about the public relations approaches used by government in the campaign for Covid-19 Vaccine acceptance in Taraba State

Variables	**Frequency**	**Percentages**
High	48	49%
Moderate	40	41%
Low	10	10%
I am not Aware	0	0
Total	**98**	**100**

Source Filed Survey, 2024

Table 2 shows that almost half of the respondents (49%) have a high level of awareness about the public relations approaches used by the government in the Covid-19 vaccine campaign. Meanwhile, 41% of the respondents have a moderate level of awareness, 10% have a low level of awareness. Data collected here importantly show a positive trend in the awareness level of respondents concerning use of public relations approaches by government in the campaign for COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State.

Table 3: Perceived public relations approaches used by government in the campaign for Covid-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State.

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
Information about the disease and the vaccine through mass media of radio, television, newspaper, magazines, billboards and social media	36	37%
Educating and persuading people through town hall meetings, traditional leaders, religious leaders and other stake holders	18	18%
Traditional Communication involving town criers and use of local languages	12	12%
Sponsorship of some programmes/events or artists to convince people to accept the vaccine	20	20%
Involving some public relations experts in the campaign for the Covid-19 vaccine	12	12%
Total	**98**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Data is Table 3 is concerned about what respondents perceived as the public relations approached used by governments in the campaign for Covid-19 vaccination acceptances in Taraba State. Data collected in this regard have shown that 36(37%) of the sampled respondents identified information about the disease and the vaccine through mass media of radio, television, newspaper, magazine, bill boards and social media, 18(18%) identified that educating and persuading people through town hall meetings, traditional leaders, religious leaders and other stake holders, 12(12%) identified traditional communication involving town criers and use of local languages, 20(20%) identified sponsorship of some programmes/events or artists to convince people to accept the vaccine while 12(12%) identified involving some public relations experts in the campaign for the Covid-19 acceptance. The implication of data collected here is that different public relations approaches were employed by government in the campaign for Covid-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State.

Table 4: Perception about the way and manner public relations was used by government in the campaign for Covid-19 acceptance in Taraba State.

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
Properly and effective used	24	25%
Improperly and ineffectively used	71	72%
Not used at all	03	03%
Total	**98**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Data in Table 4 show that 24(25%) of the sampled respondents viewed that government properly and effectively used public relations in the campaign for Covid-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State, 71(72%) held that public relations approaches were improperly and ineffectively used by government while 03(03%) believed that public relations approaches were not used at all by government in the fight against Covid-19 acceptance in Taraba State. Importantly, data collected in Table 4 have revealed that even though government used public relations, it was not properly and effectively used in the campaign for Covid-19 acceptance in Taraba State.

Table 5: Perceived effect of Public Relations approaches by Government on campaign for Covid-19 vaccination acceptance in Taraba State.

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
The vaccine has been accepted in Taraba State.	16	16%
The vaccine has not been accepted in Taraba State.	48	49%
Only few people have agreed to take the Covid-19 vaccine.	24	24%
No one agreed to take the Covid-19 vaccine.	09	10%
Total	**98**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Data in Table 5 show that 16(16%) of the sampled respondents are of the view that the vaccine has been accepted in Taraba State, 48(49%) opine that the vaccine has not been accepted in Taraba State, 24(24%) held that only few people have agreed to take the Covid-19 vaccine while 09(09%) believed that no single person have agreed to take the Covid-19 vaccine in Taraba State. This shows that the public relations approaches by government to

ensure that Covid-19 vaccination was accepted by people did not impact meaningfully on the people as they are perceived not to have agreed to come and take the vaccination.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the survey conducted in Taraba State, Nigeria, provide valuable insights into the public relations (PR) approaches employed by the government in promoting the acceptability of the Covid-19 vaccine. In the wake of the pandemic, effective communication strategies are crucial for building public trust, addressing concerns, and encouraging vaccine uptake. This discussion will delve into the survey results, exploring the perceived effectiveness of PR approaches, challenges faced by PR experts, and actionable strategies to improve public trust and engagement in the Covid-19 vaccine campaign.

Firstly, the finding from the study reveals that communication campaigns through radio, TV, and social media were widely adopted strategies. According to Table 2, the majority of respondents show a positive trend in the awareness level of respondents concerning use of public relations approaches by government in the campaign for COVID-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State. This aligns with scholarly recommendations emphasizing the importance of utilizing multiple media channels for effective health communication campaigns (Nabi et al., 2018). In their study, Nabi et al. found that leveraging diverse media platforms can help reach a broader audience and disseminate information effectively, which is particularly crucial in the context of vaccine promotion during a public health crisis. Also, a study by Rosenfeld (2014) presents effective steps that will ensure success in a public relations campaign. Rosenfeld revealed that depending on the audience and their locations, delivering these key messages can be achieved through newspapers or magazines editorial articles, customer (graduates') testimonials, television, radio, press interviews, and events like convocation ceremony, exhibitions, inaugural lectures, etc. This is so because selecting more than one communication vehicle appeal to a wider audience.

Incidentally, findings also revealed that respondents were not only aware of the public relations approaches by government in the campaign for COVID-19 vaccine acceptance but also identified that different public relations approaches were employed by government in the campaign for Covid-19 vaccine acceptance in Taraba State. The was the

submission of respondents in Table 3 who identified information about the disease and the vaccine through mass media of radio, television, newspaper, magazine, bill boards and social media (37%), educating and persuading people through town hall meetings, traditional leaders, religious leaders and other stake holders (18%), using traditional communication involving town criers and use of local languages (12%), sponsorship of some programmes/events or artists to convince people to accept the vaccine (20%) and involving some public relations experts in the campaign for the Covid-19 acceptance (12%). This finding is consistent with research by Wakefield et al. (2010), who highlight the impact of strategic communication in shaping public perceptions and behaviors related to health interventions. Wakefield et al. argue that strategic communication, including corporate advertising and press releases, can play a significant role in influencing public attitudes and encouraging desired health behaviors.

Similarly, Belch and Belch (2001) echoed that public relations uses a variety of tools including special publications, participation in community activities, fund-raising, and sponsorships of special events, advertising and public affairs activities to enhance an organizational image. Well et al., (2005) also described categories of public relations tools and stressed that the tools are best suited to create awareness of an organization and its services depending on the amount of control the company has in its communication. The tools are described as controlled (e.g. House ads, Public service ads, Publications, Photographs, Displays, exhibits), uncontrolled (e.g. News release, Press conferences, Talk and interview shows, Public service announcements) and semi-controlled (e.g. Electronic communication (web sites, chat rooms), Special events and sponsorship, Word of mouth).

Furthermore, finding in Table 4 shows that even though government used public relations, it was not properly and effectively used in the campaign for Covid-19 acceptance in Taraba State. This was the submission of majority of the respondents 71(72%) who held that public relations approaches were improperly and ineffectively used by government. This result conform to the submission of Rosenfeld (2014) who reported that the failure of any public relations campaign may be lack of effective steps that will ensure success in a campaign. Public relations strategies play a vital role in disseminating accurate information, debunking myths, addressing misconceptions, and building public trust to encourage vaccine acceptance. Effective public relations require a knowledge, based on analysis and understanding of all the factors that influence public attitudes toward an organisation or a course (Yahya, 2021).

This finding corroborate with the Jefkins Transfer Model which was adopted by the study. The theory emphasizes the importance of effective communication in transferring messages from sender to receiver, with the goal of achieving a desired response. In this regard, therefore, public relations effort must work towards gaining valuable insights and evaluate the effectiveness of government communication strategies in promoting vaccine acceptance.

Significantly, finding also revealed that the public relations approaches by government to ensure that Covid-19 vaccination was accepted by people did not impact meaningfully on the people as they are perceived not to have agreed to come and take the vaccination. This was affirmed by data in Table 5 where respondents (49%) opine that the vaccine has not been accepted in Taraba State and 24% of the respondents held that only few people have agreed to take the Covid-19 vaccine. This finding is corroborate the study of Taylor et al. (2017) who found that Nigeria has a history of vaccine hesitancy, notably the 2003 boycott of the polio vaccination campaign in northern Nigeria. This hesitancy contributed to Nigeria being one of the few countries that had not eradicated wild poliomyelitis by 2020. Also, scholars such Ogundele and Ogundele (2020); Matos et al. (2022); Afolabi and Ilesanmi (2021); and Kapp (2004) in their separate studies argue that a primary reason for vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria, particularly concerning polio and COVID-19, is the widespread distrust of the government, which is often seen as the main proponent of vaccination campaigns.

Similarly, the finding affirmed with the study of Ayenigbara et al. (2021) who reported that most African countries have been slower in their vaccine rollout compared to other regions. Vaccination programs in Africa face several challenges, including slow vaccination process initiation, limited funding, vaccine safety concerns, storage and regulatory issues, short vaccine shelf life, difficulty in reaching vulnerable communities, and ongoing conflicts (Ayenigbara et al., 2021). According to a study by Ogunleye et al. (2021), vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria is influenced by a combination of misinformation and distrust. Social media platforms have been particularly instrumental in spreading both accurate information and misinformation about the vaccine. Many Nigerians have been exposed to conspiracy theories suggesting that the vaccine could alter DNA, contain microchips, or cause severe health issues. Such misinformation has significantly contributed to vaccine. Furthermore, cultural beliefs and practices also play a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards the COVID-19 vaccine. In some Nigerian communities, traditional medicine is

highly trusted, and there is skepticism towards Western medicine, including vaccines. Studies by Fadeyi et al. (2021) indicate that some Nigerians prefer traditional remedies and are wary of modern medical interventions.

Trust in government and healthcare institutions is another critical factor influencing vaccine attitudes. Historical experiences with government initiatives and healthcare services have left some Nigerians distrustful. A survey by the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC, 2021) found that past incidents of corruption, mismanagement, and inadequate healthcare services have led to a pervasive lack of trust. This distrust is exacerbated by the perception that government officials and elites received preferential treatment during the initial vaccine rollout, leading to further skepticism among the general populace; hesitancy, hence the need for effective public relations approaches by government to ensure that Covid-19 vaccination was accepted by people.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings from the survey in Taraba State underscore the importance of strategic public relations (PR) approaches in promoting the Covid-19 vaccine campaign. The government's adoption of diverse PR strategies, including communication campaigns, media relations efforts, and collaboration with healthcare providers, demonstrates a proactive effort to engage with the public and address concerns. Despite challenges such as vaccine hesitancy, limited access to information, and resource constraints, public relations experts perceive these efforts positively, acknowledging their role in raising awareness and improving public trust. Moving forward, targeted interventions and sustained efforts are needed to overcome these challenges and enhance vaccine acceptance. Strengthening communication efforts, enhancing community engagement, advocating for increased resources, and implementing tailored interventions to address vaccine hesitancy are recommended strategies. By addressing these challenges and leveraging effective PR approaches, stakeholders can improve vaccine acceptance and contribute to controlling the Covid-19 pandemic in Taraba State. Overall, strategic PR efforts play a crucial role in fostering public trust and engagement in the Covid-19 vaccine campaign, ultimately contributing to the protection of public health and well-being.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:

1. Strengthen communication efforts by utilizing diverse media channels and ensuring transparent and regular updates on vaccine safety and efficacy.
2. Enhance community engagement through grassroots initiatives, involving local influencers, community leaders, and healthcare providers.
3. Advocate for increased resources and funding to support comprehensive PR campaigns, including investment in communication infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives.
4. Implement targeted interventions to address vaccine hesitancy and skepticism, tailoring messages to address specific concerns and misconceptions among different population groups.

Foster partnership and collaboration between government agencies, healthcare providers, community organizations, and other stakeholders to create a coordinated and effective approach to promoting vaccine acceptance and combating the Covid-19 pandemic.

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