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**PUBLIC RELATIONS AND POWER RELATIONS MANAGEMENT
WITH PESO INTEGRATED MEDIA MODEL IN THE CASE OF MTN
NIGERIA SIM REGISTRATION CRISIS**

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SECTION 1:
PUBLIC RELATIONS AND
POWER RELATIONS



PUBLIC RELATIONS AND POWER RELATIONS MANAGEMENT WITH *PESO INTEGRATED MEDIA MODEL* IN THE CASE OF MTN NIGERIA SIM REGISTRATION CRISIS

Oludare Ebenezer OGUNYOMBO



Introduction

In a crisis, power relations become an important component of resolution. For multi-national organisations that operate in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious or highly secular society, crisis management usually takes a multi-dimensional approach. It would not be out of place to agree that in a multi-faceted society like Nigeria, the public relations professional handling such a crisis must be vast, versed and nimble in making recommendations for intervention vis-à-vis strategically executing such recommendations to achieve the desired objectives and goals.

According to IAC (2020), “Power relations are the interactions between different groups in a society. Power relations are the ability of one group or a person to control others, and they exist at all levels of society”. Further operationalising the concept of power relations, Basden (n.d) explained that:

Power relations are relationships in which one person has social-formative power over another, and can get the other person to do what they wish (whether

by compelling obedience or in some less compulsive and even more subtle way). Relationships are the generated objects that result from social functioning. Power relationships are such social objects in which power is operative by the nature of the relationship; usually, this combines a measure of authority with the formative ability to have a desired effect on the other person.

Basden's description of power relations typifies what a public relations expert desires to achieve when handling a crisis. Since power relationships as a social object combine a measure of authority with the formative ability to have a desired effect on the other person, the ultimate goal of the strategic engagement of a public relations professional in crisis management is to influence the party or parties to achieve a positive effect in line with the set objective for such an engagement, which often is attaining an amicable resolution. Hallan (cited in Heath, 2013) agreed with this assertion in the classification of the seven paradigmatic models of processes presently used in public relations practice. The sixth category of the classification is the *social problems paradigm* which focuses on "public relations' response to political or sociological problems and/or opportunities and how practitioners deal with power relationships in society" (Heath, 2013, p.70).

All societies have power relations. Power relations occur in interpersonal interactions, within a group, and at greater sizes. They may also be connected to things like gender, social status, and political affiliation. The likelihood of one group controlling another increases if several groups coexist. However, there are many different ways that a group might influence others. A group may occasionally exercise power in an unclear manner, failing to explicitly demonstrate its dominance over a subordinate group or group (Reference, 2020). Essien (2021) agreed that "power relations refers to relationships in which one person has social-formative power over another, and is able to get the other person to do what they wish whether by compelling obedience or in some less compulsive and even a more subtle way". Notably, within an organisation, power relations impact both initial access and continued access in the context of what is being sought after. Most time, the more powerful the organizations, corporations, government agencies and higher levels of state and federal government, the more difficult it is to access them when there is a need for discussion (Manning, 2005).

These dynamics are what a public relations expert must fully understand, particularly when handling a crisis. In the case of MTN Nigeria, the crisis that followed the imposition of the SIM registration fine on the company by the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) and the dynamics of the power relationship that existed provide a good case study of public relations and crisis management in Nigeria.

MTN Nigeria SIM Registration Fine- The Issues

The advent of mobile telephony brought diversity into the socio-economic activities of Nigerians. In terms of employment generation, there has been an expanded avenue for startups and growing businesses. Samaila (2013) agreed that the increased teledensity created by the GSM led to job creation with the upspring of many "umbrella entrepreneurs" (i.e. kiosks owners) who sell SIM cards and call cards across the nooks and crannies of the country. Unfortunately, the steady growth noticed in the telecommunications sector has not gone without some challenges.

Aside from the task of ensuring quality service control, there are challenges of telecoms-related crimes. Kidnappers and terrorists like Boko Haram have consistently used GSM lines to track their victims and send criminal videos online. To curb this criminal trend in the use of telecoms infrastructure and services, the federal government of Nigeria directed that the various service providers must capture the biometric data of all telecoms subscribers. The Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC), based on the recommendations from the Office of the National Security Adviser gave the directive in 2008. (Odunsi, 2015). Eventually, the process was launched in 2010 and to serve as a deterrent, a sum of N200,000.00 was agreed as the fine to be paid on each unregistered GSM line at the expiration of the deadline (The Report, 2016).

As of 2013 and months after the deadline for the SIM registration exercise, the telecom operators had not fully complied. Consequently, a combined fine of N53.8 million was imposed on the four mobile network operators (MNOs). MTN Nigeria received the highest fine of N29.2 million based on 146 pre-registered SIM cards that were found on its network at a fine of N200, 000 per user, based on the Telephone Subscribers Regulation (TSR) agreement (Oluoch & Motsoeneng, 2015).

Unfortunately, further development in June 2015, indicated that another 38.87 million users have not been adequately registered as directed by the NCC. Another round of registration was ordered, but this time with more stringent measures. An ultimatum of August 31, 2015, was given for all MNOs to comply. By early September 2015, another N120 million fine was imposed on the mobile network operators (MNOs) for failing to comply, with MTN Nigeria expectedly, having the largest percentage of the fine. However, the inability of security agencies to uncover the identity of the kidnappers of a former Federal Minister of Nigeria, Chief Olu Falae on his farm on September 21, 2015, became the last straw that broke the camel's back. Security investigations revealed that the kidnappers used an unregistered MTN SIM card because MTN Nigeria was unable to provide the data of the SIM card owner (Oluoch & Motsoeneng, 2015).

Disappointed at the negligence of MTN Nigeria on the SIM registration processes, the NCC on Monday, October 26, 2015, announced a fine of N1.4 trillion (US\$5.2 billion) to be paid by MTN Nigeria. The fine was for the 5.2 million improperly/unregistered subscribers found on the MTN network despite the twelve months extension. Other matters brought against MTN Nigeria by the NCC were the refusal of the company to give full access to its backend to ascertain compliance with the SIM registration exercise; the company's nonchalant attitude to attending NCC meetings in which it sends "low cadre" staff; partial attempt to bar unregistered SIM cards; and persistent violations of NCC directives. (Adepetun & Nelson, 2015; Odunsi, 2015; Opeyemi, 2015)

By the fine, MTN Nigeria became the telecommunications company with the largest single fine as of 2015. The others before them were Intel fined US\$1.45 billion in 2009 by the European Union for breaking competition laws and SIEMENS AG fined US\$1.6 billion by the United States and German government for bribing government officials (Plunkett, 2014).

The sequence of events that followed the imposition of the fine on MTN Nigeria depicted all the dynamics of power relations required to pull out an organisation in crisis. Analysing the political economy of the situation, it can be concluded that MTN Nigeria and its public

relations team would have a lot to deal with in the context of the crisis. Such political economy approaches include political dynamics to understand legislative politics, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, fiscal and monetary policies, international relations, ethnic conflict, decentralization and democratization (Acosta & Pettit, 2013); all of which transpired in the MTN Nigeria SIM registration fine case at one point or the other.

The immediate economic power effect took an international dimension with a drop in MTN Group shares at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) in South Africa. The next was a political move by MTN through a letter dated November 2, 2015, in which the Company admitted guilt and pleaded for leniency. The Chief Executive Officer of the MTN Group, Mr. Sifiso Dabengwa became the first major casualty as he resigned from his appointment on November 9, 2015, due to what he referred to as “the most unfortunate prevailing circumstances occurring at MTN Nigeria”. MTN's biggest shareholder, Investment Corporation has 16.6% shares and indeed other minor shareholder expressed their regret that MTN seems to have failed to anticipate the fine and take preventative actions (Adeyemi & Nelson, 2015; Odunsi, 2015; Ohuocha & Motsoeneng, 2015).

The situation delved into further political bereavement when the Nigerian Governors Forum (a body comprising the 36 state Governors in the Federal Republic of Nigeria) on November 19, 2015, declared its support for NCC's move to sanction MTN Nigeria for failing to disconnect the unregistered lines. They insisted that MTN Nigeria must pay the full amount and charged the Federal Government to ensure the full execution of the fine (Ugwuanyi, 2015).

Another twist as the event unfolds was the distrust expressed by shareholders and other stakeholders towards MTN South Africa when the Nigerian Chief Executive Officer, Mr Michael Ikpoki and the Head of its Regulatory and Corporate Affairs, Mr Akinwale Goodluck were “forced to resign”. The replacement of the CEO by Mr. Ferdi Moolman a non-Nigerian was perceived as a deliberate move by the South African company to reduce the chances of Nigerians in favour of non-Nigerians at the top positions in the company (Van Zyl, 2015; Okunola, 2015). However, because of overtures from MTN Nigeria, the NCC announced a reduction in the fine from \$5.2bn (N1.04trn) to \$3.2bn (N674bn) while it gave a deadline of December 31, 2015, for the payment to be made (Tijani, 2015).

The power tussle later took a legal dimension following the reduction with a class action instituted in a suit at a High Court in Abuja by a group of Nigerians led by a legal practitioner and civil rights activist, Barrister Timipa Okponipere claiming that the NCC erred by reducing the fine. The group asked the court to declare the decision as a breach of the trust of Nigerians (Udo, 2015). In another development, members of the House of Representatives of the Nigeria National Assembly raised concerns about the authority of the Federal government to reduce the fine without recourse to the NCC, the regulatory body that imposed the fine (Ndiomewese, 2016; Opejobi 2016).

Despite the reduction of 25%, MTN Nigeria also challenged and sued the Federal Government and the NCC stating that the fine although reduced, will diminish the profit of the company. The Company claimed that NCC as a regulator, cannot assume all the functions of the state on its own, considering that it made the regulation, prescribed the penalty and imposed the fine, payable to the commission and not to the federal government. MTN also claimed it was not afforded its constitutional right to a fair hearing

before a court of competent jurisdiction and, more importantly, it had not been found guilty of any offence that would warrant it to pay such “an outrageous fine”(Momoh, 2015; Ogbeche, 2016).

While MTN Nigeria's court case was going on, the Federal Government through the Attorney General of the Federation in another suit sought to restrict MTN Nigeria from transferring funds outside the country while the initial suit lasted. The plea of the Federal Government for a Mareva injunction [a request for a court order to freeze the assets of an organisation or individual] was granted on January 12, 2016, but with a caution that the initial suit should be quickly dispensed (“MTN Barred...”, 2016).

Eventually, on January 22, 2016, it was announced that MTN would have until March 18, 2016, to reach an out-of-court settlement with the Federal Government of Nigeria (Lefifi, 2016). On January 26, 2016, the Federal Government of Nigeria gave a condition for an out-of-court settlement to MTN Nigeria. The government requested that MTN Nigeria should withdraw its case against the government from the law court while hoping for President Muhammadu Buhari to approve a new deal for settlement (Amaefule, 2016). In compliance, MTN Nigeria, on February 24, 2016, withdrew the case from the law court and announced the payment of \$250 million (N50 billion) as an advance payment towards a reduced settlement. (“\$3.9bn Fine: MTN Pays”, 2016; “MTN Drops Lawsuit”, 2016; “N780 billion fine: MTN Pays”, 2016).

While many thought that a diplomatic intervention would immediately save the situation, the opposite became the case after the meeting between the President of South Africa, Mr Jacob Zuma and the President of Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari. In a twist of political power relations, the meeting held on March 8, 2016, at the Federal Capital Territory Abuja unwittingly generated some controversies that the media immediately seized to create some sensational reports.

During President Zuma's visit, President Buhari noted that the non-compliance of MTN Nigeria with the NCC directives on SIM registration has contributed to crime, particularly the activities of terrorists in the country. President Buhari expressed his disdain at MTN Nigeria's court suit against the Federal Government rather than seeking further negotiation with the concerned agencies. (Tukur, 2016). The reaction of President Buhari may be seen as an action aimed at enforcing the sovereignty of Nigeria to protect its interest. Abia (2000) noted that “in the contemporary international political system, most of a nation's collective domestic and external goals (national interests) cannot be defended or achieved without influencing the behaviour of other states. This indicates that achievement of national interests is contingent upon the reactions and actions of other nation-states”.

Eventually, on June 10, 2016, MTN Nigeria and the NCC announced a final resolution. The fine was reduced to N330 billion. The reduced amount included the initial payment of N50 billion earlier made by MTN Nigeria to the government while the balance of N280 billion was made in six tranches within three years till May 31, 2019. Other conditions for settlement were: an apology letter from MTN Nigeria to the Federal Government of Nigeria and Nigerians within one month of the execution of the agreement. MTN Nigeria's subscription and compliance with the Code of Corporate Governance for the telecoms industry and MTN Nigeria listing on the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE) as soon as it is commercially and legally possible (Okonjiet *al.*, 2016).

After the resolution, media reports indicated that major stakeholders were satisfied with the outcome of the negotiations. The Chief Executive Officer of MTN Nigeria, Mr. Fred Moolman expressed the “apologies of the company for the series of unfortunate events that led to the imposition of the fine” given the importance and benefits of the ICT industry to all stakeholders and socio-economic growth in Nigeria. The MTN Group Executive Chairman, Mr Phutuma Nhleko “thanked the federal government for the spirit in which the matter was resolved”. Nhleko noted that the negotiation and its outcome are the best for the company, its stakeholders, the federal government and Nigerians, as MTN strengthens its relationship with the federal government and the NCC. The Executive Vice Chairman of the NCC, Prof. Umar Danbatta, also admitted that “the NCC was careful not to take decisions that were likely to cripple the business interest of the operators. The reduction of the fine is also informed by the downturn of the global economy that has affected every sector hence the need to be sensitive and flexible on matters regarding the fine” (Okonji *et al*, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Between October 2015 and June 2016, cumulating nine months, stakeholders of MTN Nigeria and indeed the media were sceptical about what may become the outcome of the crisis. A pilot study conducted by the researcher showed that at some point, there were insinuations that the fine was orchestrated by a group of influential Nigerians to frustrate MTN Nigeria out of doing business in Nigeria. Another thought has it that the fine was a harsh but subtle way of neutralizing MTN Nigeria's dominance of the telecoms industry since the company has over half of the total subscribers in Nigeria. Yet, other indications suggested that the fine was imposed to make MTN Nigeria succumb to the authority of NCC that hitherto has accused MTN Nigeria of insubordination. The dynamics of conversations around the crisis reflect the elements of strong power relations aimed at controlling and influencing either party.

Despite these insinuations, it is of interest that the crisis was resolved without MTN Nigeria closing its business operations in the country. By the media reports, all parties involved were satisfied with the outcome of the resolution. The dynamics of power relations as earlier defined and conceptualized all played out as individual, political, legal, economic, social and legislative interests and power play existed. To manage its reputation and communications during this period, MTN Nigeria employed the services of three public relations consultancy firms in Nigeria. Aside from developing strategic public relations documents for stakeholders' engagement during this period, the pilot study showed that the agencies also used elements of paid media, earned media, shared media and owned media in their various crisis mitigation activities.

Dietrich (2014) articulated these various forms of media intervention as the *PESO* integrated media model for public relations and communication management. While it could be assumed that other factors may be identified in the resolution of the crisis, how the internal communication units of MTN Nigeria and the public relations consultants used the elements of the *PESO* integrated media model to manage communications vis-à-vis the interplay of power relations to advance the interest of MTN Nigeria is the crux of this study.

Objectives of the Study

- i. Examine how the *PESO* integrated media model was applied in managing communications on the MTN Nigeria SIM Registration fine crisis.

- ii. To investigate the extent to which the application of the *PESO* integrated media model influenced communications on the MTN Nigeria SIM registration fine crisis.
- iii. To identify the challenges in the application of the *PESO* integrated media model in managing communications on the MTN Nigeria SIM registration fine crisis.

Public Relations and Power Relations in Context

Communication is a dialogic encounter that involves making meanings, sharing meanings and interpreting meanings. Such engagements are often intertwined within a context. In effect, communication cannot occur outside a context. (Asemah and Obukoadata, 2021). Public relations play a crucial role in deciphering the context in which communication takes place, particularly when power relations are imminent. Power relations often require that a public relations professional is grounded in the thoughts surrounding the context in which the phenomenon in question is created, generated or played out by the power actors. William Nielander and Raymond Miller's 1951 definition of public relations as "the gentle art of letting the other fellow *have your way*" (Turney, 2020), provides a basis for understanding why a public relations professional should be familiar with such requirements of his/her practice.

Emphasising the role of public relations in power relations as established in the foregoing, Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg (2013) referred to David Finn's four realities of the contemporary public relations practice. The first reality is that "resolving conflicts may require modifying many opinions including that held by the public relations consultant and the client". The second reality is that patterns of communication are increasingly revolving around smaller groups while the third reality is the growing increase in the random benefits of public relations activities which are not directly connected to corporate interests. The fourth reality deals with the fact that new methods of research are becoming exceedingly relevant in situations where opinions are spontaneous.

Akinwalere and Oyeniran (2021) noted that in both public and private organisations, public relations requires an amalgamation of specialized skills which makes use of systematic approaches and philosophies that are within the context of creating meanings, such as what happens in a crisis. The existentialists of power relations in such a context cannot be denied by a public relations professional because, at that moment, public relations is needed to protect the institution's reputation while maximising the opportunities to communicate and drive home the desired leadership position of an organisation. In this context, the organisation may be an individual, an organisation, a state or a country. The objective of public relations in this instance is "to achieve true dialogue, consent, mutual understanding and harmony in a complete openness" (p.32).

Where power play exists with a multiplicity of interests, such as what an organisation may experience in a multicultural society, the comprehensive definition proposed by Harlow (cited in Akinwalere and Oyeniran, 2021), may provide a context for engagement. Harlow described public relations as:

A distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps keep management informed on and responsive to public

opinions; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication (p.303)

Operationally, in the context of power relations, what public relations seeks to achieve is in sync with the objectives of the power players. Either in the context of social, economic, political, legal or legislative bickering, the desired result is to advance an interest that, to an extent, would be mutually beneficial to the actors. For instance, within the context of national power and goal achievement, Abia (2000, p.104-105) noted that “the achievement or projection of a nation-state's national interests in the international political system depends upon the actions and behaviour of other nations displayed through various techniques of diplomatic bargaining, ranging from oral efforts at persuasion to use of force”.

Public relations in the context of power relations is to influence. Influence refers to “the ability to get others to act, think or feel as one intends” (Abia, 2000, p.106). Such prospects of influence are very visible in the context of international relations or international diplomacy for which the principles of public relations are highly expectant. Richard Weiner's 1990 definition of public relations as “the activities and attitudes intended to analyse, adjust to, influence and direct the opinion of any group or groups of persons in the interest of any individual, group or institution” (Weiner, 1990), sets this assertion in motion. For instance, Abia (2000, p.109) explained that for nation-states to achieve their national interests, they engage in “various acts or actions towards others, and an act is essentially a form of communication intended to change or sustain the behaviour of those upon whom the acting state is dependent for achieving its national interests”.

Power relations require efficient trend analysis which is of great interest to public relations in whatever context. For instance, governments invest millions of money to gather intelligence reports which help them to strategise in communication and engagements. Multinational organisations, with offices outside their headquarters, are interested in the interplay of power in the host countries of their subsidiaries. Therefore, they invest in trend analysis by professionals who give them reports on the social, economic, political and legislative trends and power play that is of interest and may impact the activities and interests of their subsidiaries. David Finn in 1995 underscored these perspectives on public relations and power relations when he averred that “philosophically, public relations is all about the activities by which an individual or an organisation seeks recognition; presents its interests and perspectives to various audiences and establishes its integrity and credibility” (Dokumentips, n.d). In the context of the expectations from the level of relationship management that is involved, establishing integrity and credibility makes the role of public relations stand out in power relations.

In summary, effective public relations breeds meaningful communication in any context of power relations. Meaningful communication influences and interchange of thoughts, opinions and information that may be crucial in resolving issues, conflicts or crises. It aids attempts towards resolving issues because it serves as an avenue for the exchange of views which are implicitly relevant in the context of the discussion (Abia, 2000).

PESO Integrated Media Model

Dietrich (2014), a public relations and marketing communication specialist, created the *PESO* integrated media paradigm in her book *Spinbucks*. The *PESO* integrated media model is an acronym for the various degrees of media involvement in all aspects of public relations, including crisis management and communication. *PESO* stands for *P- Paid media*; *E - Earned media*; *S- Shared media*; and *O- Owned media*. It is referred to as the four "quadrants" of public relations media by Macnamara, Lwin, Adi, and Zeffass (2016). The need for PR communication measurement and the development of communication technologies are the driving forces behind the *PESO* integrated media model (Iliff, 2014).

According to Dietrich (2017), the *PESO* model demonstrates the interdependence and reliance on the communication activities necessary for a successful digital communications program. By questioning the importance of data in PR communication and the necessity of acquiring new skill sets and competencies in PR communications, Iliff (2014) concurred that these rapid advances have prompted public relations professionals to re-think and reframe how to approach the discipline.

The whole communications strategy of an organization can be significantly influenced by public relations experts that use the *PESO* model. To take advantage of the numerous opportunities offered by the *PESO* model, public relations professionals must move beyond their "media relations -only" mindset and adapt to contemporary communication trends. When communication is done cohesively, what begins as a simple press release to produce industry news can develop into a campaign that reaches the target audience where they are consuming material, at a time that works for them, and in a way that resonates with them ("The *PESO* framework...", 2016). PRA-Public Relations (2015) also stated that:

PESO is an acronym for the big-picture-all-channels-inclusive way of communicating that is truly the only method in which a company, entrepreneur or cause can earn the attention of those stakeholders that matter...If there is a discussion about the intersection of public relations, social media and digital, PESO is a concept that needs to be part of the conversation.

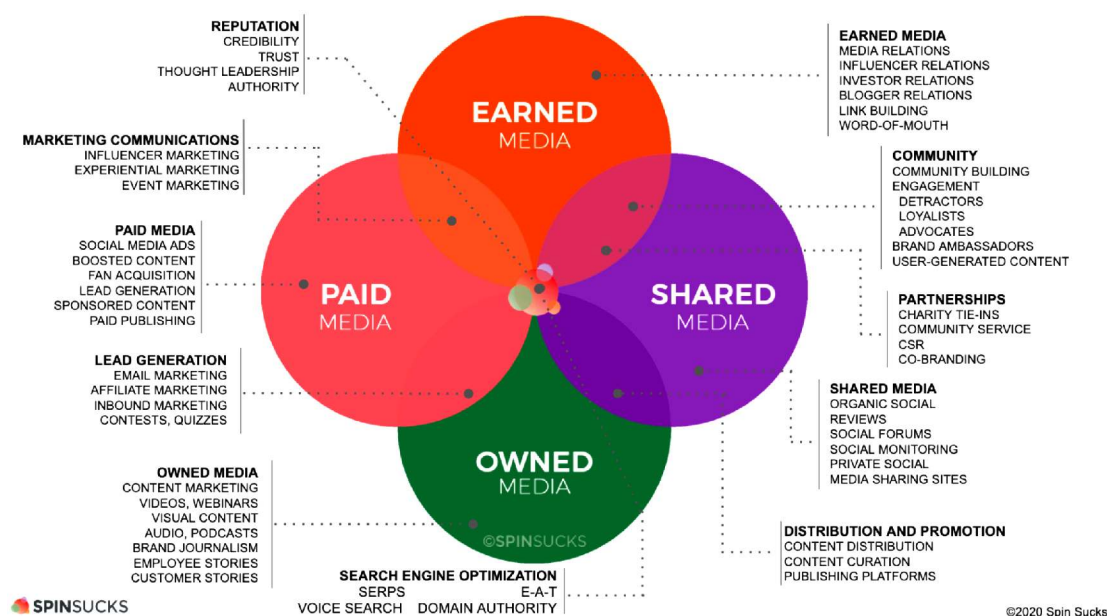


Figure 1: Screen Shot of the *PESO Integrated Media Model* Diagram. Source: Gini Dietrich, Spin Bucks (2020)

Paid Media: Dietrich (2023) described paid media as social media advertising, sponsored content and email marketing and not necessarily the big, fancy commercials and highly creative print advertisements. Robinson (2016) earlier explained that when money is exchanged for the distribution of either an advertisement or content, it is referred to as paid media while Hunt (2016) took it further to include all paid forms of digital advertising, marketing, and public relations contents and includes digital forms of affiliate marketing, paid influencers and paid content promotion, digital press releases and sponsorships. Marx (2016) agreed that paid media is important because it appears effective when searching for new buyers or creating awareness for an idea and it reaches a wider audience.

Earned Media: Dietrich (2023) explained that earned media involves publicity and media relations and stated that “it's getting your name in print. Having a newspaper or trade publication write about you. Appearing on the noon news to talk about your product. Appearing on podcasts. It's what the PR industry is typically known for because it's one of the few tangible things done”. Earned media include online word-of-mouth usually seen in the form of 'viral' tendencies, mentions, shares, reposts, reviews, recommendations or content picked up by third-party sites (Garman, 2023). An earlier description by Sietel (2014) said “Earned media represents the legacy public relations values, which is the “third party endorsement.” Earned media is 'earned' because objective reporters are persuaded to write favourably about an organisation such as the organisation's CSR activities. Earned media combines strong organic rankings on search engines and content distributed by organisations some of which may be achieved based on the cordial relationship an organisation may have established with reporters, editors, bloggers and other neutral reporters who share the organisation's messages through their platforms (Marx 2015).

Shared media: Shared media connotes social media which Dietrich (2023) agreed that is evolving as “organisations have begun to use it as their main source of communications internally and externally. It includes not just social networking, but community, partnerships, distribution, and promotion”. An early description by PRA (2015) explained shared media as “the pass along sharing and commenting upon your message by the community through social channels”. A more vivid analysis of shared media by King (2016) described shared media as a collaborative effort with customers or stakeholders of an organization who are actively commenting as well as taking part in the communities of the organization. In these shared communities, these individuals are openly sharing their opinions and feedback on the subject at hand. These dialogues include both messages from the organization and those of the participants (stakeholders). Shared media gives a great opportunity to interact, learn and forge deeper relationships. Such relationships help in building trust with the people who will advocate on behalf of the organisation. They engage in dialogue and relationship-building by crafting well-written, relevant and tailored content. They unlock significant opportunities and stories by liking, commenting on and sharing posts that are linked to the communication objectives that grow organically (Baduel, 2016).

Owned media: Owned media are contents owned by an organisation that is presented on the organisation's owned medium such as websites and blogs. With owned media,

organisations can control their messaging and tell their own stories in a way that they want them told. In other words, owned media are articles that were produced or commissioned by a company. They are the editorial materials and messages that a company or its public relations professionals create, disseminate, and manage on their own private blog or through other channels (s). By giving potential customers access to a frequently free source of information that is in line with the interests of the business, this type of media enables the company to function as its own publisher and draw in potential customers (Baduel, 2016; Bergen, 2015; Dietrich, 2023& PRA, 2015).

Owned media has emerged as a brand-new area for the profession of public relations, providing an excellent chance for social media-savvy public relations writers to succeed with their strategies. Owned media is a cost-effective communications option because of its adaptability in helping organizations reach specific audiences. An organization can use owned media to tell a variety of narratives and see which ones connect with their audience. An organization can employ a variety of material aimed at addressing diverse audience interests to interact and more fully engage with them because it has total control over the owned media (Dietrich, 2015; King 2015; Sietel, 2014). Building audience trust is the main issue for any organization or public relations specialist employing owned media. If a company's tweet inspires others to join the cause or support the campaign, it has successfully transitioned from owned to earned media, earning it coveted credibility. Turgeon (2023) summed up that "PR and marketing teams can pinpoint their exact messaging, especially when it comes to thought leadership and content focused around corporate social responsibility, to ensure that campaign themes are hit and brand reputation is managed".

To drive credibility with owned media, Bonchek (2014) proposed that the strategy for a PR professional must revolve around the content, community and context. The organisation must create engaging content that is relevant and valuable to the targeted stakeholders, using all available data to personalise the experience for the users. The organisation must be familiar with the community where its target audience connects and engage seamlessly with each other either offline or online. To use owned media in context, the organisation must be able to capture data and turn such data into value for its stakeholders. Along with effectively expressing the organization's messages, these three strategic measures will assist to create a connection that draws prospective customers and clients to what is of interest to the business (Bonchek, 2012).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study. A qualitative case study is a research methodology that aids in the exploration of a phenomenon within a specific context using some data sources. The exploration is done through a variety of lenses to highlight the phenomenon's many features. In a case study, a real-time phenomenon is investigated within its naturally occurring context, keeping in mind that context will affect how something occurs (Rashid, *et al.*, 2019). The MTN Nigeria SIM Registration crisis was chosen as a case study due to the extensive impact which the resolution or otherwise of the case might have had on the socio-economic well-being of over 65 million Nigerians who were subscribers of MTN Nigeria's services at that period. The researcher considered the ripple effect of whatever happens to this significant percentage of the population on the general social, economic and political well-being of the country important, hence the choice of study.

The purposive sampling was used to select the 3 external PR consulting firms and 1 internal PR manager in MTN Nigeria because they were extensively involved in managing the MTN SIM registration crisis. Purposive sampling was also used to select the senior project managers who were directly responsible for handling the crisis within the PR firms that were contracted by MTN Nigeria. According to Talabi *et al* (2016), purposive sampling is the most effective when studying issues involving experts. It is a technique widely used in qualitative research for “the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources that involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest” (Palinkaset *al.*, 2015, p.2).

The key informant interview (KII) protocol was used to gather data from the respondents. According to (Gabor, 2017), the key informant interview is “a method of data collection that involves verbal interactions between a field researcher and a local informant who has specialized knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable or difficult to access (and) defines what is important for the investigator to find out”. The KII was found useful because it helped to gather information from individuals who have in-depth knowledge about the MTN Nigeria SIM registration crisis and are willing to share such knowledge, their opinions, feelings and experiences during the crisis.

The instrument for the key informant interview conducted with the PR Consultants was the interview guide drawn based on the conceptual delineations and metrics for the engagement and measurement of the *PESO integrated media model*. The interview guide had 13 questions, which were designed to address the research objectives of this study. The interviews were conducted at different times with each of the key informants for 4 weeks.

The thematic analysis was used in analysing the data generated from the key informants. Thematic analysis suits questions related to people's experiences or people's views and perceptions and it allows the researcher to group and distil from the texts a list of common themes. It helps identify patterns of meanings across data sets to give expression to the community of voices across the interviewees and provide answers to the research questions being addressed (Aluko, 2017; Meribe & Oke, 2017). First, recordings from the interviews were transcribed for data familiarisation and to get the accurate expressions of the interviewees for coding in developing the themes. This process brought the researcher closer to the data to develop consistent phrases, expressions or ideas that were common among the study interviewees. The responses were further categorised such that two or more themes were aggregated under each research question.

Findings and Discussion

The key informants for the interview were selected from MTN Nigeria Limited and the 3 public relations consulting firms. The average number of years of operation among the four organisations is 16 (as of 2018). The gender distribution of the interviewees was 3 males and 1 female. Their average age was 49.8 years while the average years of work experience as a public relations professional was 17. The interviewees have degrees in history, international relations, economics, business administration and mass communication. They are members of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, the Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria, the Institute of Chartered Economists of Nigeria; Chartered Institute of Marketers, UK. Names of the interviewees were

pseudonymized with four codes viz: **SIM-A**, **SIM-B**, **SIM-C** and **SIM-D**.

Research Objective 1: Application of *PESO* Integrated Media Model in Managing Communications on the MTN Nigeria SIM Registration Fine Crisis.

Concerns for divergent local and international media reportage necessitated the need for an integrated media model.

The first reason for applying the components of the *PESO* integrated media model was the need to address the divergent views expressed in local and international media about the SIM registration issue. For instance, **SIM-A** stated that internationally, there was a measure of objectivity in the coverage as they focused more on what the fine would do to the business, “but locally we did not have that kind of luxury. The local reportage was to kill and was not fair because MTN Nigeria was perceived as a South African company, vis-a-vis the issues about the quality of service. The link with South Africa and the perceived economic hegemony was a challenge because “they (some Nigerians) believe that MTN Nigeria seems to be above the law in its business activities, a perception fueled by the South African roots of the company and the frequent xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in South Africa (at that period). So, we did not get much sympathy in the media locally and that affected a great deal”.

SIM-B agreed that largely, the media reportage victimized MTN Nigeria because “the issues were linked to apartheid, staff treatment and so on. So many negative narratives came up on tax, income etc. Whether it was in deeds or truth, *the reporting of the crisis took a lot of dimensions* and it was spiralling out of control”. **SIM-C** in explaining the power relations noted that “there were many narratives locally and internationally which sent signals about an uncertain environment to do business in Nigeria. The government was driving a narrative that MTN Nigeria had engaged in an activity that led to a breach of security arrangement in the country while MTN Nigeria felt that given their contribution to the Nigerian economy, even where there are breaches, it should have been managed less harshly”.

The sentiments of **SIM-D** reflected the perspective of SIM C. SIM-D alluded to the sensationalism enjoyed by both the local and international media. He stated that “there was a scampering for every strand of information whether true or false at the local level while there was no control on how information was passed. As such, it was a free for all. There was also the issue of 'quiet' apathy for the MTN brand based on the impression that the company lacked empathy and was only about its interest and taking advantage of Nigerians, MTN was perceived as a foreign company that is here to exploit the average Nigerians”. SIM-D thereafter create a scenario of what eventually became the nature of reportage despite the sensational tilt by explaining that “locally it was quite negative due to the sentiments aforementioned. However, on the international scene, the news was more tempered and measured to focus on the effect that the punitive action would have on the company's share profile at the JSE and Global office”.

It can be concluded from the foregoing that the need to harmonise or at least have some control over how information about the fine was being disseminated at the local and international levels to limit misrepresentation and misinformation and handle the social power relations. Social power relations are defined as “the asymmetries between two

actors in their relative ability to exert power (for ends such as resource acquisition, goal achievement, and so on) over others” (Gülgöz, 2015, p.6). There was a need to manage the socio-economic damage of the negative narrations.

***PESO* integrated media model was engaged at the point of stakeholders management planning.**

Due to the divergent narratives, the communication strategy was to align the stakeholders as much as possible through a central source of information across the various media which the components of the *PESO* integrated media model offer. The stakeholder mapping and message mapping afforded MTN Nigeria and its public relations consultants found a basis for applying the model because the communication need of each stratum of the stakeholders is taken care of by one or more elements in each of the components of the *PESO* integrated media model. For instance, **SIM-A** explained that “we felt we needed to be measured in our communication because you cannot be appealing to someone in terms of business and the media, you are saying something entirely different. We needed to maintain a balance between what we were saying in the media and what we were publishing. Therefore, we relied a lot on what we called “third-party advocacy” because we felt at this stage all we needed to concentrate on was to let the government and Nigerians realize the importance of MTN Nigeria (to the people and Nigeria's economy).

The views of **SIM-B** align with that of **SIM-A** as she agreed that” first, we itemized the stakeholders involved in the matter and tried as much as possible to keep the best scenario that addressed the different possibilities. **SIM-C** further confirmed that “currently, where you have disintermediation in the media, you cannot but apply the *PESO* model. Whenever you have any communication challenges, and planning appropriate tools, you have to look at the *PESO* model. In certain cases, you may emphasise a certain aspect of it more than the other...but you cannot get away from it...especially as an integrated approach...particularly with social media”. In summary, **SIM-D** said, “There was a need to align globally on an objective and a communication strategy to control communication”.

Therefore, it can be affirmed that the need for measured communication, which addresses the different segments of MTN Nigeria stakeholders especially as an integrated approach necessitated the application of the *PESO* integrated media model. More so, because the media is now disintermediated particularly due to the presence of social media, there was a need to meet the stakeholders at a central point of communication to manage the perspectives and in the interest of MTN Nigeria.

The strategy for engaging *PESO* integrated media model was situational and systematic.

The interviewees revealed that the engagement of the *PESO* integrated media model was situational and systematic particularly due to the peculiarity of the stakeholders' profile of MTN Nigeria. **SIM-A** stated that “we engaged *PESO* at the point where we realised the enormity of the fine...when the issue was not going away and we needed to tackle it head on”. **SIM-B** agreed that “as soon as we were doing the scenario planning and stakeholders scheduling...we needed to be on the stakeholders' management using different aspects of communication”. While **SIM C** described the *PESO* model as a “transmedia” that was adopted from the planning stage, **SIM-D** also agreed that “*PESO* was adopted at the point of engaging our external communications strategy as a need to cross the stakeholders'

bridge and the different interest lines”.

Regarding the tactical approach for engagement, the interviewees explained that it was systematic, often overlapping, and determined by the characteristics of each component in the *PESO* integrated media model. **SIM-A** explained that “(since) no one wanted to know if it was true or not... the best thing to do was to apologize through paid advertorials and even through our owned media, which are our website, social media handles etc. In terms of sequence, I would say paid and owned came out first before we started leveraging on earned”. On the rationale for earned media, he added that “We realized that for our messaging to be credible, it should not be us talking about ourselves lest it would be seen as chest-beating and arrogant. So, we needed to push it out through earned media channels and not just say what we have done”.

SIM-B further explained that “paid media was used with online influencers. On radio, we leveraged on-air personalities who had very strong programming and a lot of these were paid for. However, in the print media, we had to leverage it by identifying those who were friends of MTN in the media, using columnists who had strong opinions. (On) owned media...if you wanted information about the crisis real-time when you go on the MTN website and the *Twitter* handle, the news was right there”. **SIM-C** reiterated these points and added that the use of the components overlapped although “you can say we started a bit with earned media, it was easy to do so. You needed to make sure that the key reporters get your perspectives so they were the first to talk to, but it was all overlapping”.

SIM-D's explanations presented a few more perspectives that further show how the characteristics of each component of the *PESO* model became a major consideration for engagement. For instance, he stated that “we commenced with owned media, as the need to do some housekeeping was paramount. We had to engage on our internal social platform to update staff on happenings and calm the internal storms with a series of emails and HR memos as well as departmental Heads' memos to teams. This gave perspective to the issues, the handling of it and also limited the unwarranted rumours and managed conversations”. Owned media was seen as a potential stabilizing tool for controlling the narrative inside-out.

Moving to earned media next and the specific nature of engagement, **SIM-D** explained that “we identified the strongest partners in the media through relationships and media spend and reached out with our own angle to the issue, throwing more light on agreeable engagements. The narratives reflected MTN's contribution to education and social investments and the contribution to government, which focused on the contributions to employment and its multiplier effect on the larger communities”. The advocacy positions were further amplified on shared and social media platforms/channels while paid media was introduced to support as partners in terms of reflecting the advocates' positions on these paid platforms.

Deductions from the foregoing indicate that the peculiar nature of the stakeholders created a situation that required that communication should be systematic. Thus, in systematically engaging the *PESO* media model, the strength of each component formed the basis for engagement. The experiences of the consultants at different levels of engagement reflected an overlapped use of the components. Although the factors responsible for their lack of agreement on the sequence of use may be further examined, the interviewees were

united on the fact that different situations and the targets at different times determined the interplay of the usage.

Research Objective 2: The extent to which the application of the *PESO* Integrated Media Model Influenced Communications on the MTN Nigeria SIM Registration Fine Crisis.

The components of the *PESO* integrated media model made it easy to mix and convenient to use.

To examine the influence of the *PESO* integrated media model on communications about the crisis, the interviewees explained that the mix of the model made it convenient for them to use. SIM-A explained that “to a larger sense when you do a breakdown or an analysis of what each element represents, you would see that the totality of it made us get out our messaging to the right audience and at the right time”. According to him, leaving out any of the components “would have had a negative impact on the overall strategy combining the four really helped. It was very useful as each had its own application and usefulness and I think the combination of the four really helped us a lot”. About the overlapped usage of the components of the model, SIM-A further said “What was really important was not putting one before the other for the fact that it is integrated and has all the part you need, so that speaks a lot about its efficacy in managing the narratives around the fine...We found out that all were quite useful”.

SIM-B agreed that using the model was “very convenient because MTN already has some of their owned channels. They needed their own platforms to start getting things done. The existing social media handles (@mtnnigeria) made it easy and it meant that the PR Consultants were doing a very good job”. **SIM-C** maintained that “for want of an expression, the model was very convenient while **SIM-D** enthused that “asides from being the strategically effective thing to do, there was also a fluid flow in the use of this model as well as the success it recorded”.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the *PESO* integrated media model provided the users with a mix that allowed some level of fluidity in handling the narratives on the crisis from the perspectives of MTN Nigeria. In what seems to be a parallel application of the elements of the model at every point, the interviewees agreed that they were able to deploy the components strategically to address the communications appetite of the different segments of MTN Nigeria stakeholders.

***PESO* integrated media model was used to “discipline” and curate the narratives on the crisis.**

Concerning the effectiveness of the *PESO* integrated media model, interviewees agreed that the model was largely used to curate narratives in the media significantly. A mix of the components of the model as earlier noted, made it an interesting exploration. For instance, **SIM-A** explained that “we realized as part of the strategy that it was not enough to push (place) full pages of fantastic editorial or opinion piece (in the newspapers) because it is not everyone that reads such things, as they are not interested. However, when you have a pictorial on a spread on what MTN had supported or projects done by the MTN Foundation in pictures across national newspapers in the form of advertorials, some people would see

it and say, “Wow, so MTN did this”? Hence, for us to dilute the negativity in conversations despite what has happened, we showcased what the business too has done to positively impact Nigeria. Whether it is paid, shared, earned or owned, you just have to maintain a balance and get out your information on the platforms you want”.

SIM-B was confident in her assertions and agreed that “definitely, the model helped us to maintain the same information across the media platforms and align both the internal and external stakeholders to avoid variance in the outputs and expected outcomes. It was so good to see the truth when it comes to reporting while understanding that MTN Nigeria is hiding no information”. **SIM-C** further explained the chronology of how the narratives were curated for 'discipline' stating that “initially, the narratives were negative against MTN. However, as we deployed through the components of the integrated model, it started changing and needed to shift. Therefore, the narratives were no longer lopsided and there comes a bit of a balance. We somehow 'disciplined' the narrative since we know there will always be negative comments. As the negotiations went on, the media narratives were changing because we were deploying information through all the channels”.

On the effectiveness of the model in disciplining communications, **SIM-D** further emphasized that “the target audience (the public, policymakers, regulatory, lobbyists, competition) caught on to the message and started to shift in opinion due to superior arguments from the sustained lobbying and advocacy positions through the various media channels. These messages linked the several layers of the economy and benefits of MTN Nigeria's operations”.

In addition, the interviewees were able to identify specific instances of how they monitored the communications across the various media to ascertain if they were curated as expected to meet the objectives. **SIM-A** explained that “in pushing some of the contents on our platforms, we were able to track sentiments, comments and tones of the publics while using avatars (influencers) to weigh in, shaping the arguments without necessarily linking it to MTN Nigeria. This helped us to give more knowledge to the public while the discussion is trending on those platforms. Therefore, we were able to inspire discussions and provoke thoughts on all those platforms, giving us a full view”.

Another unique application of the *PESO* model was blending thought leadership into the process across the relevant components. **SIM-A** informed that “for thought leadership, we identified some of our executives who are knowledgeable about things like technology and development and the platforms on which they could speak. They spoke on the steps taken by MTN Nigeria to develop Nigeria and their comments were amplified on all the platforms. With that, we discovered that when we tie messaging to a credible person, the chances are that people will listen more than when you have despairing voices saying so many things”.

In curating the narratives that were generated due to apathy against MTN Nigeria vis-à-vis the perceived influence from upcountry, **SIM-B** explained that “at the initial stage, the apathy was very strong against MTN Nigeria as people queried if they would commit such infractions in their mother country (South Africa). Nevertheless, people forgot that about 80% of MTN Nigeria's management were Nigerians. Hence, by the time the implications of shutting down the business were pushed through the media, people began to understand that it would affect everybody including MTN's social services responsibilities, employment and those connected to the employed staff of MTN Nigeria and taxes and levies accrued to

the government. So, when the issues dropped, we used the influencers through the e-PR platforms where people could slant for/against the messages”. **SIM-C** added that “since communication has to communicate something, particularly in a situation of multifaceted stakeholders, we must be interested in what is communicated. The ability to get the influencers (both online and offline) to understand our messages helped change the narratives and their own perception on the matter”.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the *PESO* integrated media model allowed for a significant level of control of communications. The model contributed to changing the narratives from that of apathy to empathy based on what the interviewees described as “disciplining the communications”. In disciplining the narratives, communications through the components of the model espoused the negative effect of the fine on the socio-economic wellbeing of MTN Nigeria, which in effect would affect the socio-economic wellbeing of many of the company's employees who are Nigerians and their families. The approach aligns with the summation of Turgeon (2023) that with the *PESO* media model “PR and marketing teams can pinpoint their exact messaging, especially when it comes to thought leadership and content focused around corporate social responsibility, to ensure that campaign themes are hit and brand reputation is managed”.

Research Objective 3: Challenges in the Application of *PESO* Integrated Media Model in Managing MTN Nigeria SIM Registration Fine Crisis Communications.

Fixed mindsets, poor media literacy, source credibility and the nature of the fine were challenges faced in applying the *PESO* integrated media model.

Applying the *PESO* model has its challenges. The interviewees agreed that the challenges encountered in applying the *PESO* integrated media model during the crisis were not principally due to deficiencies in the components of the model but the fixed mindsets among the publics coupled with the issue of source credibility. Regarding the challenges faced using each component, **SIM-A** explained that “some perceived our messaging through the paid media as bragging. For the paid influencers, they believed we have simply paid them to speak in our favour. In terms of earned media, particularly in the print media, media literacy level and economic limitations meant not too many people were able to read the newspapers where such narratives were published. Even with the model, I still feel that we were still not able to reach a large chunk of Nigerians; but I am reluctant to take that as a shortfall to the model”.

In the same vein, **SIM-B** agreed that “the major challenge was reaching out to people who were bent on writing and posting negative comments about MTN Nigeria and the issue at hand. It was challenging facing people who were practically faceless because they can only be reached through their handles for explanations and to consider the facts of the matter.

For **SIM-C**, the peculiar nature of the social media, which largely formed the shared media, presented some challenges because some members of the public constantly query the sincerity of MTN Nigeria, their proponents or sympathizers. He emphasized that “one of the major challenges was that of fake news as believability in social media keeps dropping. Many people are not sure of what to believe because of the multiple and increasingly hard-to-verify sources of news...Hence, even though social media has become pervasive, there

are questions about whether all information on social media can be trusted particularly in a crisis. So, believability was a major challenge”.

The nature of the fine, being the first of its kind in Nigeria and Africa was also a major challenge. **SIM-D** agreed that “prejudiced contributors; divergence of purpose; internal aloofness and cynicism and the novel nature of the fine were major challenges in implementing the model. By the nature of the fine, this is the first time such an amount will be charged on a single company for an infraction in Nigeria and that got everyone interested, albeit with very divergent views”.

In summary, the responses from the interviewees reflected challenges that are entrenched in prejudices held against MTN Nigeria as a foreign organisation with a history of violating the laws of the host country. More so, the huge sum involved in the fine generated interest that at some point created opportunities for negative vibes. Unfortunately, the opportunities created by the workings of the paid, earned and owned media in shaping the narratives were seen by some stakeholders as bragging on the part of MTN Nigeria. However, in all, **SIM-A** affirmed that “overall and collectively, I think the model was quite an effective model because it had its different uses and varied applications and it yielded successful results”.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the study that when organisations find themselves in crisis, they must be deliberate in their approaches to managing communications, particularly where power relations become tense as noticed in the case of the MTN Nigeria SIM registration crisis. The background to the crisis showed that in a multicultural society like Nigeria, organisations and multinationals such as MTN Nigeria cannot hide from the different narratives that may follow issues concerning them at both the local and international levels. In the case study examined in this paper, it can be concluded that the *PESO* integrated media model offered MTN Nigeria and their consultants to manage communications vis-à-vis the power relations were noticed in the context of the narratives about the SIM registration fine crisis.

Components of the *PESO* model were used systematically and interchangeably at various times to address the communication needs of each stratum of the stakeholders in the crisis; they were used to curate the narratives in a disciplined manner that helps to reduce counter-narratives some of which bore out of apathy against MTN Nigeria. Although preconceptions about MTN Nigeria as an unfair entity, vested interests and low media literacy were challenges encountered in applying the *PESO* model, the flexibility provided by the model in navigating the communications helped to address issues around the social, economic and political power relations that emanated in the process of managing the crisis as reflected in the final analysis of all the major stakeholders. According to Emmett (2022), “The key benefit of planning and implementing an integrated campaign using this (*PESO*) model is that it helps you to connect to your target audiences with the right content via the right channel at the right stage of the customer journey”.

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