

THE QUESTION OF TRADITION OR CONTEMPORANEITY: A STUDY OF THE IGBO NKPOKITI DANCE

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tj.okeke@unizik.edu.ng**Abstract**

Nkpokiti, the iconic Igbo dance performance, embodies the rich cultural heritage and artistic excellence of the Igbos. Despite its vibrancy, Nkpokiti is often regarded merely as a traditional dance, thereby undermining the creative and artistic ingenuity of its originators. This paper, therefore, interrogates the nature of the Nkpokiti dance with a view to situating it as an artistic choreographic piece within a broader creative context. Through literature review, the study finds that Nkpokiti dance is a fusion of traditional, modern, and contemporary movements. It concludes that the dance should not be confined solely to traditional boundaries, as its evolving nature serves as a vital source of cultural preservation.

Keywords: Dance, Traditional, Contemporary, Igbo, Artistic.

Introduction

Dance is the movement of the body to a certain rhythm or music. It is always associated with sound. Dance is an artistic means of expression in time and space through a choreographed movement of the hands and legs and equally the head. This art form is found in every culture of the world and is identified through its unique characteristics as a means of cultural expression. The expressive nature of dance makes it easily understandable as it seldom goes without verbal expressions. As a means of non-verbal expression, therefore, stories can be narrated through varied body movements. Thus, dance conveys meaning through various elements: fluid motions, which evoke serenity and grace; sharp gestures, which express vigor and joy; and slow movements, which suggest sorrow or contemplation and so on. Hence, while dancing, the body speaks volumes, transcending verbal boundaries. Across cultures, dance serves as both entertainment and a means of showcasing the people's rich cultural heritage. Afolaranmi and Afolaranmi (40) state that "dance extends beyond performance art, serving as social commentary and a vital component of tangible cultural heritage. As man's oldest form of expression, dance reflects a culture's well-being, transmits traditions and values, and reinforces cultural identity".

Among the Igbo, dance is an integral part of their cultural life. The Igbo people are endowed with numerous traditional dances, music, and performances that portray their rich culture, to the extent that Igbo people in the diaspora organize events on which they celebrate and display this heritage. This serves as a veritable means of cultural preservation and also functions as a unifying force (Okpala 87). For the Igbos, singing and drumming are always accompanied by dancing. Dance is unarguably the biggest form of celebration among the people.

The Igbo of Nigeria occupy the southeastern region area of the country. Predominantly, they are found in the five states of eastern Nigeria: Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Anambra with settlements in some neighbouring states of Rivers, Delta, Kogi and Benue. There have been differing accounts about the origin of the Igbo: According to the Autochthony Hypothesis, the Igbo are believed to be indigenous to their present territory, having always lived in their current location with no history of migration.

Alternatively, the Migration Theory proposes that that the Igbos migrated internally from the Benue or Enugu area. Specifically, it proposes that the Niger-Benue confluence was the original homeland of the Igbo, from which they migrated southwards to settle in the Nsukka-Okigwe region (Iweadighi 2).

However, recent studies show that the Igbo have inhabited their homeland for tens of thousands of years. Notably, archaeological discoveries in Ugwuele, Okigwe, Enugu, and Ebonyi State date back over 250,000 years, providing conclusive proof of ancient human presence in Igbo land. Excavated artifacts, including tools, pottery, and carved stones, which confirm a long-term Igbo habitation (<https://faculty.ucr.edu>). These findings unequivocally establish the Igbo people's deep-rooted connection to their ancestral homeland. (Forrest 272).

The Igbo are a people of diverse nature. This is evident in their culture and traditions which exhibit elements of dynamism and syncretism born out of their frequent interactions with peoples of other cultures and traditions. The Igbo are renowned for their artistry especially in dance, music, visual arts and commerce. This study explores the confluence of traditional and contemporary in *Nkpokiti* dance, through an examination of its evolution, adaptation, and reinvention.

Dance in Igboland

Dance in Igboland is a means of expression, either as a collective or individual activity. It cuts across every facet of life and rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Dance, for the Igbo, is a vital means of communication: joy and sadness could be communicated through dance because of its aesthetic appeal, social significance, and sacred importance. "Through non-verbal expressions such as gestures, movement, and rhythm, dance conveys meaningful messages to its audience by depicting situations and events, explaining their causes, offering solutions and communicating complex ideas, making it an indispensable part of Igbo community life". (Mbara 149), dance thus, becomes an integral aspect of the Igbo society. The message conveyed through dance is often encoded in choreographic codes, cues and gestures. These however, are culturally based and could easily be interpreted by indigenes of the said culture. According to Uchechukwu Ajiwe and Judith Umeh, "his nuanced understanding enables the audience to connect dance to societal events and activities, interpret the dancer's intentions and emotions, draw meaningful inferences about the dance's significance and appreciate its importance to both the individual and community" (14-15).

Hence, dance expresses the Igbo culture including the right of passage and rituals, music and plays, material symbols and artifacts, these diverse meanings, facilitate communication, storytelling, and cultural transmission from birth to death, and even transcend mortality (Opara 77). Dance, as one of the most captivating forms of art expression in Igbo culture, is used to celebrate, observe, and interact. They are therefore identified in two forms: ritual and secular forms of dancing.

Ritual dances in Igboland have evolved through ritualistic and cultural expressions that embeds the group's values and beliefs, and serving as a unifying force of the community. It provides identity and security, emotional relief and introspection, and an existential exploration. In essence, ritual dance precedes rational discourse in addressing fundamental philosophical and spiritual questions, embodying the community's world view (Appelros 182). Ritual dances in Igbo land serve as a sacred language, enabling worshippers to communicate with the divine, express devotion, and connect with higher powers. According to Abbe:

Sacred dances are serious, having specific participants, specific, simple, stylized, and symbolic steps, specific reading and pattern. Performed for religious worship, burial ceremonies, ancestral deification, etc. That is, they are not performed outside their specified context. Also, there are other sacred dances whose movements are very fast and sometimes complex. Their secluded nature makes it impossible for a large audience to watch or know the importance of such dance (144).

This spiritual dance facilitates worship and veneration, expression and gratitude, petitioning for blessings or intervention, and communion with celestial beings or deities. As a form of religious

expression, ritual dances employ specific movement, gestures, and expression to convey need, emotions, and reference. And in the Igbo land and in the Igbo culture, ritual dances are mostly marked by masquerade performances and sacred worships. Anuka (127) and Anamelechi (6).

Secular dances are traditional or ritual dances that have, over time, metamorphosed due to certain reasons from its spiritual and cultural context to serve a more reduced purpose than it was originally conceived to be. Abbe observes that, "secularization is the art of converting something specifically from religious use to secular, general use. Dance secularization, in this context, refers to the transformation of dance from its ritual to social context... due to the influence of Christianity and Islam on African indigenous religions" (150).

This simply implies that secularization involves transforming or transposing elements from a ritual or sacred context to a social one. Therefore, that for a dance to be considered secular, it must originate from a ritualistic context and undergo a transformation from its ritual to a social function. This transition that ritual dance undergoes is gradually nurtured by skilled and creative dance experts of a particular community, whom Picton and Harper reveal adapts and shapes their ritual context to serve a social purpose while holding on to their artistic and cultural context (www.britannica.com/art/africandance).

Therefore, secularized dances undergo refinement, making them suitable for social contexts while retaining their original ritualistic significances. This distinction should clarify the misconception that secular dances are equivalent to popular dances. In reality, they are distinct forms: secular dances originate from traditional ritual contents, whereas popular dances lack these roots and serve solely as recreational expressions.

In recent times, in Igbo dance culture, a modern form of dance has emerged, driven by the desire to innovate and create novel expressions from existing traditions. Modern choreographers draw upon traditional Igbo dance steps to craft new performances for entertainment purposes, often revitalizing dying dance styles by incorporating powerful movements. The choreographers breathe new life into Igbo cultural heritage, ensuring its continual relevance. Adekogbe posits that African dance encompasses a rich diversity, which he classifies into three primary genres: Traditional dances, born from local and indigenous ingenuity, reflecting community heritage. Modern dance, emerging from individual or group creative expression, is often influenced by global trends. Contemporary dance reimagines and reinterprets traditional forms, blending heritage with modernity to suit present-day contexts (11).

History of *Nkpokiti* Dance

Nkpokiti dance is reputed to have been created by Mr. Festus Nwankwo, a primary school teacher, who formed a group at Saint Joseph Primary School, Umunze, in 1947 to teach traditional Igbo dances. The dance made its debut on March 17, 1960 at the Saint Patrick's Day Sports Event. Initially, the dance was referred to as "*Egwu Umuakukwu*" Students' Dance but it was later renamed *Nkpokiti* Dance, inspired by Nwankwo's nickname, earned after defeating a village bully. Nwankwo's persistence paid off upon his return to Saint Joseph, successfully merging dance and acrobatics (Nwafor, 187-88). The dance is highly revered as a famous and iconic Igbo cultural dance, extensively performed throughout the country. It is usually exhibited at ceremonial occasions such as coronations, cultural festivals, and marriage ceremonies, and national events. Interestingly, the nomenclature *Nkpokiti* has its roots in the dance's historical evolution.

However, OluNdi Igbo (on their Facebook page) holds a differing opinion, stating that the founder, Chief Festus Nwankwo Okoli, inaugurated the renowned *Nkpokiti* Dance ensemble on July 28, 1959, in Umunze, Anambra, also referred to it as *Ojimba*. In 1970, the *Nkpokiti* Dance Group won first position, golden gong and ₦3,000 at the Lagos Festival, marking the end of the civil war. They repeated this feat multiple times, earning Anambra State representation in cultural competitions. Their national success led to Nigeria selecting them as cultural ambassadors.

In 1978, *Nkpokiti* triumphed at Wembley, England, claiming the global World Cup in cultural dance. In 1974, *Nkpŏkịtị* proudly represented the Federal Government of Nigeria at the prestigious Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) held in Lagos. The dance has been performed in almost all parts of the world and has been crowned the "Legendary Dance of the Universe." As a result, the *Nkpŏkịtị* Group is featured on the back of the five-naira note as an honor. Regardless of the two historical accounts of the origin of the *Nkpŏkịtị* dance, the fact remains that it was created by a school teacher and that it is a purely of Igbo origin.

***Nkpŏkịtị*: Traditional or Contemporary Dance**

Tradition or traditional is defined as a long-established custom, practice or belief, passed down through generations. The *Thesaurus* online dictionary specifically states that "it's characterized by their lack of a central founder, written scriptures, and formal worship space that revolve around practices rather than system or doctrine or belief. However, it is handed down from generation to generation, sticking to what is old or long established". Thus, our emphasis on this definition will rely heavily on the lack of central founder, old or long established, and passed down through generations. Tradition can also encompass ancient customs and beliefs with unknown or mysterious origins, dating back to prehistoric times.

Contemporaneity, on the other hand, according to Smith, is defined in three key aspects: "Presentness: being in the moment; mutual awareness and connection among individuals; and temporal context: acknowledging the current time period. While acknowledging the present, contemporaneity also allows for imaginative connections to other times and eras through: Fiction, drama, and empathy" (3). Paco Baragan complements Smith's perception, saying that this complex phenomenon is constituted by dialectical tension between contradictory forces, defying reduction to a singular narrative. Specifically, it is responsive to three intersecting axes of contention: globalization's hegemonic impulses, exacerbating socio-economic disparities and the omnipresent spectacle of image culture (16). Baragan maintained that "contemporary" does not mark a departure from postmodernism or postmodernity but rather represents a new phase of modernity. A more fitting description of today's era would be "new modernity," which aligns with neoliberalism, acknowledges our current globalized context as an evolution of modernity, rather than a rupture from it (17).

Similarly, contemporary art requires a deep understanding of human development's possibilities and knowledge of the underlying laws that can lay the groundwork for a new artistic style, representing a higher evolution in art (Georg 98). The position of this discussion, as clarified above, is that contemporary art conceptualizes "presentness" – being in the moment – and understanding human and societal laws is crucial for artistic advancement. Hence, art's evolution and style, and new styles represent each stage building upon the previous one. In essence, contemporary arts embody the present moment, draw from human and societal understanding and foster continuous artistic growth.

Nkpŏkịtị is a typical Igbo dance, characterized by its dynamic kinesthetic expression, incorporating vigorous bodily movement and magical acrobatic maneuvers. After its creation in 1947, Nwankwo's involvement was interrupted by his studies at the Teachers Training School in Agulu. However, when he returned to his base at Umunze in 1959, he reawakened the *Nkpŏkịtị* dance albeit with influences from the activities of pioneers of modern Nigerian Theatre such as Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo whom he had read about in the course of his studies. Therefore, by integrating elements of modern dance and



PLATE 1: NKPQKITI DANCE
Source: Internet

The *Nkpqkiti* dance is a syncretic tradition, combining elements from diverse Igbo indigenous dances. These include: *Ogbagu* the secretive night masquerade dance movement, *Ihediogwu* indigenous Umunze dance, *Igba* a chieftaincy dance, the *Ijele* - the king masquerade dance, and *Atilogwu* (a wide-spread Igbo dance with magical movements). These influences equally inspired their choice of costume design and colours; this fusion of iconic Igbo traditional elements to form the *Nkpqkiti* dance could be found in the performances of artistes like Hubert Ogunde, who made use of indigenous Yoruba elements to create unique dances of Yoruba cultural identity. Ugolo emphasizes that, for Ogunde:

the need to preserve and improve his culture led him to adopt syncretism as a philosophy – an attempt to marry traditional religious beliefs and practices with Western Christian religious practices. Also, in his early training as an Alarinjo dancer and drummer, Ogunde was bent on projecting the cultural image of his people (42).



PLATE 2: NKPQKITI DANCE
Source: Internet

Therefore, in like manner, Nwankwo, in his dance creations espouses indigenous traditional elements, resulting in a distinct dance form that truly represents the Igbo culture. The *Nkpokiti* dance thus becomes a blend of external influences which has resulted in a transformative evolution that distinguishes it from its traditional Igbo roots. With this fusion of 'local' and 'foreign' dance elements into a unique blend of tradition, modern and contemporary choreography, it could be averred that the dance can no longer be specifically categorized as traditional dance.

Varied elements have contributed to the reclassification of the *Nkpokiti* dance as a strictly traditional dance. This is because there have been very significant adjustments in the movements, design and execution. These modifications are aimed at positioning the dance to meet contemporary global performance demands. For example, the polychromatic design of its costume which is a diverse array of colours, practically distinguishes it from the regular traditional dance attires. These costumes are embellished with accessories such as white raffia wrapped around the waist and rattling leg bands. These harmonize with the kinetic movements of the dancers giving the spectator a multi-sensory experience.

According to Mackay and Ene (22), “the instrumental ensemble includes: the *Alo* or *Ivum* - used to produce deep notes, serves as main cue for dancers; *Ogene*- high pitched bell-like tone; *Ngedegwu*- an earthen Ware pot and wooden slats to produce a complete scale; *Ekwe*- wood sit drum; *Osha*-made from fronds and Calabash; and *Qja*- whistle flute” (Mackay & Ene 22).

From the foregoing therefore, it would be safe to assert that fact that a dance presents elements of its traditional origin which invariably makes it a bearer of the people's culture is not enough evidence to situate the dance solely within the confines of traditional dance. It could equally be argued that whereas modern and contemporary dances may not readily be said to have traditional origins because of the fact that they have appropriated elements from other cultures, yet, they invariably do represent the cultural heritage of the environment in which they are created. According to Martozet (204), “classifying a dance as traditional depends on factors beyond chronological age.



PLATE 3: NKPOKITI DANCE
Source: Internet

A traditional dance must demonstrate cultural significance, communal acceptance and emblematic representation of a people's identity. And not all long-standing dances meet these criteria". It is a truism however, that every traditional dance must retain elements of its cultural background and endure for generations with very minimal or no changes. But, a contemporary cultural dance mutates, adapts and appropriates aspects of other cultures yet, retains elements of its cultural origin. The *Nkpqkiti* dance of the Igbo meets the definition of contemporary dance.

Conclusion

Having presented evidence concerning the origin and creation of the *Nkpqkiti* dance, it is evident that its emergence during the era of modern Nigerian theatre allowed the choreographer to appropriate dance elements from other cultures. Consequently, the dance cannot be easily categorized as purely modern, traditional, or contemporary. However, its complexity makes it more appropriate to situate it within the framework of contemporary dance, as it emerged at a transitional period in the development of modern Nigerian performance traditions. Its contemporaneity stems more from the fact that it has continued to evolve with the times as it has progressively kept adapting to emerging trends in world dance. Therefore, despite its classification as a contemporary dance—as argued in this paper—the *Nkpqkiti* dance should still be regarded as a vital means of preserving Igbo cultural heritage, even with the incorporation of new dance movements.

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CHALLENGES OF GOVERNMENT SPOKESPERSONS IN IMAGE MANAGEMENT IN A DISTRESSED ECONOMY: CASE STUDY OF IMO STSTE

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Abstract

In a distressed economy, government spokespersons face significant challenges in managing the public image of the government. This study explores the difficulties encountered by spokespersons as they strive to communicate effectively amid economic instability, rising public dissatisfaction and heightened scrutiny from media and opposition groups. The rationale for this study lies in the critical role that communication plays in shaping public perception and the need to understand the pressures faced by spokespersons in maintaining government credibility. The main objective of this study is to examine the specific challenges government spokespersons encounter in managing public image during economic downturns and to propose strategies to enhance their effectiveness. The theoretical framework includes Crisis Communication Theory promulgated by Timothy Coombs, which explains how organisations communicate during crises and Image Restoration Theory by William L. Benoit which outlines strategies for repairing public perception. The study adopts a library research method, reviewing existing literature, case studies and reports on government communication practices in distressed economies. Key arguments highlight the tension between transparency and public relations in times of economic distress, the rising influence of social media in shaping public discourse and the limited resources available for communication in financially constrained environments. The findings suggest that spokespersons must strike a balance between addressing public concerns and maintaining a positive government image, often under tight budgets and increasing pressure. The conclusion emphasises the importance of strategic communication, transparency and adaptability for government spokespersons in managing public perception during economic crises. Recommendations include enhanced media training for spokespersons, the development of proactive communication strategies and the integration of social media monitoring tools to better respond to public sentiment in real-time.

Keywords: Challenges, Government Spokespersons, Image Management, Distressed Economy.

Introduction

In an economically distressed environment, government spokespersons face a unique set of challenges in managing the image of the state. As official representatives, they are responsible for conveying the government's position on critical matters, mitigating public concerns and shaping perceptions that may be vital to national stability. In situations where economies are declining, characterised by inflation, unemployment, shrinking GDP and rising public debt, the government's image can become tarnished by public dissatisfaction, social unrest and international skepticism. This places immense pressure on spokespersons to navigate a complex web of domestic and global expectations, while maintaining credibility and transparency.

The role of a government spokesperson is not just to disseminate information but also to safeguard the government's image, especially during crises (Harrell, 2018). However, economic distress creates an atmosphere where misinformation and disinformation thrive, complicating the efforts of spokespersons to present coherent narratives. Public perception can be heavily influenced by social media, partisan politics and the continuous coverage of negative economic news, which can undermine confidence in government leadership. As a result, spokespersons must carefully balance their communication strategies to address multiple stakeholders, including local citizens, international organisations and investors, all of whom have varied interests and concerns.

One of the central challenges faced by government spokespersons in a distressed economy is credibility management. Public trust in government often diminishes in times of economic hardship, which makes it harder to communicate government actions effectively (Kim & Lee, 2020). The spokesperson must navigate this environment by not only managing the economic narrative but also by dealing with the politicisation of economic failures and opposition attacks. In this context, there is a need to assess how well government spokespersons can balance optimism with realism and to what extent they can maintain the government's integrity without appearing evasive or deceptive.

Imo State, located in South-Eastern Nigeria, presents a compelling example of the challenges government spokespersons face in image management during periods of economic distress. In recent years, the state has grappled with public discontent arising from unpaid salaries and pensions, industrial actions, and allegations of insecurity and misgovernance. These issues have placed its public image under sustained pressure, with significant media scrutiny and civil agitation (Punch, 2023; Vanguard, 2023).

Despite the gravity of these challenges, public communication from government officials, especially the spokespersons, has often been defensive, combative, and dismissive, further worsening the public's perception of the administration. Rather than serving as a platform for transparent engagement and trust-building, official communications have largely focused on denying wrongdoing and attributing crises to political opponents or saboteurs (Nwogu, 2022). To better understand and critique these communication failures, it is essential to apply theoretical models such as Image Restoration Theory by William Benoit (1995) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by W. Timothy Coombs (2007).

Hence, this study explores the multifaceted challenges that government spokespersons encounter in managing the state's image during economic downturns. Drawing on case studies from both developed and developing nations, with a specific focus on Imo State, Nigeria, the researchers investigate how spokespersons have adapted to the rapidly evolving media landscape, how they maintain credibility and how they address public grievances in distressed economies. By applying relevant communication theories, this study seeks to provide a wide-ranging analysis of the strategic role government spokespersons play and offers recommendations for improving image management practices in challenging economic contexts.

Statement of the Problem

Government spokespersons play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, particularly during times of economic distress. In such periods, the government's credibility, legitimacy and ability to effectively manage the economic crisis often come into question, making image management a critical function of spokespersons. However, managing the government's image in an economically distressed environment presents significant challenges that go beyond traditional public relations tasks. These challenges are compounded by public distrust, misinformation and heightened media scrutiny. While several scholars have examined the role of government communication in crisis situations, there is a gap

in the literature addressing the specific struggles that spokespersons face in economies undergoing prolonged or severe distress. Furthermore, the rise of social media has intensified the speed at which negative narratives spread, leaving spokespersons with little room to control or correct information before it escalates (Kim & Lee, 2020).

Moreover, the socio-political context in developing countries, such as Nigeria, where economic challenges are intertwined with political instability, cultural factors and weak institutions, adds another layer of complexity to image management. Studies on government communication often fail to consider these contextual factors, limiting their applicability in non-Western settings. For example, Graber (2003) highlights the role of government communication in democratic governance but does not explore how economic decline in fragile democracies affects spokesperson credibility and public engagement.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the specific challenges faced by government spokespersons in managing the state's image during times of economic distress, with a particular focus on developing countries like Nigeria. It will explore the limitations of existing theories and propose new approaches to understanding the unique communication hurdles faced in such contexts. By analysing how spokespersons can maintain credibility, manage misinformation and effectively engage with diverse stakeholders in a distressed economy, this study aims to offer valuable insights into improving government communication strategies in times of economic crisis.

Theoretical Framework

In addressing the challenges faced by government spokespersons in image management during periods of economic distress, this study will be grounded in several communication and public relations theories. These theories will offer a structured understanding of how image management operates in crisis situations and the unique role of government communication in shaping public perceptions.

1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Developed by W. Timothy Coombs, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a foundational framework for understanding how organisations, including governments, should respond to crises. SCCT emphasises that the nature of the crisis determines the most appropriate communication strategy, proposing that spokespersons should adapt their message depending on whether the crisis is due to external factors (e.g., natural disasters) or internal mismanagement (Coombs, 2007). This theory provides a basis for understanding the communication challenges government spokespersons face during economic distress, where both internal governance issues and external economic pressures might shape public perception. SCCT suggests that spokespersons need to employ a range of strategies, including information dissemination, damage control and reputation management, based on the specific crisis scenario.

The importance of image management in economic distress is grounded in public relations theories such as Image Restoration Theory and Crisis Communication Theory. According to Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (2000), the ability of government representatives to shape narratives during economic crises is critical for maintaining trust and legitimacy. Similarly, Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) highlights that the nature of the crisis significantly influences the communication strategy and tools employed by spokespersons. These theories underscore the strategic management of public discourse, media relations and stakeholder engagement as key components of effective image management.

Scholars such as Coombs (2007) have extensively studied crisis communication strategies, emphasising the importance of transparency, responsiveness and accountability during crises. Coombs'

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) posits that the nature of the crisis should guide the communication strategy, yet his work largely focuses on corporate crises and short-term events, without fully exploring the nuances of long-term economic distress that government spokespersons must navigate. Similarly, Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (2000) provides insight into how institutions can repair damaged reputations, but much of the existing research focuses on scandals or isolated public relations failures, not the sustained, systemic issues that arise in distressed economies.

The limitations of these theories in addressing the complexities of economic distress are evident in their lack of attention to specific challenges like misinformation, loss of public trust and media bias in such contexts. For instance, in a distressed economy, spokespersons must not only communicate government policies effectively but also combat misinformation that can exacerbate economic panic and social unrest (Harrell, 2018).

However, SCCT has limitations in addressing the sustained nature of economic crises, which differ from short-term or event-specific crises that the theory traditionally addresses. In a distressed economy, spokespersons must maintain ongoing communication, which demands not only short-term crisis management but also long-term engagement with public distrust, misinformation, and economic uncertainty.

2. Image Restoration Theory

Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (2000) is crucial to understanding how government spokespersons attempt to repair or maintain a positive image during economic hardship. This theory posits that when an entity's image is damaged, strategic communication responses, such as denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of events, corrective action and mortification are used to restore its credibility (Benoit, 2000). This framework applies well to the role of government spokespersons, who often need to justify unpopular economic decisions, address public grievances and correct negative perceptions caused by economic decline.

In a distressed economy, spokespersons might employ image restoration strategies to counteract accusations of mismanagement or inefficiency. However, the theory's primary focus on individual incidents of image damage limits its applicability to sustained economic crises, where a prolonged negative narrative may require more dynamic and multifaceted approaches to image management.

3. Framing Theory

Framing theory, as articulated by Goffman (1974), provides insight into how government spokespersons craft messages to shape public perception. Framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient to influence audience interpretation (Entman, 2003). During periods of economic distress, government spokespersons can frame economic challenges in ways that deflect blame, highlight external causes (such as global economic downturns) or emphasise the government's efforts to alleviate the crisis.

The use of framing can help spokespersons shift public discourse toward positive aspects of government action or encourage patience by underscoring long-term recovery efforts. However, the success of framing in managing the government's image depends on the spokesperson's ability to align the message with public sentiment and media portrayal, which can be challenging in environments where trust in government is low or where media outlets are oppositional.

4. Public Relations Role Theory

Public relations role theory, particularly the two-way symmetrical communication model developed by Grunig & Hunt (1984), suggests that public relations practitioners, including government

spokespersons, should engage in balanced communication that promotes mutual understanding between the government and the public. This model posits that effective communication is not just about disseminating information but also about listening and adapting to public feedback. In a distressed economy, the two-way symmetrical model suggests that government spokespersons need to be responsive to public concerns, engage in dialogue, and adapt their communication strategies based on public sentiment (Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

However, implementing this approach can be difficult in an economically distressed environment, where public frustration and widespread disillusionment may lead to communication breakdowns. Furthermore, government institutions in developing countries may lack the institutional capacity or political will to engage in genuinely symmetrical communication, as the focus often remains on top-down messaging.

5. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides another lens for understanding how public perceptions of government spokespersons and their messages are shaped by social affiliations and group identity. In times of economic crisis, individuals' responses to government communication are influenced by their identification with political, social and economic groups. For instance, government messages may resonate differently with various segments of the population depending on their socioeconomic status, political affiliation or regional identity. Government spokespersons need to consider these identity dynamics when crafting messages to ensure that communication resonates with different demographic groups.

In a distressed economy, this theory underscores the importance of tailoring communication strategies to specific social groups, acknowledging the diverse identities and experiences of the public. Spokespersons who fail to address these identity-driven nuances may struggle to maintain credibility and trust with key segments of the population.

These theories—SCCT, Image Restoration Theory, Framing Theory, Public Relations Role Theory and Social Identity Theory, collectively offer a robust theoretical framework for understanding the challenges faced by government spokespersons in image management during times of economic distress. Each theory provides a different perspective on how communication strategies can be tailored to manage public perception, respond to crises and engage with diverse audiences. However, these theories also have limitations in their applicability to the prolonged and multifaceted nature of economic distress, suggesting the need for a more integrated approach to understanding the role of government spokespersons in these contexts.

Conceptual Review

The role of government spokespersons is integral to managing public perceptions, especially during times of economic distress. This conceptual review explores the key concepts related to government spokespersons, image management, and the unique challenges presented by distressed economies. These concepts will be discussed in the context of communication theory, public relations strategies, and crisis management.

Government Spokespersons

A government spokesperson is a key official responsible for communicating government's policies, decisions and responses to the public and the media. Their role is central to shaping the narrative around governmental actions and ensuring that the public is adequately informed (Lee, Neeley & Stewart, 2012). Government spokespersons act as the voice of the administration, tasked with both maintaining transparency and protecting the government's reputation. In times of economic distress, their

responsibilities become more challenging, as they must balance the need to provide accurate information with the imperative to protect public confidence in the government. Effective government spokespersons must have a deep understanding of both media relations and public opinion, as their ability to manage crises and communicate with stakeholders is essential to maintaining governmental credibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). In economically distressed environments, they are often confronted with heightened scrutiny from both the media and the public, making their role increasingly complex.

Image Management

Image management refers to the strategic process of controlling or influencing public perceptions of an individual, organisation or government (García, 2011). For government institutions, image management becomes critical during periods of economic distress because public confidence tends to erode and negative sentiments towards government policies can rise. Governments in distressed economies often rely on spokespersons to manage their image through a combination of crisis communication, media engagement and public relations strategies. Image management is not just about addressing immediate concerns but also about maintaining long-term trust and credibility (Cornelissen, 2017). The process involves both reactive and proactive strategies. Reactive strategies include addressing specific incidents or crises, such as inflation or public sector cuts, while proactive strategies involve continuous engagement with the public to foster positive perceptions.

Challenges of Image Management in a Distressed Economy

Managing a government's image in a distressed economy presents unique challenges. Economic distress often leads to widespread discontent, political instability and social unrest, all of which can diminish the effectiveness of communication efforts (Moss, 2016). For government spokespersons, the key challenges include:

Public Distrust: Economic crises tend to lower public trust in government institutions. Government spokespersons may find it difficult to convince a skeptical public of the government's good intentions or the viability of its policies (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Public distrust can also exacerbate the spread of misinformation, making image management efforts more complex.

Media Hostility: In times of economic hardship, media outlets may become more critical of government policies, questioning decisions and amplifying negative narratives. Government spokespersons must manage these critical media relationships while attempting to ensure balanced coverage (Jin, Pang & Cameron, 2012).

Misinformation and Disinformation: In distressed economies, misinformation and disinformation can spread rapidly, often through social media. Government spokespersons are tasked with countering false narratives and ensuring the public has access to accurate information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). However, in environments where public trust is low, combating falsehoods can be difficult.

Communication Fatigue: As the public becomes inundated with negative news about the economy, communication fatigue can set in. The constant stream of crisis communication can lead to disengagement from government messages, further complicating the task of managing public perceptions (Avery, 2010).

Crisis Communication

Crisis communication refers to the strategies used by organisations, including governments, to communicate during times of crisis (Coombs, 2007). In the context of a distressed economy, crisis communication involves delivering messages about economic policies, interventions and government

strategies to mitigate the crisis. According to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the nature of the crisis dictates the communication strategy. For example, in an economic crisis caused by global factors (e.g., oil price collapse), the government may use messages that deflect blame away from its own policies (Coombs, 2007). In contrast, when the crisis is perceived as stemming from internal mismanagement, spokespersons may need to employ image restoration strategies, such as acknowledging mistakes and outlining corrective measures (Benoit, 2000).

Public Relations in Government Communication

Public relations (PR) is a vital tool for government spokespersons in managing relationships with various stakeholders, including the media, the public and other governmental entities. In a distressed economy, the role of PR becomes even more significant as it is necessary to build and maintain relationships amidst heightened tensions and economic uncertainty (Grunig&Grunig, 2008). PR strategies can include media campaigns, public engagements and collaborations with civil society to improve the government's image and foster public confidence in economic recovery initiatives. Additionally, PR practices may involve corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives aimed at addressing the social impacts of economic downturns (Fawkes, 2015).

Media Relations

The relationship between government spokespersons and the media is pivotal in shaping the public's understanding of government actions during an economic downturn. Media relations involve managing how the government's messages are portrayed in the news, responding to inquiries and addressing misinformation (Lariscy, Avery&Sohn, 2010). However, during economic crises, this relationship can become strained as media outlets may adopt more critical or investigative stances. Government spokespersons must therefore navigate this dynamic by providing timely, transparent and accurate information to maintain credibility, while also managing potentially adversarial media narratives.

This conceptual review has explored key concepts related to government spokespersons, image management and crisis communication within the context of a distressed economy. The literature underscores the complexities of managing public perceptions during economic downturns, with factors such as public distrust, media hostility and misinformation complicating the role of government spokespersons.

Review of Related Literature

The role of government spokespersons in managing a government's image during economic distress is a topic that has sparked various opinions among scholars, media practitioners and public relations experts. In times of economic crisis, the challenges of maintaining a positive image become more complex and spokespersons are often tasked with navigating a delicate balance between transparency, optimism and public trust. This opinion review explores different perspectives on these challenges, with insights drawn from both academic literature and industry commentary.

Many scholars argue that one of the primary challenges government spokespersons face is balancing the need for transparency with the necessity of maintaining public confidence (Avery & Graham, 2013). Economic distress often brings about intense scrutiny from both the media and the public, leading to heightened demands for transparency regarding government actions, policies and solutions. Some commentators argue that spokespersons must be candid about the severity of the situation to avoid accusations of dishonesty or incompetence (Coombs, 2007). However, this honesty must be tempered with assurances that the government is capable of addressing the issues at hand, which is a difficult narrative to construct in an environment of economic instability. According to Coombs & Holladay (2010), crisis communication theory suggests that too much transparency, particularly during a severe economic crisis, can have unintended consequences. If the government reveals too many of its internal

struggles or uncertainties, it may fuel public panic, distrust or frustration. This creates a dilemma for spokespersons, as they must decide how much information to disclose without undermining public confidence.

Several experts have pointed out that during economic downturns, public trust in government institutions often erodes, creating a "credibility gap" that spokespersons must work hard to bridge (Graber, 2013). In distressed economies, citizens may already feel disillusioned by the government's failure to prevent or mitigate the economic crisis, making it harder for spokespersons to craft messages that resonate with the public. Grunig & Hunt (2004) argue that public relations in such situations is not just about sending out messages but also about listening and engaging with the public to rebuild trust. Yet, public relations practitioners in government often face the challenge of rigid bureaucracies that prioritise policy defense over open dialogue. Consequently, government spokespersons may find themselves in a position where they cannot fully engage with public concerns, thereby exacerbating the credibility gap.

Another major challenge, as noted by practitioners, is managing relations with a potentially hostile media. During economic crises, media outlets tend to take a more critical stance, often holding the government accountable for the nation's economic woes (Holladay & Coombs, 2010). For government spokespersons, this means that their statements and press releases are likely to be dissected and critiqued more harshly than during periods of stability. According to Fuchs (2014), media hostility can lead to defensive communication strategies from government officials, where spokespersons attempt to control the narrative by limiting access to information or framing stories in a way that favours the government. While this might seem like a strategic move, it can also backfire, as journalists and the public may perceive such tactics as an attempt to manipulate or hide the truth, further eroding trust.

In contrast, other scholars argue that the media can also serve as an ally in managing public perceptions during an economic crisis (Cornelissen, 2017). By fostering transparent, cooperative relationships with journalists and media outlets, government spokespersons can ensure that their messages are delivered in a more balanced and fair manner. However, this approach requires a level of trust and openness that may not always be available, especially in high-pressure situations.

The rise of digital and social media platforms has added another layer of complexity to image management for government spokespersons in distressed economies. Unlike traditional media, social media allows for instantaneous dissemination of information and public feedback, making it both a valuable tool and a potential liability (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). On one hand, spokespersons can use social media to directly engage with the public and counter misinformation, as seen in various government communication strategies globally. On the other hand, social media can also amplify negative sentiment, making it difficult for spokespersons to control the narrative. Fawkes (2015) points out that government spokespersons must now be adept at navigating the fast-paced nature of social media, where rumours, misinformation and public grievances can spread quickly. In distressed economies, where public emotions run high, social media often becomes a battleground for opposing narratives. This can be both an opportunity and a challenge for spokespersons, as they must ensure that their messaging is consistent, timely and credible across multiple platforms.

There is also an ethical dimension to the challenges faced by government spokespersons. Some critiques argue that image management, particularly during times of economic distress, can be seen as an attempt to "spin" or "manipulate" public perception, rather than a genuine effort to communicate effectively (Fawkes, 2015). This has led to debates about whether government spokespersons should prioritise honesty and transparency over image protection, especially when the stakes are high. Scholars like Curtin & Gaither (2006) highlight the tension between the ethical responsibility to provide truthful information and the strategic need to maintain a positive image. In distressed economies, where public

anxiety is high, the temptation to downplay negative information or oversell government efforts may be strong. However, such tactics can lead to long-term damage if the public perceives that they have been misled. Therefore, the ethical challenge for spokespersons lies in finding a balance between managing the government's image and upholding the public's right to accurate and honest information.

In view of the foregoing, one can safely infer that the role of government spokespersons in managing image during economic distress is fraught with challenges. From navigating public distrust and media hostility to engaging with the public via social media and upholding ethical standards, spokespersons must walk a fine line between transparency and strategic communication. The opinions and debates surrounding this issue highlight the complexities of image management in government, particularly in times of economic crisis. Ultimately, the effectiveness of government spokespersons in such situations depends on their ability to build trust, engage with the public and adapt to the rapidly changing media landscape.

Empirical research on the challenges faced by government spokespersons in image management, particularly in economically distressed contexts, has produced valuable insights into how governments communicate with the public during crises. In this section, the researchers reviewed relevant studies, focusing on the key issues of credibility, trust, media relations and the effectiveness of various communication strategies employed by spokespersons.

Avery & Graham (2013), in "Government Communication in Economic Crises: Strategies and Public Perception," examined how spokespersons manage public image during economic downturns, using qualitative interviews with officials and media analysis. They found that transparency and consistency enhance credibility, while mixed messages worsen distrust. The study concluded that adaptive communication is vital in crises. They recommended proactive messaging and public engagement. Unlike their focus on strategies, this study emphasises challenges like public scepticism and resource constraints in distressed economies.

Yang & Taylor (2015), in their work titled, "Strategic Communication in Economic Crises: Government Spokespersons and Media Framing," explored how spokespersons shape public perception during financial instability, employing content analysis of press releases and media coverage. Their findings revealed that framing crises as temporary and actionable bolstered public trust, whereas defensive rhetoric exacerbated anxiety. They concluded with recommendations for coherent messaging and media collaboration. While their study emphasises framing techniques, this work highlights structural and credibility challenges unique to distressed economies.

Kang & Gearhart (2010), in their study on "Government Communication and Public Trust During Economic Decline," investigated how spokespersons influence trust amid recession, using surveys and media analysis. They found that empathetic messaging and policy clarity improved credibility, while evasion eroded confidence. The study concluded with recommendations for timely, audience-tailored communication. While their focus was on trust-building strategies, our study examines deeper structural barriers such as limited resources and polarised media facing spokespersons in severely distressed economies, extending their framework to more acute crises.

Taylor & Kent (2014), in "Crisis Communication and Image Repair in Economic Downturns," analysed government press conferences and public statements using discourse analysis. Their study found that proactive, solution-focused messaging mitigated reputational damage, while delayed responses amplified public scepticism. They recommended consistent stakeholder engagement and pre-emptive communication strategies. While their research centred on crisis response tactics, our work extends this by examining how severe economic constraints and institutional distrust further complicate image management for spokespersons in distressed economies.

Application of Theories

Image Restoration Theory posits that when an organisation or government faces reputational threats, it can adopt five major strategies to restore its image: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification (Benoit, 1995). In the case of Imo State, government spokespersons have often relied on denial and blame transferclaiming, for instance, that criticisms of poor welfare conditions are politically motivated or based on misinformation.

However, these strategies are inconsistent with Benoit's recommended responses in high-responsibility crises. More effective alternatives, such as corrective action (e.g., releasing timelines for salary and pension payments) and mortification (admitting failings and appealing for understanding), were notably absent in Imo's communication strategy (Benoit, 1997). Their absence has led to increased public frustration and negative media narratives.

Further insight is provided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), which argues that the public's perception of responsibility should guide the communicator's response strategy. In the case of Imo State, where the government is largely held responsible for economic grievances, rebuilding strategies focused on apology, transparency and tangible remedial action would be more appropriate than denial or diminishment. SCCT warns that failure to align strategy with perceived responsibility exacerbates reputational damage, which is evident in the growing cynicism among Imo citizens (Coombs, 2007; Nwogu, 2022).

Discussions

In a distressed economy, the role of government spokespersons becomes increasingly complex and multifaceted as they are tasked with managing the government's image amid public dissatisfaction, economic instability and heightened media scrutiny. These spokespersons face the challenge of balancing transparency and optimism, providing accurate information while maintaining a positive narrative that can foster public trust and confidence (Coombs, 2007). The dynamic between economic realities, public perception and media relations creates a challenging environment for effective image management.

Hence, in an economically distressed context, public perception is often shaped by frustration and skepticism. Citizens are more likely to question the effectiveness and accountability of their government, particularly as economic conditions lead to hardships such as job losses, inflation and declining public services (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Government spokespersons, in this scenario, are required to craft messages that acknowledge these difficulties while emphasising government efforts to address the situation. However, a recurring challenge is the potential misalignment between government messaging and the lived realities of the population. When government spokespersons fail to acknowledge the severity of economic challenges, they risk losing credibility, which can further erode public trust (Benoit, 1995). This trust deficit is particularly challenging for spokespersons in developing economies, such as Nigeria, where political instability and economic volatility create additional hurdles. In such environments, maintaining an optimistic yet realistic narrative becomes essential for preventing further deterioration of public trust.

Secondly, the relationship between government spokespersons and the media plays a critical role in image management, especially in a distressed economy where negative news dominates media coverage. Traditional media outlets, often seen as watchdogs, can amplify public dissatisfaction, making it challenging for spokespersons to control the narrative. Spokespersons must engage in strategic media relations, offering clear, factual and consistent messaging that can help counteract the negative framing often associated with economic distress (Holladay & Coombs, 2010). The rise of social media has further complicated the landscape for government spokespersons. On one hand, social

media offers a direct channel for communicating with the public, bypassing traditional media filters. On the other hand, it is a platform where misinformation and public dissent can spread rapidly. In a distressed economy, social media can amplify negative sentiment, making it difficult for spokespersons to manage crises effectively. As noted by Veil, Buehner & Palenchar (2011), social media crises can escalate quickly, requiring government spokespersons to respond with agility and transparency. Failure to engage appropriately on social media can lead to reputational damage, as spokespersons appear out of touch or unresponsive to public concerns.

Thirdly, one of the core challenges in image management for government spokespersons is maintaining ethical communication practices while managing public perception. The temptation to engage in spin or propaganda becomes stronger in distressed economies, where governments may feel pressured to project an overly positive image to prevent panic or unrest. However, unethical communication practices can lead to long-term reputational damage. Coombs & Holladay (2012) argue that transparency and honesty are fundamental to crisis communication, even when the message is not favourable to the government's image. Government spokespersons must navigate the fine line between presenting a positive outlook and misleading the public. Ethical communication requires acknowledging economic difficulties and providing realistic assessments, rather than resorting to misinformation or deflection. For instance, during economic crises in Greece and Argentina, spokespersons who prioritised transparency over spin were more successful in maintaining long-term public trust (Fawkes, 2015).

Fourthly, crisis communication theory, particularly Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory, offers valuable insights into how government spokespersons can effectively manage public perceptions during economic distress. Benoit outlines strategies such as corrective action, where spokespersons communicate the steps the government is taking to resolve the economic crisis and mortification, where the government admits fault and seeks forgiveness from the public. For example, during the 2008 financial crisis, governments that employed corrective action strategies, such as communicating policy measures aimed at stabilising the economy, were more successful in maintaining a positive image than those that engaged in denial or deflection. In Nigeria, the government's response to the oil price crash of 2016 demonstrated the importance of communicating both short-term and long-term economic recovery plans to reassure the public.

Therefore, the Imo State case supports the broader argument of this study: that government spokespersons in distressed economies often operate with limited tools, poor strategic orientation and a reactive mind-set. These factors worsen public perception, erode credibility and hinder effective governance communication. As seen in Imo, the absence of theory-driven, empathetic crisis communication has deepened the government's image problem rather than resolving it. This illustrates that effective image management, especially in an economically distressed context, requires government spokespersons to go beyond media rebuttals and cultivate strategic, theory-informed communication practices that prioritize public trust and long-term reputation.

Finally, in distressed economies, cultural and political factors also play significant roles in shaping the effectiveness of government communication strategies. In countries with high levels of public distrust toward government institutions, such as Nigeria, spokespersons face the additional challenge of overcoming skepticism. Public distrust is often rooted in historical issues of corruption and mismanagement, which can exacerbate the difficulties of managing the government's image during an economic crisis (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Moreover, in political systems where media freedom is limited, government spokespersons may have more control over the narrative but at the cost of public trust. In environments where the media is seen as an extension of the government, citizens may be less inclined to believe official statements, perceiving them as propaganda rather than transparent communication.

Therefore, the role of government spokespersons in image management during economic distress is fraught with challenges, including public skepticism, media relations, ethical dilemmas and the rapid spread of information (and misinformation) via social media. While the strategies outlined by crisis communication and image restoration theories offer useful frameworks, the unique political, cultural and economic contexts of distressed economies require nuanced approaches. Ethical communication, strategic media relations and proactive crisis management are essential for government spokespersons to maintain public trust and effectively manage the government's image during times of economic hardship.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In a distressed economy, government spokespersons play a critical role in shaping public perception and maintaining trust. Their task of managing the government's image is complicated by economic hardships, public frustration and an often skeptical media environment. The complexities are further exacerbated by the rise of social media, which can both facilitate direct communication and spread misinformation rapidly. To effectively manage the government's image during economic crises, spokespersons must strike a delicate balance between transparency and optimism, ethical communication and strategic media engagement. Theories such as crisis communication and image restoration provide valuable frameworks for understanding how spokespersons can navigate these challenges. However, the unique socio-political and cultural contexts of countries like Nigeria require tailored approaches that acknowledge the public's economic realities while fostering hope and confidence. Ethical communication practices, rooted in transparency and honesty, are essential for sustaining long-term public trust, even when the message is not favourable. The credibility of government spokespersons ultimately depends on their ability to acknowledge the challenges while convincingly communicating the government's efforts to address them. Based on the conclusion, the researchers make the following recommendations:

1. **Adopt Ethical Communication Practices:** Government spokespersons should prioritise transparency and honesty in their communication, especially during economic crises. Misleading or overly optimistic narratives can backfire, eroding public trust and damaging the government's reputation in the long term.
2. **Leverage Social Media Responsibly:** Social media can be a powerful tool for engaging directly with the public. Spokespersons should use these platforms to share accurate and timely information, while also addressing misinformation proactively. Quick and transparent responses to social media crises are crucial for maintaining credibility.
3. **Enhance Crisis Communication Training:** Government spokespersons should undergo regular crisis communication training to equip them with the skills to handle economic distress effectively. This training should focus on crisis management strategies, media relations and public engagement in difficult times.
4. **Engage the Media Strategically:** Building strong relationships with the media can help government spokespersons control the narrative more effectively. Strategic media engagement, where accurate information is provided consistently, can reduce the spread of negative or misleading stories during economic crises.

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