

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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