The Impact of Crises on Rebuilding the National Image: The Paradox of Nigeria's Rebranding Project

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Abstract: This paper sets out to examine the ideals of rebranding in the national image rebuilding process, fetching examples from Nigeria's experience. The discourse also examines the concepts of image and the impact of anti-social behaviour of citizens on the nation's image within the international community. This includes indiscriminate imaging of violence or crime scenes through photographs and written reports by citizens of the country. The paradox of the development of indiscriminate imaging and reporting of violence through photographs is antagonistic to Nigeria's image rebranding project. This paper acquires data through observational and analytical methods. This paper concludes that the rebranding of Nigeria and other African nations where violence, corruption, and anti-social behaviours strive is almost impossible until there is a change in the attitude of the citizens. The paper recommends that the war against corrupt practices, suicide bombings, and terrorist attacks on innocent citizens of Nigeria should be a collective effort of every Nigerian who wishes the country's image well, otherwise the country will continually suffer the risk of perpetual alienation effects.

Keywords: Crises Imaging, National Image Rebuilding, Rebranding

Introduction

Nigeria's rebranding project was launched in Abuja, Nigeria in March 2009 with a slogan: 'Nigeria, Good People, Great Nation'. The former Nigeria's Information Minister who was in office at that time was the Chief Pilot of the project. At the event, the former Information Minister, Professor Dora Akunyili remarked that 'Nigeria cannot wait until it solves all her problems before it can stand to give serious thought to re-branding its battered image… because our development is tied to our image' (Aririesike 2009, 1). She obviously misplaced the priorities of rebranding and assumed the process to be a project to be executed at the surface. Akunyili's expression however underscored the significance of a country's image and the need to address image challenges that the nation was suffering even at that time in national development.

Nigeria's rebranding project was an anticipated rebirth designed to market Nigeria's image to the international community on the belief that the nation has its hidden strengths apart from its weaknesses. Before then and even now, Nigerians are labeled and stereotyped negatively at most international airports while others are subjected to intensive security checks anywhere they go. They are treated with utmost suspicion. In the minds of the international community members, most Nigerians are fraudsters, racketeers and criminals. Others believed some Nigerians, if not all are dubious, rebellious and generally corrupt. The international media of communication including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Cable News Network (CNN) have been at the forefront of transmitting negative signals about Nigeria to the international community. The truth or otherwise of the negative stereotypes are inconsequential at this point.

The issue now is the global internet has become an accomplice of the likes of BBC and CNN in reporting crises and crimes in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. This is not unacceptable, however, the indiscriminate representation of images about violence, crime and general crises in Nigeria by inexperienced Nigerians who have access to the internet platforms such as facebooks and blogs using technological accessories like Ipads, laptop or desktop computers and sophisticated mobile phones became an albatross that contributed significantly to the frustration of the Nigeria's Rebranding Project. It is an indication that images and written reports published can make or mar the national image rebuilding process. This practice of indiscriminate reporting

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in words and photographs, known as citizen journalism, appears to remain unchecked and uncensored by the appropriate authorities in Nigeria.

The thrust of paper is to examine the ideals of rebranding in national image rebuilding process fetching examples from the Nigeria's experience. The discourse also examines the concepts of image and the impact of anti-social behaviour of citizens on the nation's image within the international community including indiscriminate imaging of violent or crime scenes through still photographs and written reports by any citizen of the country. Various photographs of violent crises in Nigeria displayed on the global internet are also represented in this essay. The objective of this discourse is to correct the notion about national image rebranding, to demystify the negative implication of public journalism through imaging and to encourage positive attitudes and reports using images that would create positive stereotypes as much as the question of nation image rebuilding is concerned.

Nigeria's Image and Crises Imaging

An image is originally derived from the Latin word *imago* which means an artifact that depicts or records visual perception usually a physical object or a person. An image can also refer to a mental picture that exists in an individual's mind which is like something one remembers or imagines. There is however a relationship between a physical and a mental image. A mental image may be constructed out of one's familiarity with the physical image. In another development, the subject of an image needs not be real; it may be an abstract concept, such as an imaginary entity. Thus the term 'image' is viewed in this discourse first to connote mental constructs or the way a person represents reality to himself. It also connotes sets of visible attributes of a product, object, or person that are "projected" or "transmitted" to the consciousness of an audience. In summary, an image is a human construct imposed on an array of perceived attributes projected by an object, event or person (Nimmo and Savage 1976, 8). Nigeria's image in this context is therefore defined by the international perception about the country's citizens, the reflections of reality of the perceived identities and the sources of information affecting the image.

International perceptions about Nigerians are no doubt negative. Nigerians are known to be corrupt, fraudulent and religiously fanatical. The insatiable quest for wealth and political offices and subsequent assumption of power are opportunities for Nigerians to embezzle public funds and to indulge in money laundering. They employ all strategies to perpetrate themselves in the office. These corrupt practices are exemplified in 2013 videos of the free-for-all-fight that ensued in the Rivers State House of Assembly in Nigeria where 'honourable' members and their shameful acts were circulated through the internet. Also the recent accusation of Nigerians over falsification of the 'yellow cards' and their subsequent repatriation from South Africa to Nigeria was not only reported in the national media but also circulated pictorially on the internet. The incessant killings perpetrated by the 'Boko Haram' (a religious fanatical group that is against western education) in Nigeria is also another stereotype of religious fanaticism and the consequences of the sect's deadly activities and other communal clashes are well circulated through the global internet by eye witnesses.

Such images are actual reflections of realities that confirm the already perceived notions about Nigerians by the international community. The danger however is the questionable manner by which the sources of information disclose the images. Sources of these image transmissions exercise the agenda setting and the gate keeping theories by deciding what to report to the global audience. The manner of reporting Nigeria through images alone can be inimical to the ethics of journalistic practice in the country, moreso as the practice is common among members of the public who have little of no knowledge about development journalism.

Crises imaging therefore deals with the process of gathering information pictorially about crimes, violence communal clashes and political skirmishes from a given geographical region.

Crises imaging has partly affected Nigeria's national image rebuilding process negatively. The more the country strives to promote its story pictorially and otherwise, the more the Nigerians are reportedly committing atrocities while indiscriminate imaging worsens the process. This has sustained the various perceptions of Nigerians' image in the minds of members of the international community. Crises imaging and the resultant negative stereotypes about Nigeria's image abroad was what necessitated the launching the re-branding Nigeria project. Although the project has met with enormous challenges while its success remains a great doubt, they havoc done by images remains a significant factor in Nigeria's negative image. The continuous transmission of such images till date is a clear indication that Nigeria's national image rebuilding efforts may remain frustrated for some time.

Branding and Rebranding a Nation's Image

A brand is people's perception about who you are and what people think about you (Ariyibi-Oke 2010). It is a product, a service or in this sense, a nation set apart and recognized for its unique qualities. A nation is branded in the instance where its qualities are perceived and differentiated from another country's characteristics by the international community. The creative strategy used to sell a brand is based on the development of a strong and memorable identity through image advertising (Belch and Belch 2001, 266). The assertion that positive communication in words or pictures about brand enhances positive stereotypes is highly contestable because the written information about the product or nation may be doctored and as such false. The pictorial representation of a tangible product can partly reveal the outer beauty without the inner reality.

Either way, a brand may possess the ugly inner reality while its image may be projected positively. Thus, a brand is not necessarily a logo, not a name, not a slogan, not a product, not an identity alone and not the advertising campaign. A brand is not what you call yourself but what people experience about you. Branding a nations' image is a collective responsibility of the leaders and their subjects. It involves individual sacrifices and patriotism of all citizens, faithfulness and right attitude towards government projects, sincerity, transparency and respect for the rule of national and international law at individual, local, state and national levels. The absence of these brand qualities paves way for the negative perception about a nation's image and therefore calls for rebranding.

'Rebranding' is a term that is commonly used for enhancing marketing of goods and services. In marketing, when a particular commodity is not in high demand as a result of poor quality or counterfeiting, the manufacturers rebrand by improving the quality through packaging or even changing the name, trademark or colour of the product. Essentially, therefore, rebranding is done to change customer's perception, through the improvement of service delivery, and every other thing that the customer desires. Rebranding is therefore the creation of a new look and feeling for an established product in order to differentiate the product from its competitors'. It is a marketing strategy aimed at developing a product and differentiating the identity of the product in the minds of consumers, investors and competitors in order to distance itself from negative connotations of the previous branding.

Rebranding a nation's image is a second step in the branding process. It is a process that caters for the shortfalls of a nation's brand. It involves sincere attitudes, commitment and hard work of the nation's citizens, economic, social-cultural and political advancement of the nation's sectors arising from past mistakes, and communication of same through verbal and non-verbal channels to the international community. A rebranded nation attracts more investments, promotes tourism and enhances speedy development. A rebranded nation's image is easily perceived by the international community through news stories, advertisements or some information but the accompanying images in form of photographs transmitted independently or otherwise are mere confirmations.

The Paradox of Nigeria's Crises Image Rebranding and Reactions

The paradox of Nigeria's image rebranding is anchored on the assumptions that Nigerians still promote corrupt practices to a significant extent at all levels. They indulge in communal and religious crises and suffer untold vices resulting from political insincerity while singing the slogan 'Nigeria: Good People Great Nation' through national and international media stations perhaps to attract the admiration of the international community. The contradiction is evident in the nation's vices such as police molestation of innocent citizen at every slightest provocation, secret cult movement, political crises, kidnapping for ransom, religious killings, pipeline vandalization, embezzlement of public funds and many more. While these vices persist, attempts to conceal them are planned under the rebranding project designed to project the country's image in positive light.

Nigeria is bedeviled by bad leadership occasioned by flawed electoral processes, buccaneering corruption, religious bickering and mutual distrust (Sahara Reporters 2009). Economic opportunists, political adventurers and ethnic and religious bigots deceive the masses by wearing the toga of patriotism, statesmanship and altruism. The Nigerian re-branding project is therefore a paradox which has failed due to adoption of a wrong sense of what branding is all about, lack of proper corporate social strategies and wrong chain of brand structure. Other reasons include lack of collective efforts and commitment of all Nigerians towards real branding, starved and deprived citizens and non-consultation with professional image branding consultants (Ariyibi-Oke 2010).

The most challenging era of Nigeria's image rebuilding is the current *Boko Haram* saga and the persistent battles among the sect, the Federal Government troops and the innocent citizens. In Kano, northern Nigeria, protests over the Federal Government's withdrawal of fuel subsidy were triggered by the *Boko Haram* bombings in January 2012. These bombings were preceded by bomb attacks by the sect on United Nations' building and the Police Headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria. Also of note were the sect's bombings on Christmas Day in northern Nigerian towns and cities of Madala in Niger State, and Jos and Gadaka in Plateau State (Leremont 2012). The current crises in Nigeria contributing to the building of the nation's image before the international community include the activities of the terrorist sect *Boko Haram*, nonviolent demonstrations from unions (National Labour Congress, Petroleum Workers, Academic Staff Union of Universities, Health Workers and Nigerian Students) who are demanding economic justice and the political tussles, fights and name callings in the political sectors.

Figure 1: Ambushed and killed persons by a religious sect given mass burial in Jos, Nigeria 2012.

Source: Gistmania.com

One of the major reactions of some members of the international community to the predicaments of Nigeria includes the directive to international citizens to avoid visits to some Northern Parts of Nigeria. The US declared that 14 states in Nigeria namely Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara were unsafe and advised its citizens to avoid visiting those areas ahead of the 12th anniversary of September 11, 2001 attacks on the twin towers and the World Trade Centre (Niyi 2013). Canada and Taiwan had earlier urged their nationals to avoid non-essential travel to Nigeria during the last week of December, 2012 following the incessant bomb strikes in Nigeria at that period, citing fear of another terror attack (Alechenu, Owuamanam and Azania 2012). In addition to these perceptions about Nigeria, most Nigerian certificates of graduates are hardly recognized abroad due to the perceived sharp practices and unstable learning academic calendars occasioned by academic staff unions strikes and closures of schools caused by students incessant demonstrations.

Figure 2: A scene from *Boko Haram*'s bombing of a Catholic Church in Nigeria on Christmas day 2011

Source: telegraph.co.uk

The overall implication of Nigeria's crises image is international community's sudden and unavoidable alleviation, stigma against Nigerians travelling abroad, xenophobic sentiments among international community member states and fear of investments in Nigeria. Other far reaching implications include delayed development and loss of trust on Nigerians. Nigeria's image is still in a comatose state in view of corruption, economic backwardness, insecurity and other social vices that have paraded the nation's landscape (Ayopo 2012). In the midst of Nigeria's crises ridden image, rebranding is bound to fail. A favourable image cannot be bought or made, but can be commanded through the self-righteousness, and behavioral realities and respect for the rule of law of the nation by country's citizens (Hasan 2013, 536).

Conclusion

Images are either abstract (perceived), concrete and visible (Photographs and pictures). Whatever form they exit, Nigeria's image is one of crises. These crises are actually inherent in the country. They are politically, economically and religiously motivated. These images are transmitted to the international community through written information, published articles, news stories or pictures. The images are abstractly conceived in some cases by what others see Nigerians do or what they hear about Nigeria. The images form a brand of Nigeria. The recent brand of Nigeria has been quite detestable and unattractive to the international community. This image triggered of the idea

of rebranding Nigeria project in 2011. The project was actually flagged off but greeted with seemingly contradictory reports about Nigerians, real actions of the citizens and photographs of realities in the country, especially by those who do not understand the implication of crises imaging to Nigeria's development.

Nigeria's national image rebuilding process is therefore a paradox of vision; situations where efforts are made to secure a good image for the country internationally while unwholesome acts and traits of the citizens capable of derailing the country's image are still consistent. Nigeria's image will remain crises ridden except Nigerians command the will-power to change it positively. To achieve this, Nigerian politicians need behaviour change. They should remain committed to the sacrificial course of leading the nation to greater heights. Nigerian citizens must shun corrupt practices such as falsehood. Every Nigerian at individual, community, national and international level must imbibe the spirit of honesty, accountability and respect for the rule of law. Nigerians should understand that writing, speaking or transmitting pictures about crises in Nigeria only confirms the nation's crises ridden image. However, if such crises are brought to the barest minimum; if the Boko Haram sect ceases its hostilities and the nation's leadership live up to its billings, these crises will not occur and there will be no negative image to capture or to transmit to the international community. Rebranding the nation's crises image at such a point would be more metaphorical than paradoxical.

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