Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Buhari Administration Communication Strategies to Manage the IPOB'S Agitations by the South-East Residents

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Abstract

This study evaluate the effectiveness of the Buhari administration communication strategies to manage the IPOB's agitations by the south-east residents. Two objectives were drawn from the study, among which was to find out the South-East residents awareness of communication strategies used by the Buhari administration in managing agitations by IPOB; investigate South-East residents assessment of the appropriateness of the communication strategies used by the Buhari administration in managing agitations by IPOB. This study was anchored on the Attribution Theory of Conflict. This is because it focuses on how people draw inferences about the critical reasons behind human behavior. The study reviewed the communication strategies involved in conflict management which are; active listening, clarification, empathy, collaboration, negotiation, nonviolent communication, cultural sensitivity, assertiveness, effective communication channels. The study concludes that the Buhari administration needs to be more strategic and creative in its communication approach to managing the IPOB's agitations. The study recommends that evaluation Buhari administration communication strategies should assess the effectiveness of the communication strategies in achieving the set objectives. This could be done by comparing the level of awareness, trust, and confidence among the South-East residents before and after the implementation of the strategies, analyzing the level of misinformation and propaganda about the government's actions.

Introduction

Nigeria's present identity is a mosaic of diverse ethnic groups and tribes that once existed independently prior to British colonization. These included the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Fulani, Igala, Ijo, Ibibio, Efik, Tiv, Jukun, Idoma, and others, each with distinct cultures and beliefs (Orugbani, 2005). The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates aimed to unify the country for economic reasons, despite lacking permanence (Gavin & Oyemakinde, 2001). The Colonial Office didn't view it as a lasting solution. Nigeria achieved political independence in 1960 but encountered challenges like the 1967 Biafra secession attempt due to dissatisfaction and disregard of agreements (Cookey, 2016). The Nigerian Civil War resulted from the breach of the Aburi Accord and the creation of states that intensified secessionist demands (Nwamu, 2017).

Although the Nigerian Civil War ended in 1970, geopolitical and ethnopolitical conflicts, along with Biafra agitations, persisted (Alumona et al., 2017). The transition to democracy in 1999 saw a resurgence of ethno-nationalist movements, including the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), aiming for peaceful Biafran separation led by Ralph Uwazuruike. Another group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), emerged in 2012, led by Nnamdi Kanu, advocating for Biafran independence through a referendum. The group claims the southeast's marginalization and oppression by the government (Orugbani, 2005).

IPOB's call for secession led to it being declared a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government, which fears its impact on national unity and territorial integrity (Alumona et al., 2017). Protests and clashes with security forces have occurred, drawing international attention (Orugbani, 2005). Some argue that addressing the southeast's marginalization is crucial for resolving the Biafra issue (Alumona et al., 2017). Despite calls for dialogue, the government maintains a tough stance against separatist groups like IPOB, leaving a peaceful resolution elusive (Orugbani, 2005).

Nigeria's diverse ethnic landscape underwent British-led unification attempts, resulting in challenges like the 1967 Biafra secession attempt. The country faces ongoing conflicts and Biafra agitations, including IPOB's pursuit of a referendum for Biafran independence. While some call for addressing root causes, the government's firm stance underscores the complexity of resolving the Biafra issue (Alumona et al., 2017).

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and agitations

Secessionist movements have prominently shaped the socio-political landscape in various countries. In Africa, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) emerged to advocate for Biafra's independence from Nigeria (Sawe, 2017). IPOB is Africa's second-largest separatist movement after the Polisario Front, which was founded in 1973 to seek Western Sahara's independence from

Morocco (Sawe, 2017). Other significant African separatist movements include the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance, established in 1982, aiming for Casamance's separation from Senegal, and the Somali National Movement, which declared Somaliland's independence from Somalia (Sawe, 2017). Europe and America also host secessionist movements, such as Catalonia's movement in Spain and the Cape Party in South Africa's Western Cape (Alagbe, 2017).

The founding date of IPOB, the Indigenous People of Biafra, has sparked debates among authors. Agbo (2020) suggests IPOB's establishment in 2007 after the United Nations' indigenous people's declaration. Emeka Emekesiri and others filed a case in 2012, indicating IPOB's intent for self-determination (Agbo, 2020). Sluiter (2016) states IPOB formed in 2009 following Nnamdi Kanu's rift with Uwazuruike, the MASSOB leader, and Kanu assumed IPOB leadership in 2012. Some authors place IPOB's establishment in 2015, coinciding with the start of the Buhari administration (Julius-Adeoye, 2017; Alumona et al., 2017). However, IPOB's Facebook post from January 12, 2014, and Bello (2017) indicate IPOB's active pursuit of Biafra's independence by 2013. The group gained notoriety around 2015 but had been active earlier (Sawe, 2017).

Nnamdi Kanu leads IPOB's faction focusing on his leadership (Sawe, 2017). Born on September 23, 1967, Kanu holds British citizenship, practiced Judaism, and was educated at the University of Nsukka and London Metropolitan University. He directs Radio Biafra from London (Wikipedia, 2021). IPOB emerged in 2014 after the arrest of the MASSOB leader, seeking to reinvigorate Biafra's cause due to perceived political compromise (Julius-Adeoye, 2017). IPOB's ranks mainly consist of youth seeking change (Julius-Adeoye, 2017). Key figures in IPOB include Kanu, Ikechukwu Enyiagu, Emmanuel Okafor, Emma Powerful, Anayo Chukwu-Okpara, Emma Nmezu, Clifford Iroanya, and national and zonal coordinators across different countries (Aljazeera, 2021).

Nnamdi Kanu and other IPOB leaders were arrested in 2017, resulting in protests and clashes with the armed forces (Bello, 2017). Despite the 2017 proscription, IPOB's activities continued, prompting the Buhari administration to employ military intervention and communication strategies to address the movement (Salawu, 2018). This approach sparked criticism domestically and internationally, raising concerns about human rights violations (Bello, 2017; Salawu, 2018).

Communication Strategies Used by the Buhari Administration in the Management of IPOB Agitations

In December 2015, the Nigerian Federal Government initiated dialogue efforts with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which IPOB declined due to Nnamdi Kanu's continued detention (Sluiter, 2016). In 2017, President Buhari's administration, led by Vice President Prof. Yemi Osinbajo, embarked on consultations to address IPOB's concerns and promote peace (Agbakwuru, 2017; Premium Times, 2017). Traditional rulers and government officials participated, aiming to foster coexistence (Agbakwuru, 2017).

The South East traditional rulers' meeting, held on June 18, 2017, aimed to address IPOB's agitation for secession and the Arewa Consultative Forum's ultimatum for Igbo people to leave Northern states by October 1, 2017. Government officials including the Acting President, Vice

President, Deputy Senate President, and ministers attended alongside South East traditional leaders (Agbakwuru, 2017). The Acting President acknowledged IPOB's complaints rooted in perceived marginalization but condemned their unlawful agitation. He emphasized the consequences of hate speech and divisive actions while reaffirming Nigeria's unity as an indivisible sovereign state. The government pledged to address the grievances, uphold justice, and ensure citizens' inclusion (Agbakwuru, 2017; Premium Times, 2017).

Consultative meetings involved the Federal Government, traditional rulers, religious leaders, security agency heads, and state governors, seeking to communicate the government's stance on agitations and foster understanding (Awka, 2017). These meetings aimed to counter the eviction notice issued by the Coalition of Northern Youth (CNY) in response to IPOB's sit-at-home order (Awka, 2017). The CNY's notice was initially set from June 6 to October 1, 2017, but was revoked following the consultative meetings (Awka, 2017).

Criticism emerged over the Buhari administration's use of armed forces to address IPOB's agitations, with various studies and reports condemning this approach (Bello, 2017; Alumona et al., 2017; Julius-Adeoye, 2017; Sluiter, 2016; Ibeanu et al., 2016; Adibe et al., 2017; Alagbe, 2017). Despite existing studies, limited focus has been given to the administration's communication strategies concerning IPOB's agitations. The present study aims to bridge this gap in the literature.

Statement of the Problem

In 2015, the Buhari administration faced heightened calls for Biafra's secession by IPOB. Criticized for military intervention, the government used communication strategies, including dialogue, attempted in 2015 but rejected due to Nnamdi Kanu's detention (Omeje & Eke, 2021). Following a quit notice to Igbo people in Northern Nigeria, consultations were held with stakeholders from South-East and North in 2017. However, IPOB deemed the engagement inadequate (Omeje & Eke, 2021). Despite efforts, IPOB's agitations persist, leading to the group's proscription. IPOB continues calling for a referendum and sit-at-home protests, raising concerns about the administration's communication strategy effectiveness (Omeje & Eke, 2021).

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims at investigating South-East residents' assessment of the Buhari administration's communication strategies used in the management of IPOB agitations. In specific terms the study seeks to:

1. find out the South-East residents awareness of communication strategies used by the Buhari administration in managing agitations by IPOB;
2. Investigate South-East residents assessment of the appropriateness of the communication strategies used by the Buhari administration in managing agitations by IPOB.

Literature Review

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on the Attribution Theory of Conflict. This is because it focuses on how people draw inferences about the critical reasons behind human behavior.

Attribution Theory of Conflict

Littlejohn (1996) introduced the attribution theory of conflict, developed by Alan Sillars, to elucidate how people infer reasons behind behavior, influencing conflict resolution strategies. This communication-centered theory suggests three conflict resolution strategies: avoidance, competitive, and cooperative, each characterized by distinct communication patterns.

The avoidance strategy employs indirect or no communication to minimize conflicts, involving topics evasion, equivocation, and non-committal statements. The competitive strategy, marked by negative communication, escalates conflicts with confrontational behaviors including criticism, rejection, and hostility. In contrast, the cooperative strategy, the most effective, encourages open and positive communication, fostering information exchange and integrative solutions.

However, criticism exists for this theory. Littlejohn (1996) highlights its potential reductionism and mechanistic view of human behavior, which may not always align with reality. People can exhibit irrationality and biases when making causal inferences.

Nonetheless, the attribution theory of conflict remains applicable, as Littlejohn (1996) suggests that audiences' assessment of the Buhari administration's communication strategies hinges on their attributions of both the administration and IPOB agitations. By investigating factors influencing South-East residents' perceptions, we can unveil audience attributions concerning the IPOB issue and the Buhari administration.

Conceptual Review

Conflict Management

Conflict, an enduring aspect of human societies throughout history, necessitates adept management for societal growth and stability (Akinwale, 2011). As Ropers (2002) elucidates, contemporary livelihoods are intricately linked to conflict handling within and among groups. The manner in which conflicts are managed and resolved profoundly impacts lives at community, state, and national levels. This recognition has propelled scholars to dedicate considerable attention to conflict management in diverse contexts. Ropers (2002) defines conflict resolution as an endeavor to enhance communication and relationships among conflicting groups. Conversely, conflict transformation involves sustained efforts to address root causes, fortify connections between

parties, and cultivate conflict management capabilities. Both resolution and transformation are integral to effective conflict management (Ropers, 2002).

Scholarly perspectives on the interchangeability of conflict resolution and management diverge. While Osisioma (2016) considers conflict management inclusive of techniques for stimulation and resolution, Osabiya (2015) contends that resolution exclusively pertains to reducing, ending, or eliminating conflicts. Rahim (2011) and Usoro, Ekpenyong, and Effiong (2014) share the view that conflict management seeks to mitigate negative consequences and enhance benefits through strategies promoting learning and societal functioning. Ropers (2002) adds that conflict management encompasses efforts to regulate, prevent, and terminate violence.

Moreover, conflict management entails curbing ongoing conflicts to avert uncontrollable escalation, minimizing violence, property damage, and handling long-lasting disputes (Dalung, 2013; Usoro, Ekpenyong, & Effiong, 2014). Black (as cited in Akinwale, n.d.) simplifies conflict management as grievance handling. While some scholars perceive resolution and management as synonymous, others posit them as distinct processes with disparate goals and tactics. Ropers (2002) posits that constructive and mutually beneficial solutions characterize conflict management. Its efficacy hinges on employing methods and approaches that yield positive outcomes for parties and the broader context. Strategy is a common thread in conflict management definitions, which Aminu and Marfo (2010) describe as the procedures facilitating conflict control or eradication. Similarly, Nwagbara and Brown (2014) and Botes (2003) characterize conflict management as strategic methods.

To elucidate "strategy" in conflict management, Blanchard (2011) views it as a plan for goal attainment, often articulated as a "strategy statement." According to Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, and Agee (2003), strategy statements provide instructions, guidelines, and themes for program achievement. Strategies are designed in alignment with predetermined objectives. Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2010) assert that once goals are established, appropriate strategies must be devised.

Conflict management strategies are pivotal for resolution and desired outcomes. Adeyemi and Ademilua (2010) define these as deliberate action plans executed by entities and authorities to meet conflict-specific objectives. Strategies vary based on institution type, conflict nature, stage, and parties involved. Internal systems, methods, and mechanisms aid conflict resolution (Adeyemi & Ademilua, 2010). Effective strategies necessitate grasping conflict dynamics and parties' goals. Thus, meticulous evaluation precedes strategy implementation.

Communication Strategies in Conflict Management

Conflict is a natural phenomenon that arises from differences in opinions, values, and interests between individuals or groups. It can occur in different settings such as workplaces, families, communities, and international relations. When conflicts arise, they can lead to negative outcomes such as stress, tension, and even violence if not managed effectively. Communication is a crucial element in conflict management since it determines the success or failure of the process. Therefore, this paper discusses communication strategies in conflict management.

Active Listening

Active listening is one of the essential communication strategies in conflict management. Active listening involves paying attention to the speaker, understanding their message, and responding appropriately. It is important to listen actively during conflict resolution since it shows that the listener is interested in the speaker's opinions, and it enables the listener to understand the speaker's perspective. According to Moore (2003), active listening is a vital tool in conflict resolution since it enables the parties involved to develop mutual understanding and find common ground. Active listening involves several techniques such as paraphrasing, summarizing, and reflecting. Paraphrasing involves restating the speaker's message in one's words, while summarizing involves providing a concise overview of the speaker's message. Reflecting involves mirroring the speaker's emotions and feelings.

Clarification

Clarification is another crucial communication strategy in conflict management. Clarification involves asking questions to obtain additional information, and it is useful in situations where the message is not clear. Clarification helps to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations, which can escalate conflicts. According to Lewicki et al. (2016), clarification is a useful technique in conflict resolution since it allows the parties involved to clarify their positions and interests.

Empathy

Empathy is a vital communication strategy in conflict management. Empathy involves understanding the other party's emotions and feelings and showing concern for their well-being. Empathy is crucial in conflict resolution since it helps to build trust and mutual respect. When parties feel understood and respected, they are more likely to cooperate in finding a solution to the conflict. According to Deutsch and Coleman (2000), empathy is essential in conflict resolution since it allows the parties involved to appreciate each other's perspectives and develop a sense of shared responsibility.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is another crucial communication strategy in conflict management. Assertiveness involves expressing one's opinions, needs, and desires in a clear and direct manner without infringing on others' rights. Assertiveness is important in conflict resolution since it enables the parties involved to communicate their positions effectively without resorting to aggression or violence. According to Fisher and Ury (1991), assertiveness is crucial in conflict resolution since it enables the parties involved to communicate their interests and needs clearly.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a vital communication strategy in conflict management. Collaboration involves working together to find a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict. Collaboration is important in conflict resolution since it enables the parties involved to find creative solutions that meet their needs and interests. According to Pruitt and Carnevale (1993), collaboration is essential in conflict

resolution since it enables the parties involved to generate multiple options and evaluate them objectively.

Negotiation

Negotiation is another crucial communication strategy in conflict management. Negotiation involves a process of give and take in which the parties involved try to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Negotiation is important in conflict resolution since it enables the parties involved to find a solution that meets their needs and interests. According to Lewicki et al. (2016), negotiation is essential in conflict resolution since it allows the parties involved to explore different options and reach a solution that is acceptable to all.

Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent communication is a vital communication strategy in conflict management. Nonviolent communication involves expressing one's needs and feelings in a way that does not hurt or offend the other party. Nonviolent communication is important in conflict resolution since it enables the parties involved to communicate effectively without resorting to aggression or violence. According to Rosenberg (2003), nonviolent communication is crucial in conflict resolution since it helps the parties involved to identify their underlying needs and interests and communicate them effectively.

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity is a crucial communication strategy in conflict management. Cultural sensitivity involves understanding and respecting the cultural differences between the parties involved in the conflict. Cultural sensitivity is important in conflict resolution since it helps to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations that can escalate the conflict. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), cultural sensitivity is essential in conflict resolution since it enables the parties involved to appreciate each other's cultural perspectives and values.

Effective Communication Channels

Effective communication channels are vital in conflict management. Effective communication channels involve using appropriate communication channels to communicate with the parties involved in the conflict. Effective communication channels are important in conflict resolution since they ensure that the message is conveyed clearly and effectively. According to Rahim (2002), effective communication channels are crucial in conflict resolution since they ensure that the parties involved receive the message in a timely and accurate manner.

Effectiveness of the Buhari Administration Communication Strategies to Manage the IPOB's Agitations

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a Nigerian separatist group striving to establish an independent state for the Igbo people in the southeast. However, the Nigerian government, particularly under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, has faced criticism for its handling of IPOB's activities (Adagbo, 2018). A notable critique is the lack of engagement and

reliance on confrontational methods, escalating tensions (Akinwotu, 2017). Effective communication would entail addressing root grievances through dialogue, as avoiding these concerns can fuel separatism (Alabi, 2018). Unfortunately, the government has also faced allegations of using its media outlets to spread misinformation and demonize IPOB, further damaging relations (Azeez, 2019).

An improved approach would involve sharing objective information to address IPOB's worries and establishing a platform for constructive discussions between the government and IPOB (Okoli & Asuzu, 2019). Transparency and accountability have also been issues, with the government limiting access to independent media, undermining public trust (Okoli & Asuzu, 2019). Consequently, the Buhari administration's communication strategy has aggravated conflicts and strained relations. For better results, a strategy emphasizing dialogue, fact-based discourse, and transparency would be more effective in managing IPOB's agitations.

Review of Empirical Studies

Idegwu (2015) conducted a qualitative study entitled "Pre-war and War-time Conflict Management Strategies of the Nigeria Civil War," with the aim of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies employed by conflicting parties during the pre-war and war-time phases of the Civil War in Nigeria. The study sought to determine the reasons behind the escalation of the war, the conflict management strategies utilized before and during the war, and the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies. To achieve these objectives, the researcher employed descriptive and case study research designs, as secondary data on conflict management strategies needed to be described and interpreted. In addition, certain phenomena required description and interpretation through the observation and words of specific respondents.

Davies (2015) traced the origin of the term "propaganda" to its Latin root and found that it was originally a religious term used to describe the work of a committee charged with dispersing the Roman Catholic Faith. The term was known as de fide propaganda. Davies (2015) further noted that propaganda involves an explicit set of goals and requires the careful selection of symbols, facts, and arguments to achieve these goals. During times of conflict, propaganda is used by the parties involved to gather and inspire their constituencies to take the desired actions (Davies, 2014). To intensify the desired outcomes, important facts may be omitted or altered, and the target receivers are often distracted from other relevant information, as reported by Davies (2015). For instance, during the Civil War in Biafra, propaganda was the only option available to the Biafran side following the blocking of their means of livelihood, sea, land air, and the resulting massive starvation. According to Davies (2015), the use of propaganda was effective and contributed to stretching the war to three years. In summary, propaganda is a deliberate and systematic attempt to manipulate people's perceptions and behavior through the careful selection of information and symbols, often in times of conflict, with the ultimate aim of achieving specific goals.

Agu (2013) conducted a cross-sectional survey research study to investigate the effectiveness of conflict management strategies and their impact on employees' performance in Julius Berger

Nigeria Plc, Bonny Island, from August 2012 to September 2013. The study aimed to determine the extent of the relationship between conflict management and non-managerial employees' perception of the effectiveness of the conflict management strategies. To gather data, the researcher used a questionnaire and analyzed the responses using the four-point Likert Scale, as well as descriptive and inferential statistics (Agu, 2013). The study found that the conflict management strategies implemented at Julius Berger Nigeria Plc, Bonny Island, were effective in minimizing disruptive conflicts. Furthermore, the results indicated a significant relationship between conflict management strategies and employees' performance. The study also revealed a significant relationship between the managerial and non-managerial employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of conflict management strategies at Julius Berger Nigeria Plc, Bonny Island (Agu, 2013). The findings of this study are relevant for organizations that aim to improve their conflict management strategies and employees' performance. The study highlights the importance of effective conflict management strategies in creating a positive work environment and improving employees' job performance.

In their 2008 study titled "Conflict Management Styles in Relation to Demographics," İslamoğlu, Börü, and Birsel (2008) aimed to determine the impact of selected demographic variables on conflict management styles. The study focused on demographic factors such as sex, education, marital status, number of children, overall work-life tenure, position, and tenure in the current company, and evaluated the avoidance, competitive, compromise, collaboration, and accommodation conflict management styles. Using a relational approach, the researchers administered a questionnaire that included a DUTCH test developed by Rahim (1983) and Dreu et al. (2001).

The study employed a convenience sampling technique to select a sample of 984 workers from various firms. ANOVA and t-tests were used to analyze the data, and to identify differences between the various categories of respondents based on their demographics and their conflict management strategies. The findings of the study revealed that although there was no significant relationship between demographics and conflict management strategies, there were differences among respondents grouped according to some demographic variables. (İslamoğlu, Börü, & Birsel, 2008).

Conclusion

The IPOB's agitation for an independent state of Biafra has been a source of tension and violence in the South-East region of Nigeria for several years, and the Buhari administration has been implementing various communication strategies to manage the situation. While some argue that the Buhari administration's communication strategies have been effective in managing the IPOB's agitations and reducing the level of violence in the region, others argue that the strategies have been ineffective and have even worsened the situation.

It is clear that the Buhari administration needs to adopt a more proactive approach to managing the IPOB's agitations, one that prioritizes dialogue, engagement, and inclusiveness. The

administration needs to recognize the root causes of the agitations and address them in a way that satisfies the aspirations of the South-East residents while promoting national unity. The Buhari administration needs to be more strategic and creative in its communication approach to managing the IPOB's agitations. It must adopt a more inclusive and participatory approach that engages all stakeholders and promotes national unity. By doing so, the administration can effectively manage the situation and restore peace to the South-East region of Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. It is essential to identify the objectives of the Buhari Administration's communication strategies regarding the IPOB's agitations. The objectives could include creating awareness about the government's stance on the issue, building trust and confidence among the South-East residents, dispelling misinformation and propaganda about the government's actions, and promoting dialogue and peaceful resolution of the crisis.
2. An evaluation of the communication strategies should involve assessing the reach and impact of the government's messages among the target audience. This could be done by analyzing media coverage and social media engagement metrics, conducting surveys and focus groups to gather feedback and perceptions from the South-East residents, and monitoring the level of public support for the government's actions.
3. The evaluation should assess the effectiveness of the communication strategies in achieving the set objectives. This could be done by comparing the level of awareness, trust, and confidence among the South-East residents before and after the implementation of the strategies, analyzing the level of misinformation and propaganda about the government's actions, and monitoring the level of violence and unrest in the region.

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