

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE IMAGE OF THE MILITARY SPECIAL TASK FORCE (STF) AND ITS OPERATIONS IN PLATEAU STATE

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Abstract

This study investigated the public perception of the image of the military Special Task Force (STF) peace keeping operations in Plateau State in furtherance of the enhancement of better civil-military relations. In doing so, the survey method was used to elicit responses from a sample drawn from purposively selected communities considered as flash points and hosts to the STF in five local government areas, covering the three senatorial zones of the state. The sample consisted of 400 respondents chosen from the population using random sampling technique. The questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection while the SPSS software was deployed for the analysis of data. Using the Systems theory and the Social Information Processing Model of Perception, the study discovered that the STF has generated an image considered less than desirable,

while also factors such as lack of respect for civilian population and highhandedness affect the level of cooperation that the STF receives from the populace. However, the organization was recognized as being combative, dutiful and helpful to communities. Also, the PR strategies used by the STF were identified as not being too effective in smoothening the operations in host communities. Therefore, the study recommended a more humane and cooperative approach to civil-military relations by the STF where the STF will be more courteous, accessible and friendly to their host communities and also engaging in community relations activities towards boosting its image.

Keywords: Image, Public Perception, Peace Keeping, Civil-Military Relations

Introduction

Organizations in whatever guise have used the tools of excellent image, identity and reputation to attain their objectives as well as establish and reinforce their presence in their areas of operations. Fleishman (2000, p. 34) supports this claim by arguing that “all the goals of a corporation can only benefit from strong, well-managed and synergized efforts of her image, identity and reputation”. Image, identity and reputation have come to stay in describing any institution. In deciphering between reputation and image, Lowensberg (2006, p. 253) says an “organizational image is the impression perceived by an individual of an organization at one moment in time”, while reputation is “arrived at by considering the total of images an individual has

accumulated over a period of time that help that individual form an opinion about an organization”. Organizational identity is seen by Lowensberg (2006) as consisting of the total of proactive, reactive, and unintentional activities and messages of organizations. From the above, one could draw a synergy between image, reputation and identity, with image serving as the common denominator.

Scholars agree that image of whatever kind is a powerful component of an organization or institution, indicating that how it is perceived and the overall impression that is left in the mental frame of the publics at any point in time is an indicator of the success or failures recorded by such organization in her dealings with not only the internal publics, but also the external publics (Bernstein, 1984; Olins, 1989; Ajala, 2005). The implication of this complex assertion is that image, positive or negative, and the impression created within the minds of the public are determinant factors of the success or otherwise of an organization's dealings with its publics.

Owing to the above, Alemika (2005, p. 4) contends that:

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Unethical behaviours have caused the image of the Nigerian Military to nosedive, due to incivility to citizens, including verbal assault or insult; threat of or actual physical restraint without lawful grounds, brutality, torture and degrading treatment of innocent citizens, frivolous searches and arrests in order to intimidate or harass individuals; extortion and corruption, torture of suspects as means of obtaining confessions due to deficiencies in investigations, and extra-judicial killings.

Globally, military/civil relations are effective ways of enhancing harmonious relationship, intelligence gathering as well as consolidating corporate image of the military. Again Alemika perceives contrary practice where he further pressed home the idea that the presence of checkpoints, which pervade the state and are occasionally theatres of Civilian-Military collision, has also contributed immensely to this wide negative perception of the public concerning the activities of the military. He however observes that the institution of the Armed Forces has made several efforts to reestablish democratic and effective civil-military relations through the various initiatives to professionalize and rebrand the image of the military, with the goal of regaining citizens' confidence in the institution.

The Navy, Air force and Army who make up the Military like other institutions need to build an image, sustain a good image or make a bad one better. According to Ajai (2007), public relations practices in the Armed Forces became active during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), when there was need to fight the communications war alongside the military war. This became necessary at the time as propagandists' activities fully charged the air as each side of the divide wanted to gain the sympathy of the world. He argues that because Nigeria was accused of genocide by the Biafran Regime and documentary films were shown to the outside world to buttress this point, there was the need to correct these adverse image problems created for the country and the armed forces. This gave birth to the Directorate of Public Relations in 1968 with the Late Brigadier-General Sotomi as the first Director. Events later turned out that tasked the credibility of the armed forces. These include

several coup de' tat, and charges of corruption, high handedness and brutality leveled against various arms of the Nigerian Armed Forces. The effects of these events meant that the public relations departments of the various military arms were put on the edge to either fuel or counter the propagandist wars even in military regimes.

Thus, in carrying out peace keeping operations, the military has been brought to close interaction with the civilian populace they serve in Plateau State. As a result, the image of the Military in their peace keeping operations and what it mirrors in the minds of the public is indeed indispensable and can be audited to be fully understood, therefore motivating the researcher to embark on this study.

Statement of the problem

Since the perennial outbreaks of communal conflicts in Plateau State for over fifteen years (September 2001 till 2018), the military alongside other security agencies have been saddled with the responsibility of restoring peace and protecting lives and property. The conflicts have been attributed to boundary disputes, communal and ethno-religious rivalries, cattle rustling and trespass and farmers-herders conflicts. The professional performance of the Armed Forces as stipulated by their defined roles is expected to engender positive attitude and muster cordial relationships with the law abiding citizens in Nigeria. Contrary to the above supposition, events relating to the Armed Forces over time can better be said to have pitted the Forces against the people it is supposed to defend and protect. Osayende (2009) captures the common areas of public complaints against the military to include dissatisfaction with response to emergency calls even when communities are in distress, complicity in crimes, impoliteness to members of the public, the use of excessive force, misuse of firearms, corruption, and delay in prosecution of reported cases. Several communities in Plateau State (like Heipang in BarkinLadi LGA, Kuru in Jos South) have come out to openly protest the continued presence of the STF, accusing them of corruption, compromise and high-handedness among other unethical practices. As such, despite all the efforts at image laundering, why is this laundering not going down well with the people? Contrary to the scenario in the North East where

civilians willingly volunteer to help in security operations through the formation of Vigilante groups (alias Civilian JTF) that provide valuable information to the Military in the fight against insurgency, the same will not be said of the scenario in Plateau State. Therefore the preoccupation of this study is hinged on evaluating the perception of the existing relationship between the host communities and the Military operations and the level of cooperation they receive in order to achieve positive results.

Research objectives

The objectives of the study are

- i. To establish how the citizens of Plateau State perceive the image of the STF in its operations.
- ii. To identify the factors that affect the level of cooperation the Military receives from host communities for successful operations in Plateau State.
- iii. To evaluate the public relations strategies the Military is using in building and maintaining a positive image.
- iv. To proffer workable public relations strategies on how to handle civil-military relations in peace keeping.

Research questions

The following questions guide the study:

- i. How do the host communities in Plateau State consider the image of the STF?
- ii. What are the factors that affect the level of cooperation or otherwise the STF receives from the host communities?
- iii. How effective are the military public relations strategies employed in boosting its image before the public?
- iv. What are the public relations best practices necessary for effective civil-military relations in peace keeping operations?

Literature review

Having an image of an organization stems from having a relationship with the organization and it is usually in the mental frame. Hanna and Wozniak (2001, pp. 34-68) in their summary of the concept of image say it is the mental picture publics of the subject hold of the subject itself and it is the logical planned end-result of a strategy. They equally say it

is a person's net impression of what a company, product, brand or store is all about. However, they contend that "image building presents challenges because there are so many facets to the mental image" (p. 122). This submission agrees with Jefkins and Yadin's (1998) categorization and subsequent analysis of image types and how they are perceived. A product's image can differ greatly from its physical attributes, creating normal variations that give room for constantly building of blokes of attributes and symbolic codes that should deliberately convey specific and intended image. The image held by the stakeholders of an organization underscores the kind of reputation held by such organization. Fill (2006, p. 424) posits that "people form an image of the organization based on the cues or signals that organization transmits". The mode of transmittal is said to be accidental or unintended or deliberate. It is based on the signals and modes of transmittals that organizations strive to maintain a consistent and accurate image of the organization to all stakeholders.

However, posers exist, like: can image remain static and be maintained over time? How do stakeholders perceive these organizational images? Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron (2000, p. 292) shed light on these posers. They assert that what corporations do is not enough pointing out that "public's perception of their conduct also matters". Conduct in this regard refers to image. An organization may operate legitimately and do everything it felt is right, but may find "itself viewed by segments of the public as cold, greedy, and heedless of cherished social values" or may inherit a reputation as a result of its associations with other organizations. It is therefore imperative for an organization to get it right and constantly evaluate her reputation and image.

Civil-military relations (CMR) in a democratic state describes a situation where the military establishment is obedient by accepting subordination to elected civilian authorities. Dunmoye (2011) observes that the power relations that exists is complex and involves a multiplicity of interactions at different levels between the military and the society, between the political and military leaders as well as between the officer corps and non-military elites of a country. This complexity is

identified as having many dimensions. Nwoli (2010, p. 17-19) identifies 17 dimensions that constitute the realm of civil-military relations. These include: Human relations-mutual perception, security of lives and property; Intellectual relations- corpus of civil-military thought; Political relations- praetorianism, civil control and politicisation of the military; Strategic relations- Peace Support Operations (PSO), Military Assistance to Civil Authority (MACA), civil support, allies mobilisation and; Legal relations- laws of war, military subjection to civil and military laws.

On the other hand, Gamble and Gamble (2005, p. 103) opine that the media can shape our perception accurately or inaccurately, which in turn affects our image formation process. Consequently, exposure to the wrong stimuli from any of the media can drastically affect the images' prospect form in their mental frame on the subject. But the focal question is what kind of public communication approaches can the STF evolve to enable her get positively strong image? A probable answer is one advanced by scholars such as Arens (2002), Belch and Belch (2004), Gamble and Gamble (2005) and Rodman (2007). They suggest image or corporate advertising which is a public relations tool. Image advertising is designed to make a product known by creating a distinct image for it through appropriate use of colours, symbols, logo, uniform and other such insignia that will make people have positive perception of the products. It involves giving personality to the object through a practiced and organized communication process. In consonance with the above position, the STF in Plateau State can advance its image by reviewing its civil-military relations to accommodate some of the mentioned points to suit contemporary and international practices. Despite these ideas, if the conduct of its personnel remains that of aggression and unprofessionalism, the anticipated achievement of its PR goals will be a mirage or a prologue to a farce, or perhaps both. As such, the need for effective community service, enabling access to military humanitarian facilities and engaging and involving young people in community-based information/intelligence gathering.

Theoretical framework

This study is hinged on two theories that provide the lenses for viewing the phenomenon under study. They are the **Systems Theory** and the **Social**

Information Processing Model.

This study falls within the frame of a PR audit which Wimmer and Dominick (2003, p. 283) assert is a "comprehensive study of the public relations position of an organization" and is intended to appraise the company's standing. These appraisals are done within an environment, hence the resort to the Systems Theory. According to Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth and Van Leuven (2004, p. 46) the Systems Theory "is useful in public relations because it gives us a way to think about relationships" by looking at "organizations as made up of interrelated parts, adapting and adjusting to changes in the political, economic and social environment in which they operate". Leaders of these organizations create and maintain necessary structures towards achieving organizational goals but within recognizable boundaries. It is from the achievement of these goals that images are carved out for such organizations, as well as the need to constantly appraise such images. Towards this end, can the STF be said to operate an open or a closed system? STF as it currently stands operates a closed system. Reasons are that newer information seems almost nonexistent for STF, whose leaders prefer to work with old stereotypes and prejudices and preferences of the leaders who hedge most of such on security concerns. Ajai (2007, p. 34) suggests that spillover from military involvement in governance as well as security concerns have conspired to shut the STF from the public it is supposed to cater for.

On the other hand, according to McShane (2004), **Social perception** involves a four-stage information-processing sequence. Three of the stages in this model – selective attention/comprehension, encoding and simplifying, and storage and retention – describe how specific social information is observed and stored in memory. The fourth and final stage, retrieval and response, involves turning mental representations into real world judgments and decisions. Therefore, the Social information-processing model of perception provides a framework for understanding the

formation of public perception and opinion by individuals and groups in host communities in Plateau State and their experiences with the Military peace keeping operations which ultimately shapes conceived images formed.

Methodology

The survey method was adopted in this study. Toth and Van Leuven (2004) contend that survey helps evaluate the public's perception of an organization to obtain an overall view of the organization's image and seek to measure familiarity of the public with the organization, its officers, services, policies and other facets; degrees of negative or positive perceptions and characteristics of various publics attribute to the organization. Tejumaiye (2003) and Wimmer and Dominick (2003) all attest to the suitability of the survey in evaluating the image of organizations.

Research population

The population for this study is comprised of the civilian populace resident around and within the various STF sector commands in five selected LGAs in Plateau State. These selected LGAs are considered as flashpoints and have military camps (sectors) that were established because of the precarious security conditions in these areas. The researcher sampled LGAs including Jos North, Jos South, BarkinLadi, Pankshin, and Shendam LGAs which have experienced long Military presence as a result of recurring conflicts. This population involves people who have regular interactions with operations of the Military especially in their host communities and therefore can build varying perceptions of the force based on their experience. Another component of this population includes Community Based Organizations (CBO) who are stakeholders in the operations of the Military.

Sampling technique

The random sampling method was adopted in the selection of the survey samples for the study from the external publics that come in contact with the services of the Military. This approach becomes appropriate because of the fluid nature of the external population; no formal data base is available for these categories of the population. The respondents were drawn from the civilian populace,

religious and community leaders, government officials in the LGAs and LGA legislators.

Sample size

Seitel (2011, p. 182) recommends that "the more similar the population elements are in categories being studied, the smaller the sample size required". As such, he proposed the following for population to sample ratio with a 5% margin of error.

Table 1: Distribution of population sample

LGA	Census Population (2006)
Jos North	429,200
Jos South	306,716
BarkinLadi	175,267
Pankshin	191,685
Shendam	205,119
Total	1,310,885

Calculating sample size using the formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

For the purpose of this study, N= 1,310,885

$$e = 5\% = 0.05$$

$$n = \frac{1,310,885}{1 + 1,310,885(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{500,410}{32788.9} = 399.9992$$

$$n = 400.$$

Therefore at least 400 questionnaires are required for the survey, hence, the sample size is drawn at 400.

Instruments of data collection

The questionnaire was the instrument used to get necessary data from the. The questions were designed as both open-ended and closed-ended. Several measurement scales were employed. These are the Semantic Differential Scales and the Likert scale which are supported by Stacks and Hocking (1999) and Wimmer and Dominick (2003) who averthat the scales are very useful in the collection of data on opinion and attitude of a sample on a subject.

Methods of data analysis

The data collected from this study was analyzed to answer the four research questions raised to guide this study. The SPSS software was deployed for the analysis of data and the results are presented in tables and percentages. Some comments on analysis were influenced by personal observations in discussing the findings and recommendations. The method for data analysis is the simple percentage used to analyze each item as presented in the questionnaire.

Results

Inferential statistics results

How do the communities in Plateau State consider the image of the Military and STF?

Table 4: Respondents' opinion on how helpful the STF is in their various communities

LOCATION	Do you consider the military & STF helpful in your community?			Total
	NO	CANT SAY	YES	
Jos South	24.8%	12.8%	62.4%	100.0%
Jos North	20.2%	9.1%	70.7%	100.0%
B-Ladi	22.5%	15.0%	62.5%	100.0%
Pankshin	17.1%	4.8%	78.1%	100.0%
Shendam	15.8%	5.3%	78.9%	100.0%
Total	21.1%	10.1%	68.8%	100.0%

Table 4 above reveals acceptance of the fact that the communities consider STF as helpful as indicated by the majority of the responses including 78.9 % from Shendam, 78.1% Pankshin, followed by 70.7% in Jos North and 62.5 %, and 62.4% in B/Ladi and Jos South respectively. On the other hand, the non-acceptance of the how helpful the STF is considered reflects the highest responses in Jos South 24.8%, B/Ladi 22.5%, and Jos North 20.2%. Pankshin and Shendam had 17.1% and 15.8 % respectively. This indicates a cumulatively high level of acceptance of how helpful the communities in Plateau State consider the STF which further helps to boost their image as indicated in the cumulative average of 68% of positive responses compared to 21.1% and 10.1% for “No” and “Can’t Say” respectively.

Table 5: Responses on the perception of cooperation the STF receives with communities

Key: SA (strongly agree); A (agree); U (undecided); D (disagree); SD (strongly disagree)

Location	The military (STF) receives the cooperation of community members					Total
	SD	D	U	A	SA	
Jos South	4.5%	17.3%	21.8%	36.1%	18.0%	100.0%
Jos North	6.1%	13.1%	15.2%	45.5%	20.2%	100.0%
B/Ladi	11.3%	23.8%	13.8%	42.5%	7.5%	100.0%
Pankshin	10.5%	18.1%	8.6%	32.4%	30.5%	100.0%
Shendam	.0%	.0%	15.8%	36.8%	47.4%	100.0%
Total	7.3%	17.0%	15.4%	38.5%	20.9%	100.0%

Table 5 above reveals responses on perception of communities on the level of cooperation the STF receives, which indicates that 84.2% (Shendam), Pankshin 62.9 and 65.7% (Jos North) were the majority in agreement followed by 54.1% in Jos South and 50% in B/Ladi .

Meanwhile, the highest areas which disagreed were B. Ladi 35.1 %, Pankshin 28.6%, Jos South 21.8%, Jos North 19.2 % and Shendam null. Therefore the cumulative average indicates a 59.4 % agreement outweighing 24.3 % disagreement with the fact that communities thought the STF was receiving cooperation with communities.

Table 6: Responses on perceptions of the conduct of community relation activities

Key: GE (great extent), LE (little Extent), VLE (very little extent), NE (No extent), NS (not sure)

Location	Sponsorship of community-related activities (sports, cultural day)				
	NS	NE	VLE	LE	GE
Jos South	11.8%	18.9%	24.4%	29.1%	15.7%
Jos North	13.5%	22.9%	22.9%	22.9%	17.7%
B-Ladi	10.1%	22.8%	21.5%	31.6%	13.9%
Pankshin	11.7%	10.7%	15.5%	28.2%	34.0%
Shendam	.0%	5.3%	26.3%	31.6%	36.8%
Total	11.3%	17.9%	21.5%	28.1%	21.2%

Table 7: Suggestions on the steps the STF can take to improve its image

Location	Suggest some of the steps you feel theMilitary (STF) can take to improve its image					
	Giving swift response to crime or distress	Being honest	Being considerate to the civilian population	Avoiding promiscuity especially to young girls	Avoiding bribery	Avoiding violent behaviors to innocent civilians
Jos South	9.8%	17.3%	27.1%	25.6%	14.3%	6.0%
Jos North	11.1%	14.1%	24.2%	16.2%	20.2%	14.1%
B-Ladi	13.8%	16.3%	23.8%	25.0%	10.0%	11.3%
Pankshin	8.6%	16.2%	21.0%	22.9%	22.9%	8.6%
Shendam	5.3%	31.6%	47.4%	15.8%	.0%	.0%
Total	10.3%	16.7%	25.2%	22.2%	16.3%	9.2%

Table 6 above reveals responses on the communities' views on if the STF undertakes sponsorship of community related activities like sports and cultural days in which a majority of respondents agreed to a little extent 28.1% and very little extent 21.5 % , while only 21.2% agreed to a great extent. Also 17.9 % of respondents agreed to no extent and 11.3 % were unsure. Therefore the tone of responses indicates a below average extent to which respondents accepted that the STF undertook community relations activities.

The table above revealed the responses of the majority of respondents. It showed that 25.2% of the respondents believed that for the military to have an effective civilian-military relationship the military has to be considerate to civilian population. Also, 22.2 % of the respondents believe that the military should avoid promiscuity with the community girls. 16.7% and 16.3% of the respondents say the military should be honest and avoid bribery respectively. Finally, 10.3% and 9.2% of the respondents respectively believe that giving swift action and avoidance of violent behavior will also help galvanize a smooth civilian-military relationship. Therefore adopting these best practices will answer research question four to further boost the image of the STF and guarantee effective Civil-Military relations in peace keeping operations.

Discussion of findings

The deduction drawn from the survey data reveals that less than half of the respondents that participated in the survey considered the image of the military and STF as positive. This is in line with the repeated calls by several stakeholders for

improved Civil – Military relations in any host communities that the Military is undertaking operations. The direct consequence of a frosty relationship not only negatively affects the image of the organization but also impedes the success of any such operations because it affects the level of cooperation that the military would receive from the host communities.

Again the findings contradict a postulation of the System theory which asserts that describes organizations as a set of subsystems that affect each other and jointly interact with the external environment. The external publics in this regard are significantly less aware of the public relations activities of the STF and the Military. This negative assertion was also aggravated by the position revealed by most respondents who indicated that the relationship between the Military and its host communities was far from cordial and perceived the military as unfriendly, highhanded, brutal, inaccessible, unresponsive to emergencies and also inconsiderate when dealing with the civilian population. This is in sharp contrast with the position of the military STF who opines that the organization engages the public in different activities that endear the STF to the people. These expressions are indeed a dent on the image of any organisation that intends to maintain goodwill with its publics.

Conclusion

This study concludes from the results of the data analyzed to address the objectives of the study, which include probing the image the Military and the STF have in its peace keeping operations, that the STF has generated a current image that is

perceived as weakly positive by the public which cannot be argued to be the most desirable. This is markedly different from the 'intended' or the 'wish' or the 'mirror' image that the STF would have loved. Identifying and analyzing the factors that affect the level of cooperation that the forces receive from the public, the majority lamented that issues like lack of respect for the civilian population, disregard for community leadership and excessive pride on the side of the service men are the major hindrances to the smooth civil-military cooperation.

Recommendations

In the light of the above empirical findings and in line with adopting best practices that would further boost the image and augment the deficits identified, this study recommends among others that:

- i. Concerted PR strategic efforts should be evolved by the STF towards creating a strong positive image among her external publics whom in this case are primarily their host communities.
- ii. The STF should open a two-way communication process that will enhance how information is shared among her various publics and address issues of inaccessibility raised in the study. The STF should get more involved in Corporate Social Responsibility.
- iii. The STF should adopt a very strong and committed approach towards proactively addressing crisis and negative issues as they ought to be and not through some form of deceit or coercion.
- iv. The STF should also make deliberate effort to strengthen its media and community relations strategies so as to be more interactive, receive feedback and douse misconceptions and suspicion that arise from poor information management especially during crisis which is capable of distorting the image of the organization.

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