



Navigating Turbulence: Managing the Image of Tertiary Institutions in South-West, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: Tertiary institutions in Nigeria face numerous challenges that threaten their reputation and long-term sustainability.

Objective: This study examined the impact of economic, social and political turbulence on the image of tertiary institutions in South-West Nigeria and possible ways of navigating the turbulence.

Method: Descriptive survey research design and in-depth interview were adopted for the study. A total of 250 participants who are experienced in image management strategies within their institutions were purposively selected from the University of Ibadan, University of Lagos, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo and Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti. Data were collected using questionnaire and interview guide, and analysed using multiple regression and thematic analyses. **Result:** Findings revealed that there was a significant impact of economic, political and social factors on the image of tertiary institutions ($F_{(3, 241)} = 3.452, p < .05$).

Conclusion: Tertiary institutions in South-West Nigeria are finding it difficult to attract the critical resources needed for the long term development and sustainability. This is attributable to a myriad of factors that affect their reputation.

Unique Contribution: This work offers fresh insights into how universities' managements can strategically engage with their stakeholders in times of threatening challenges to maintain positive reputation.

Key Recommendation: Institutions should prioritise open and honest communication with stakeholders at all times to mitigate reputation damage.

Key Words: Turbulence, image, tertiary institutions, reputation.

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary institutions in Nigeria face numerous challenges that threaten their image, reputation and long-term sustainability. Economic instability, political unrest and social upheaval are prominent issues that continue to disrupt the education system. These factors influence public perceptions of these institutions. Inflation, poor revenue, reduction in government funding, grants, sponsorship, reduced student enrollment, and inconsistent government policies exacerbate economic pressures, which in turn affect the quality of education offered by these institutions (Abdulrahman & Waziri,



2021). This is affirmed by the World Bank Group (2024) report that spatial inequality remains significant in Nigeria, a situation underscored by the low state capacity and inadequate service delivery. Infrastructural deficit impede domestic economic integration to propel the nation to achieve its substantial market potential. Nigeria offers limited opportunities to most of its citizens, and it is the 7th lowest human capital index in the world with an estimated 38.9% poverty rate in 2023. Its Weak job creation and entrepreneurial prospects stifle the absorption of the 3.5 million Nigerians entering the labor force every year. The poverty rate was estimated at 38.9% in 2023. The above factors affect the income level of tertiary institutions to provide necessary facilities that satisfy the needs of students, thus predisposing them to crisis of confidence.

Political tensions such as frequent industrial unrest by academic and non-academic staff, and rioting by students, shifts in government policies affecting institutional autonomy and curriculum damage institutional credibility (Akinrinola & Hassan, 2022). Similarly, social issues, including insecurity and the increasing rate of brain drain among academic staff (Babatunde & Oladejo, 2023; Nwokeocha & Onyejelem, 2024), complicates the management of these institutions and their public image. In addition, changing societal values, norms and technology are affecting institutional culture, teaching methods, and curriculum. These economic, political and social factors pose serious consequences on the reputation of tertiary institutions and by extension, on student enrolment, retention, and revenue.

Effectively managing the image of tertiary institutions in Nigeria could make them competitive to attract donor agencies, research grants, international students, faculty and staff, and also facilitate the emergence of a multi-cultural and cross-continental academic environment with diverse knowledge and experience that could enrich research output for national development. Tukur et al. (2019), Igwe & Nwador (2015), Chandra et al. (2019), Manzoor et al. (2024), and Jhantasana, (2022) explored the influence of fees, social responsibility, service quality, image models, student satisfaction, and value co-creation respectively on university image, but there is insignificant research on how Nigeria's tertiary institutions could achieve a positive image in a period of economic, political and social turbulence. More so, Ojo and Olagunju (2020); Del-Castillo-Feito et al. (2019) aver that, in a volatile environment, maintaining a positive image becomes critical for institutional survival and overall institutional success. Therefore, failure of Nigeria's tertiary institutions to address this challenge could hamper their capability to function, and weaken their ability to attract and retain local and international talents. This is the gap that this study aims to fill. This study will provide insights that could help Nigeria's universities build an all-time favourable reputation in a period of turbulence.

Objectives

The general objective was to examine the impact of economic, political and social turbulence on institutional image and propose strategies for effective image management while the specific objectives was to investigate how economic, political and social factors influence the reputation of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.



Hypothesis

Hypotheses Ho: There is no significant impact of economic, political and social factors on the reputation of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

METHOD

The population consisted of key stakeholders from selected universities in South-west, Nigeria, namely, University of Ibadan, University of Lagos, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo and Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti. The study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from public relations officers and administrative staff of the selected tertiary institutions with a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contains sections measuring demographic variables, economic, political and social factors and the reputation of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Primary data adopted a descriptive research design, which helped in examining the current strategies employed by tertiary institutions in managing their image. The target population consisted of key stakeholders from the selected universities in Nigeria. These stakeholders include public relations officers, academic and non-academic staff and students. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 250 participants who have direct knowledge or experience about image and image management strategies within their institutions. The sample comprised individuals from both public and private universities. To ensure the validity of the instruments used in the study, the questionnaire was pre-tested in a pilot study with a small sample ($n = 20$) from non-selected institutions. Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .72, which indicates that the instrument is reliable. Expert opinion was relied on to determine its validity. Data were analysed using regression and thematic analyses. Key themes regarding crisis management and image-building strategies were identified and analyzed to draw insights. Secondary data were gathered from institutional reports, media publications and previous studies on the image and reputation of Nigerian universities.

Nigeria's Economic, Social, and Political Environments

Numerous social, political, and economic issues face Nigeria today (Onyejelem, Ude-Akpeh, Uduma, 2015). The nation has embarked on significant reforms to restore macroeconomic stability and promote growth since May 2023, but no positive outcome has been recorded. Oil subsidy has been largely removed, and the exchange rate has been unified to reflect market conditions. The Central Bank of Nigeria has adopted a stricter monetary policy and shifted its focus back to maintaining price stability, supported by the government's commitment to cease financing the deficit through money creation. Meanwhile inflation remains elevated, exacerbating hardship and poverty. The country has inadequate job creation and limited entrepreneurial prospects. Many parents have lost their jobs. Over 3.5 million Nigerians join the labor force each year. As of 2023, about 87 million Nigerians were living below the poverty line (World Bank Group, 2024).



Institutional Image in Higher Education

Institutional image refers to the perception that external stakeholders, including students, parents, government bodies and the public, have of a particular educational institution. It plays a critical role in shaping decisions about enrolment, partnerships and investments in the academic sector. For tertiary institutions, a positive image is essential for attracting students, securing funding and academic collaborations. Institutions with a strong image are often perceived as trustworthy, reliable and capable of providing quality education (Babatunde & Ogunsanya, 2021). This perception directly impacts their long-term sustainability and competitiveness within both local and international academic environments.

In developing countries, where economic instability and political unrest are more pronounced, the importance of institutional image becomes even greater (Adeyemi, 2023). This is because tertiary institutions often grapple with issues related to poor infrastructure, insufficient funding, frequent unrest, and policy shifts, all of which negatively impact their public image. Consequently, institutional leaders have to proactively manage their image and reputation to ensure continued relevance, appeal and success in an increasingly competitive educational landscape. A poor institutional image can lead to reduced student enrolment and decreased access to financial resources (Abiola & Ajayi, 2020). This is true of many private universities in Nigeria which struggle for student enrolment. This makes image management an indispensable part of any institution's strategy for growth and sustainability.

Image and Reputation Management in Higher Education

Reputation management in higher education involves the strategic oversight of an institution's public standing to maintain or improve its status among key stakeholders. Studies suggest that reputation is one of the most valuable assets an institution can possess, as it affects virtually all aspects of its operation, from student recruitment to faculty retention and partnerships with other institutions (Aliyu & Bello, 2021; Ibrahim & Salihu, 2022). This is true because a strategically positive image management will attract quality students, faculty, grants and donations needed for innovative academic programmes and infrastructure in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. On the other hand, a negative image, especially in the face of challenges can damage the age-long goodwill of those institutions (Obasi & Nwosu, 2022). Tertiary institution's reputation is shaped by quality of education offered, student satisfaction, internationalisation, and adaptation to external challenges, quality infrastructure, and effective governance (Adebisi & Hassan, 2023; Ojo & Usman, 2021). Most universities in Nigeria are in deficit of these, thus leading to frequent strikes that damage their reputation before local and international stakeholders. Effective reputation management in Nigeria's higher education in a time of turbulent social, economic and political atmosphere is therefore important and requires a multi-dimensional approach that includes clear communication with its stakeholders, strategic branding efforts and continuous quality improvement. This supports Kalim and Asim (2022) and Ali and Muhammed (2020) Tijani and Fakolujo (2022), and (Bature & Hamidu, 2023) that reputation management is crucial and should be integrated into the overall governance of institutions to ensure long-term success. This calls for tertiary institutions in Nigeria to demonstrate high commitment to practices that will enhance their image even in turbulent situations.



Crises in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Over the years, Nigeria's tertiary institutions have faced crises that have significantly impacted their operations and image. These challenges are caused by economic crisis such as rising inflation and soaring prices of commodities that instigate hunger and anger. The situation has given rise to inadequate funding, poor staff welfare, deteriorating facilities, leadership conflicts and industrial unrest, thus disrupting academic activities in many tertiary institutions, reducing their ability to expand infrastructure, improve services, attract and retain quality faculty and students (Olatunji, 2023; Adeyemi, 2022; Akinwumi & Oke, 2021; Ibrahim & Usman, 2021; Ogunlana & Adeoye, 2021; Salawu & Bamgboye, 2021). These negatively impact their reputation globally, resulting in low student enrolment in public and private universities, as stakeholders often express dissatisfaction with the poor learning environment. This explains why some universities in Nigeria cannot get international donor support and opportunities for partnerships and exchanges.

Theoretical Framework for Image Management

This study is anchored on the following theories: *Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)* developed by Coombs & Holladay (2022) provides a framework for understanding how organisations can manage their image and communication during crises. The theory posits that the nature of a crisis and the organisation's prior reputation significantly influence the communication strategies employed during the crisis. Coombs & Holladay (2022) categorize crises into: *Victim Crises*: Organisation is seen as a victim (e.g., natural disasters); *Accidental Crises*: Organisation is perceived as having limited responsibility (e.g., accidents); and *Preventable Crisis*: Organisation is seen as responsible for the crisis (e.g., negligence or misconduct). SCCT is particularly relevant to this paper because, understanding the nature of these crises allows institutions to design their communication strategies effectively to engage with stakeholders in order to preserve the institution's reputation during turbulence.

Reputation Management Theory (RMT), developed by Fombrun and Van Riel (2004), centres around building, maintaining and repairing organisation's reputations over time. It posits that an organisation's reputation is a valuable asset that significantly impacts its overall success and stakeholder relationships. RMT identifies performance, communication and stakeholder perception as contributing to an organisation's reputation. This indicates that organisations engage in reputation management strategies to influence stakeholder perceptions positively through proactive communication, crisis management and stakeholder engagement. In the context of this study, RMT provides a framework for understanding how tertiary institutions can build and maintain credibility among stakeholders for their long-term success.

Stakeholder Theory developed by R. Edward Freeman in the 1980s is a framework for understanding the relationships between an organisation and its various stakeholders, emphasising the importance of recognising and addressing the interests and needs of all parties affected by the organisation's actions. The theory posits that organisations are a part of a larger network of relationships. Stakeholders are any group or individual who can affect or is affected by organisation's objectives (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders include employees, management, customers, suppliers, regulators, and the community. The theory emphasises that organisations



must consider the interests of all stakeholders and shareholders in a way that their distinct interests is managed for the success of the organisation. It advocates for an effective communication among these stakeholders, and a balanced approach where the organisation can create value for all stakeholders, enhance loyalty, and long-term sustainability. Stakeholder engagement during turbulent times can help institutions mitigate damage to reputation.

Major Crises and Their Impact on Institutional Image

Political Crises: Government policies have often had far-reaching consequences on the autonomy and governance of Nigerian universities. One major political issue has been the frequent strikes organised by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), which stem from disputes over inadequate funding, poor working conditions, unfulfilled government agreements and interference institutional decision-making processes. This unrest significantly undermines institutional independence, disrupt academic calendars and instigates national debates about government's commitment to education (Babatunde, 2023; Odeh & Oladejo, 2023; Adeyemi et al., 2024). All of this weakens trust among stakeholders and impact negatively on the image of affected tertiary institutions in Nigeria, thus posing a huge task to their reputation management.

Economic Crises: Economic issues, including funding cuts, low income, and inflation, have been major stressors for Nigerian universities. Budgetary constraints have resulted in the dilapidation of infrastructure, inadequate research funding, and a decrease in academic quality. The World Bank in 2024 reported that between 2015 and 2021, Nigeria's education budget was far below the recommended 15–20% of total government expenditure. This invariably meant insufficient resources to maintain educational standards, student scholarships, research grants, and the overall learning environment. Additionally, high rate of inflation and currency fluctuations in Nigeria have made it difficult for institutions to acquire modern technologies for instruction.

Social factors: The increasing demand for higher education due to growing youth population has strained the capacity of Nigerian universities to provide quality education. Many universities admit more students than they can effectively accommodate, thereby exacerbating issues of insufficient housing for students and staff, and inadequate learning facilities, leading to declining institutional reputation. Moreover, the rapid pace of urbanisation and technological change has created a misalignment between traditional teaching methods and the skills required in today's job market, necessitating universities to update their curricula and teaching methodologies to halt the production of unemployable graduates (Ademola & Okoye, 2023). Technological change has been both a challenge and an opportunity for Nigerian universities. Universities without technological advancements are viewed negatively, thus impacting their reputation both locally and internationally (Adewuyi, 2021). The integration of new technologies requires substantial investments which many Nigerian institutions do not have due to persistent underfunding. Besides, globalisation has resulted in high student mobility and increased competition among universities, especially in terms of international collaborations. Many Nigerian universities have found it tough to compete with their international counterparts due to their poor global rankings. This has weakened the capacity of local institutions to retain top talent, thereby affecting both teaching quality and institutional image.



Institutional Response to Crises

Nigerian universities have had to respond to the aforementioned multiple crises their efforts to manage these challenges vary in strategies and effectiveness. They include:

Communication Strategies: Communication plays a vital role in crisis management, particularly in maintaining public confidence. During the ASUU strikes of 2020, the University of Ibadan and Obafemi Awolowo University regularly issued updates to students, staff and the external public through official websites and social media platforms. These aimed at clarifying the universities' positions, managing expectations and preventing misinformation. However, the effectiveness of these communication efforts has been mixed, as some stakeholders felt that the universities were slow in their responses or lacked transparency, which further fuelled discontent.

Public Relations: Some universities have launched public relations campaigns to repair their image following major disruptions. Public relations offices at Babcock University, University of Lagos and Ahmadu Bello University have taken proactive steps, through collaboration with media outlets to highlight positive aspects of their institutions. These campaigns often focus on positioning the institution as resilient and forward-thinking despite challenges. However, while such efforts have been somewhat effective in promoting positive narratives, they often do not address the root causes of institutional problems, leaving long-term reputational damage unmitigated.

Engagement with Government: Some Nigerian universities through academic bodies such as ASUU have engaged directly with governments to address issues such as funding cuts and political interference, autonomy and improved working conditions. Negotiations between university representatives and government officials have led to temporary solutions, such as the release of bailout funds or the signing of agreements (Adediran, 2022). However, the cyclical nature of unresolved issues suggests that while these efforts offer short-term relief, they are not entirely effective in bringing about lasting reforms.

Adoption of Technological Solutions: In response to technological challenges, some Nigerian universities have made efforts to modernise their teaching methods and infrastructure. Universities like Babcock University, Covenant University and the Federal University of Technology, Akure, invested in digital infrastructure and trained staff on how to deliver lectures online (Ayodele, 2021). Although these institutions have made strides by embracing technology, a significant number of others have faced difficulties overcoming these problems due to inadequate technical expertise. The result has been a digital divide, where well-funded institutions adapt quickly, while others struggle to keep up.

Student and Staff Welfare Initiatives: Some universities have introduced welfare initiatives aimed at mitigating the negative effects of crises on students and staff. For example, during prolonged ASUU strikes, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, provided financial assistance and mental health support to staff who were financially affected by the strikes. Babcock University also provided food items to staff to show compassion for their employees during the trying period. While these



welfare efforts have helped to alleviate the immediate burdens of crises, their impact has been limited by the lack of sustained resources and broader institutional support.

Collaboration with International Partners: To address funding and academic challenges, some Nigerian universities have sought collaborations with local and international institutions. Partnerships with foreign universities for research grants have provided avenues for Nigerian universities to enhance their research capabilities and access funding (Eze & Musa, 2023). For example, the University of Ibadan and Bayero University have partnered with international institutions to promote joint research and staff exchanges. These collaborations have been beneficial, but the extent to which they have addressed domestic challenges such as underfunding and poor infrastructure is limited.

RESULT

Hypothesis

Ho: There is no significant impact of economic, political and social factors on the reputation of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Table 1: Model Summary and Coefficients of Multiple Regression Analysis for Impact of Economic, Political and Social Factors on Reputation of Tertiary Institutions

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	188.090	3	62.697	3.452	.001
Residual	4376.598	241	18.160		
Total	4564.688	244			
Model Summary $R = .385$; $R^2 = .148$; $R^2_{(Adj)} = .145$; Std. Error = 4.07341					

Thematic Analysis

Dependent Variable: Reputation of Tertiary Institutions

Predictors: (Constant), Economic Factors, Political Factors, Social Factors

Table 1 revealed significant results ($F_{(3, 241)} = 3.452, p < .05$). The null hypothesis is rejected, which means we can accept the alternative hypothesis. This indicates that there is a significant impact of economic, political and social factors on the reputation of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Table 1 further revealed that economic, political and social factors jointly contributed about 14.5% of the variability in reputation of tertiary institutions ($Adj. R^2 = .145$).

DISCUSSION

Economic issues, including funding cuts, low income, and inflation, have been major stressors for universities in South-west, Nigeria. Budgetary constraints have resulted in the dilapidation of infrastructure, inadequate research funding, and a decrease in academic quality. Social factors such as increasing demand for higher education in South-west Nigeria have strained the capacity of these universities to provide quality education, resulting in high student mobility. Rapid technological change has created a misalignment between traditional teaching methods and the



skills required in today's job market. Universities are struggling to update their curricula and teaching methodologies to reflect these societal changes. Politically, government policies have often had far-reaching consequences on the autonomy and governance of Nigerian universities. Shifts in government policies on funding, appointments and institutional governance often interfere with universities' ability to function independently, thus leading to crises that affect the image of the universities and consequently, their student recruitment ability and capability to attract foreign donors. These scenarios can be addressed through stakeholders' engagement and reciprocal communication to create value for all parties concerned.

Interconnected themes of reviewed literature

The reviewed literature revealed the following:

Institutional Image and Reputation: These are fundamental concepts tied to the perception of tertiary institutions. A positive image is critical for attracting students and investment, while a poor reputation can hinder institutional growth and sustainability. Tertiary institutions in South-west, Nigeria must invest in their image management to be able build trust and understanding with their various stakeholders. This aligns with the Reputation Management Theory (*RMT*), which emphasises the need for organisations to build, maintain and repair their reputations over time, because an organisation's reputation is a valuable asset that significantly impacts its overall success.

External Challenges: The socio-political and economic environment in Nigeria significantly influences institutional reputation. Issues such as changes in societal norms and values, technological changes, teaching methods, curriculum, and infrastructure create a volatile reputation landscape. Understanding the nature of these crises will enable tertiary institutions in South-west, Nigeria to design their communication strategies effectively, depending on whether they are perceived as victims, accidental perpetrators or preventable offenders. Applying the Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs & Holladay (2022), tertiary institutions in South-west, Nigeria can help deal with crisis situation by either denying responsibility; acknowledging some responsibility while emphasising the external factors involved; and accepting responsibility while offering apologies or corrective actions. This approach could preserve their institutions reputation and credibility during crises. It will alleviate or mitigate reputation damage, and restore trust in tertiary institutions in South-west, Nigeria.

Reputation Management Strategies: Proactive management of institutional image, and transparent governance are essential strategies for managing institutional reputation effectively. Tertiary institutions in South-west, Nigeria are lacking in this regard, predisposing them to poor reputation. These institutions need to engage in reputation management strategies to influence stakeholder perceptions positively through proactive communication and stakeholder engagement. This is particularly important in order to reduce untoward consequences and restore stakeholder confidence.

Historical Impact: The crises faced by Nigerian universities have had long-term negative effects on their image, often leading to diminished student enrollment, low student retention, poor global rankings, and limited international collaboration. Lack of reciprocal communication



between management and ASUU on the one hand, and between management and students on the other, have led to the industrial unrest and protestation by students that disrupted academic calendar of schools. But by fostering open dialogue with students and ASUU, university management can address their concerns proactively, negotiate solutions, minimise potential misunderstandings, and enhance organisational reputation for long-term success. This supports the Stakeholders theory that allows for a collaborative endeavour, advocating for transparency, honesty, and integrity in communication, and serves as an effective strategy for managing conflicts. By valuing stakeholder input, tertiary institutions in South-west, Nigeria can make informed choices that reflect the needs and expectations of their communities, thus improving their image and overall effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Universities in South-west, Nigeria need to develop a strategic reputation management and stakeholder engagement in order to navigate the nation's economic and socio-political turbulence. This will ensure their capacity to attract and retain quality students and faculty, as well as attract international funding. This study provides insight into how universities in developing countries, such as Nigeria, which grapple with economic, social and political upheavals, could deploy strategic reputation management to remain competitive in the global academic arena for the needed resources for their sustainability. Understanding this will assist to solve societal problems. Institutions should prioritise open and honest communication with students, staff and the public during crises. Being transparent about challenges and solutions fosters trust and mitigates reputation damage. Universities should proactively engage with the media to share accurate information. Having a designated media liaison can help control the narrative and prevent the spread of misinformation, especially during unrest on campus. Universities in Nigeria should develop and implement crisis preparedness strategies that include risk assessments, contingency plans and crisis response teams. Preparing for potential crises in advance allows institutions to respond quickly and efficiently, and minimise reputational damage.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



Authors' Contributions.

The research topic was conceived by Joshua Suleiman who also determined the design, handled data collation, interpretation, and wrote the initial manuscript. Government Osaro analysed the research data. Both authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials.

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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