



NEGATIVE NARRATIVES RESULT IN POSITIVE CORPORATE REPUTATION: AN ANALYSIS OF FUEL PRICING IN THE DANGOTE PETROLEUM REFINERY AND NIGERIA NATIONAL PETROLEUM COMPANY TRADE

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Abstract: Corporate reputation is a fundamental concept that underscores the imperativeness of corporate organizations or individuals to understand and effectively manage their corporate image to thrive despite challenges. Therefore, this paper examined how negative narratives aimed at tarnishing an organization's reputation can positively lead to a favorable corporate reputation when effectively managed and expertly addressed. Employing a qualitative research method, the paper analyzed news extracts from prominent Nigerian newspapers and television news content as primary data sources. The stakeholder theory, which stipulates that management has a moral duty to protect not only the corporation but also the legitimate interests of the stakeholders, underpins this investigation. The results indicate that an organization with a robust corporate reputation can gain a competitive advantage over its competitors by building an entry barrier and enhancing its competitiveness. The paper concludes that organizations should not solely react when faced with a reputation crisis or scrutiny but rather take a proactive stance by engaging with the public regarding their operations. The paper recommends that organizations should adopt a proactive rather than a reactive approach when addressing image or reputation-related issues.

Keywords: Corporate, reputation, narratives, Dangote refinery, corporate communications, fuel pricing.

Introduction

When examining the impact of negative narratives on corporate reputation, it is essential to consider how companies respond to challenges and criticisms when they perceive these narratives. Therefore, the approach of Dangote Petroleum Refinery Limited and Nigeria National Petroleum Company Limited to addressing issue

related to fuel pricing serves as a point to reckon with in corporate reputation management of any organization. According to Bronn (2007) research on corporate reputation has increasingly captured the attention of academics in the fields of strategy, economics, and management. Fombrun and Van Riel (2003) cited in Bronn (2007) describe corporate reputation as something that magnetically attracts people to an organization like a magnet. An organization with a good reputation attracts people to engage with it through purchasing, investing and working. Therefore, corporate reputation rests on what has traditionally been known by many as public relations (Anani-Bossman, 2020), though, it is seen from different perspectives, such as corporate communication, corporate affairs, strategic communication, and corporate relations.

Corporate reputation or reputation management has been the topic of increased interest in the public relations field (Plowman & Chiu, 2007). Grunig and Hung (2002) assert that corporate reputation is a collective representation of a firm's past actions and results that describe the firm's ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders. Grunig and Hung (2002) also posited that reputation is an intangible asset that encompasses past reflections and future expectations, as well as a firm's actions, activities, products, and services. Corporate reputation is also a broad and far-reaching characteristic of a business, incorporating concepts such as corporate image, corporate management, goodwill, and brand equity.

In Susanti, Rahmanto, and Wijaya (2022), the management of a company's corporate reputation is orchestrated by public relations practitioners to promote or protect the importance of a brand, including the company's reputation. This pointed to the fact that corporate reputation will be good or bad, strong or weak depending on the quality of strategic thinking, communication, and management commitment to achieve the established goals, skills and energy with all components of the program that are going to be realized and communicated. Thus, this implies that when Dangote Petroleum Refinery Limited has a good reputation, corporate profits will increase tremendously to boast the company's revenue. Therefore, when transparently communicating the pricing strategies and engaging with stakeholders to address certain concerns, this company can turn negative narratives into opportunities to showcase its commitment to fair pricing practices and customer satisfaction. Hence, the objective of this study is to find out how negative narratives expressed about an organization targeted at tarnishing its image might result in positive corporate reputation when properly handled, with a particular emphasis on Dangote Petroleum Refinery Limited Trade on Fuel Pricing in war with Nigeria National Petroleum Company Limited.

Statement of the problem

The significance of effectively managing the corporate reputation of an organization is often underestimated by some information managers within their organizations. These individuals frequently believe that negative narratives regarding their organizations will lead to the destruction of their corporate reputation, thereby leading them to resort to defensive measures rather than empathizing or sympathizing with the organization offering suggestions and solutions. Despite this, presenting the true picture of the story and providing veracious information will help to dispel the rumors and strengthen the corporate reputation of organization. Thus, negative narratives most often create better opportunities for corporate reputation building; therefore, when a negative narrative is professionally handled, the corporate reputation of the organization is enhanced. However, despite the efforts of Dangote Petroleum Refinery Limited to stabilize the price of petroleum product and make the products available and affordable to consumers to strengthen local refineries and reduce importation, the Nigeria National Petroleum Company Limited has thwarted the effort and decided to fix the price of the

product, which has resulted in fuel pricing disputes and inconsistencies that have brought mistrust and credibility issues to the organization. This study examined how negative narratives supposedly targeted at tarnishing an organization's corporate reputation would significantly result in a positive corporate reputation of the organization.

Objectives of the study

Generally, the work focused on when negative narratives result in positive corporate reputation with a look at the fuel pricing trade of Dangote Petroleum Refinery and Nigeria National Petroleum Company. Specifically, the paper:

- i. Examine the negative narratives of the trade between Dangote Petroleum Refinery and Nigeria National Petroleum Company on fuel pricing.
- ii. X-ray positive corporate reputation management strategies of Dangote Petroleum Refinery and Nigeria National Petroleum Company trade on fuel pricing.
- iii. Determine the influence of negative narratives in fostering Dangote Petroleum Refinery and Nigeria National Petroleum Company's positive corporate reputation management.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on stakeholder theory. The stakeholder theory was propounded by Edward Freeman in 1980s. Freeman is generally credited with popularizing the stakeholder concept in 1984. But the concept was first used in 1963 in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute. The stakeholder theory addresses the principle of who or what really counts (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2022). In general, the concept is about what the organization should be and how it should be conceptualized. The theory states that organization itself should be thought of as grouping of stakeholders and the purpose of the organization should be to manage their interests, needs and viewpoints. As an integral part of normative organizational management theories, stakeholder theory stipulates that management has a moral duty to protect not only the corporation but also the legitimate interests of the stakeholders. Thus, the interests of all stakeholders must be maximized at all times.

Therefore, when organization invests in the society, it is expected to reap this in form of improved corporate reputation and understanding when things go wrong and to equally maximize the owners' profit motive in the process. According to the stakeholder management theory, managers balance diverse information requests from multiple stakeholders and may not respond to all stakeholders with the same degree of attention; rather than satisfying every stakeholder, firms prioritize their stakeholders after assessing their attributes, including power, legitimacy, and urgency. The stakeholder concept enables management to address the divergent needs and interests of critical groups, including capital owners, employees, customers, and suppliers, as well as those of emerging groups, including governments, competitors, consumers, advocates, environmentalists, special interest groups, and the media (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2022).

In terms of relevance and applicability to this study, it can be assumed that the positive corporate reputation of an organization would be tremendously enhanced when critical stakeholders are always involved in an organization's activities and the legitimate interests of the stakeholders are protected. Therefore, as corporate organization, the management of Dangote Refinery Limited should at all times keep the stakeholders abreast of

the information at hand and be transparent, credible and reliable in its communication across the activities. In this way, the stakeholders' group will always give their maximum support to the company in case of any negative narratives about them, and the organization's corporate reputation will stand out. Consequently, addressing negative narratives about individuals or organizations and sharing the company's authentic perspective without bias or attacks can yield positive outcomes. Thus, it will help the organization to maintain its positive corporate reputation against all odds.

Corporate Reputation Concept

Effective corporate reputation is essential for fostering and safeguarding the growth of any business organization for optimal performance. According to Kim and Cha (2013), corporate reputation is an overall positive evaluation of an organization that has been formed over a long-term period among audiences based on various constructs, such as a corporation's philosophy, activities and communications. Kim (2001, cited in Kim and Cha, 2013) also argued that a positive effect on the company's reputation is expected as the unit of public relations expense increases. Carmeli and Tishler (2005) posited that a corporation's reputation is the most important intangible asset contributing to its success. They further contended that corporate reputation could add value to a corporation, allow it to attract quality applicants or investors, and improve both economic performances. Therefore, organization with a high corporate reputation could have an advantage over its competitors by building an entry barrier, attracting investors' interest, save costs, and bolster its competitiveness. Corporate reputation is the cornerstone of a company's success and has a significant impact on various aspects of its operations and outcomes (Nuortimo, Harkonen & Breznik, 2024). This is where Dangote Petroleum Company limited should leverage on and promote, as well protect its corporate reputation in the eyes of the public and other critical stakeholders to boost its revenue generation and reputation.

According to Sayimer and Kucuksarac (2018), corporate reputation is expressed as an intangible strategic business entity with an economic value creation capacity is difficult for to imitate competitors. Fombrun (1998, cited in Sayimer & Kucuksarac, 2018) stated that corporate reputation is a combination of versatile components that is considered the history of experience of stakeholders with the corporation. This has to do with the effectiveness of the communication stakeholders establish with that institution, the content of corporate services, the institution's quality perception, institutional appeal, and their wide-ranging effects. Therefore, reputation is seen as a result of the institutions past activities. According to Cha and Kim (2010), public relations activities positively affect corporate reputation; therefore, reputation management is an important part of public relations strategies. Barnett, Jermier, and Lafferty (2006) viewed corporate reputation as an awareness, assessment, and asset. As an awareness, corporate reputation is the stakeholder's perception of an organization; as an assessment, corporate reputation is seen as a judgment, an estimate, an evaluation or a gauge; and as an asset, corporate reputation is something of value and significance to the firm. They further argued that corporate reputation is all about observers' collective judgments of a corporation based on assessments of the corporation's financial, social, and environmental impacts over time.

Sharma, Sharma and Sharma (2013) stated that the value of PR can, therefore, not be overlooked due to the fact that public relations is an essential factor in deciding the success of any organization by developing and fostering its corporate reputation. Sharma, Sharma and Sharma (2013) further contended that the responsibilities

of PR practitioners are very crucial in building the corporate reputation of their respective organizations in the eyes of the public, which helps them in monitoring, controlling and establishing their corporate image. Esenyel (2020) argued that corporate reputation provides social support to organizations, influencing their sector's competitive advantage and future endeavors. Therefore, the stakeholders' favorable appraisal of this attribute ensures better prospects for the enterprise. This implies that a company's positive corporate reputation distinguishes it from competitors, drawing increased financial benefits and enhancing the company's standing. Esenyel (2020) further asserted that while maintaining a positive reputation has numerous benefits, establishing and managing reputation proves to be a formidable challenge for organizations. However, corporate reputation encompasses the collective perceptions and favorable evaluations that evolve over time in the minds of all stakeholders due to the organization's consistent efforts. It represents an intangible asset that bestows a significant competitive advantage upon the organization. Reputation stands as an essential element in realizing the objectives of individuals and organizations alike, as the public and community extend their trust and support in relation to the extent of reputation upheld.

Vercic and Coric (2018) opined that corporate reputation has been widely recognized as one of the key foundations on which to build organizational success. When positive, is considered one of the most valuable intangible assets any organization can possess. In Clark and Montgomery (1998, cited in Esenyel, 2020), corporate reputation is a multi-faceted component that depends on the effectiveness of the communication with the stakeholders, the content of their services, the quality of the organization, the appreciation of the institution, and their profound impact. However, Shamma (2012), see corporate reputation as a comprehensive concept that comprises all aspects of corporate marketing including: corporate image, corporate identity, corporate branding, corporate personality, corporate associations, and corporate communications. Gotsi and Wilson (2001) argued that a firm's corporate reputations with its stakeholders must be regarded as dynamic constructs, which influence and are influenced by all the ways in which a company projects its images: its behavior, communication and symbolism. Therefore, Bozkurt (2018) submitted having a good impression on customers is vital if enterprises seek to continue to exist in the market and maximize their profits by increasing their potential customer portfolio. In looking at the arguments of the concept of corporate reputation by different scholars, it would be established that the central idea in all the assertions is that the stakeholders' perception about the organization are the key element that builds a corporate reputation for the organization. Therefore, what is important is the perception that stakeholders have about the organization and not how the organization looks at itself before the eyes of the public or the picture of the organization painted by an outsider to portray the reputation of the corporate entity in a bad light.

Corporate Reputation and Corporate Communication

Different scholars make different assertions regarding the factors that shape reputation, which have an impact on corporate reputation, and what consequences corporate reputation has for the organization (Esenyel, 2020). Charles and Shanley (1990, cited in Esenyel, 2020) argued that effective and successful management of an organization in its investment decisions is an essential determinant of its reputation in the eyes of investors. Effective management its financial assets creates high financial performance, increases the reputation of the organization, and the likelihood of excellent performance in the future. According to Emuru, Aruku, Itam, and Ikangakang (2024, p. 11), "corporate communication is the management of identity, image, and reputation through research that allows identification of shared values, attributes, differentiators, and competitive

advantages; it comprises the strategic management of communication tools that contribute to public awareness and the construction of links with stakeholders, thereby contributing to the achievement of stated objectives.” Emuru et al. further asserted that corporate communication encompasses communication relationships aimed at facilitating the favorable transmission of information between the internal and external audiences of an organization to attain its set objectives. Therefore, corporate communication is a challenging task that is responsible for influencing the behaviors of consumers and other stakeholders in favor of the corporate organization, goods, and services, especially in a competitive business environment.

According to Cornelissen (2014), corporate communication is a management function that oversees and coordinates the work done by communication practitioners in different disciplines, such as media relations, public affairs, and internal communication. According to Shamma (2012, pp. 154) corporate communication is “an instrument by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communications are harmonized as effectively and efficiently as possible to create a favorable basis for relationships with the groups upon which the company is dependent.” This is where corporate communications are seen as a channel to get across to various stakeholders and to bring the stakeholder’s interests with that of the company together to conform to the company’s operational guidelines and procedures. Corporate communications also help the organization better understand the different needs of stakeholders and integrate them into a company’s standard to build a stronger relationship between the organization and stakeholders’ group. Shamma (2012) further asserted that corporate communication can be used to reach out to all the company’s stakeholder groups collectively as opposed to communicating with individual stakeholder separately. Therefore, apart from simultaneously communicating with different stakeholders, corporate communications also help enhance and support a company’s corporate reputation among its stakeholders.

Balmer and Geysler (2006) noted that corporate communications relate to the various outbound communications channels deployed by organizations to communicate with customers and other stakeholders. Organizations consider the various communication effects of management, employee and product behavior, and word-of-mouth as well as media and competitor behaviors to determine the level of their performance to improve or maintain their standard. Guru, Sanjeevaraja, Gopala, and Parashivamurthy (2013, pp. 135) stated that, “corporate communication is the key vehicle to setting the tone and messages for corporations through several channels of communication.” They further buttress that corporate communication is effective in the successful business management and its effects are understood by the corporate leaders in enhancing the reputation of corporations; therefore, it is the key factor in the creation, implementation, monitoring, and reporting on all corporate activities. Corporate communication provides opportunities to feel the pulse of various stakeholders and bring about suitable changes and modifications in the business and communication approaches that shape the corporate reputation of organizations. In Ezeah (2005, p. 137), “corporate communications management involves the creation and presentation of a company’s overall image to its employees and the public at large.” Therefore, it is imperative for corporate organizations to focus on planning, organization, direction, and control over their corporate reputation through corporate communications approaches to avoid any potential damage to their reputation.

Corporate Reputation and Management

Reputation management refers to an organization’s ability to establish its reputation, identity, and image in terms of improved business performance and organizational goals; therefore, integrity, consistency, persistence,

and sustainability are the foundation of corporate reputation management (Esenyel, 2020). Golgeli (2013) observed that reputation is the total set of individual and collective judgments on institution's reliability based on a general set of values, trustworthiness, and competence. Golgeli further argued that an institution or corporation's reputation is characterized by a set of factors, including customer satisfaction, service and product quality, administrative and corporate transparency, social responsibility, staff qualifications, social facilities and rights provided to staff, wage policy, avoiding unfair competition, and reliability. According to Agbonifoh and Oshagbemi (1989 cited in Emuru et al., 2024, p. 10) "corporate image management is the totality of an organization's deliberate and concerted efforts directed at moving its image toward its target image." Therefore, organizational management's efforts consciously fashion, protect and promote the company's desired image or impression in the eyes of its customers.

Nguyen and Leblanc (2001, pp. 228) posit that "corporate reputation is an aggregation of a single stakeholder's perceptions of how well organizational responses are meeting the demands and expectations of many organizational stakeholders." Clardy (2005, pp. 280) contended that "organizational reputation is a perceptual representation that accompanies past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to various stakeholder and constituency groups." Clardy (2005) argued that six properties can be identified to further define the meaning and functions of organizational reputation; that reputation is a blanket characterization of what an organization is like; indeed, it functions like a stereotype, reducing some complex phenomenon to a simplified essence. Reputations also provide predictions about how an organization's members will act in certain circumstances. A reputation is not fixed but can change. A brand is a special type of organizational reputation, attached to a firm's products or services, and those who beliefs about an organization will likely also involve evaluative judgments.

Barnett, Jermier, and Lafferty (2006) posit that the transition from identity to image is a function of PR, marketing, and other organizational processes that attempt to shape the impression people have of the firm. In this regard, therefore, image can be shaped but not controlled by an organization because factors such as media coverage, governmental regulations and surveillance, industry dynamics and other external forces also influence firm impressions. Oparaugo (2021 cited in Emuru et al. 2024) asserted that corporate image is the reputation or perception of a person, group, or corporate body held by others, often as a result of what the organization does or has done in the past. Kim and Lee (2012) posited that corporate image is another important factor in the overall evaluation of service quality of any organization, therefore, corporate image is the perception of an organization that customers' hold in their minds over a period of time. Consequently, the corporate image of various corporation works as a purifier through which a company's entire operation is perceived. Thus, a corporate image reflects a company's overall reputation and commanding position in the minds of stakeholders. According to Lee and Choi (2009, pp. 174) "corporate image is influenced by various corporation-side factors, such as product, service, financial status, employee relations, corporate citizenship, mission and vision, and organizational culture, among others." Bozkurt (2018, pp. 61) asserted that "corporate image is the accumulation of all judgments in the minds of target mass as regards the adjectives associated with a given enterprise." This also implies the compilation of all analyses related to the way audience recognizes and perceives enterprises.

Küçüksüleymanoğlu (2015) maintains that corporate image entails an accomplishment and impacts that a company has attained since its establishment, behaviors in the relationships between employers and employees,

what it has toward the environment, personal experiences with the organization, informing people in line with their comprehension levels about the enterprise, in company communication, and the impact created by the organization on the target audience. Corporate image has been studied as an indicator of the social performance of organization, thus, it is the total sum of its reputation, the way it organizes and operates its activities and conducts its business, the attitudes of its employees and even the way they respond to clients and associates ((Powell, 2011; Almeida & Coelho, 2018). As Sz wajca (2018) argued, corporate image and reputation are interrelated but should not be identified with each other. Image is a picture, a set of imaginations and associations about a company, which is emerging in the minds of its audience as a result of the interaction of information coming from different sources, while reputation, is the opinion about the company, formulated by different stakeholder groups, based on the assessment of the various aspects of its activities. Therefore, corporate image and corporate reputation are a part of the company's intangible resources that can be built on its long-term competitive advantage and market value to sustain the organization's long-standing.

Methodology

This qualitative (descriptive) study provides a deeper understanding and demonstrates how the corporate reputation of an organization can be congruously managed by the critical stakeholders. The qualitative research used extracts from news articles on the fuel pricing dispute between the Dangote Petroleum Refinery Limited and Nigeria National Petroleum Company Limited. The news items concerning the two companies on fuel pricing were extracted from the online newspaper (Nigerian dailies) and broadcast station (Television) from August 2024 to December 2024, spanning five months. These documents were sourced and extracted from the online news articles.

Findings and Discussion

The summary of findings was drawn from Nigerian newspapers and TV broadcast sources. This agrees with this study's objective and the theoretical framework guiding the research. To keep its costumers abreast and protect its corporate reputation, the Dangote Petroleum Refinery Limited announced its fuel pricing strategy, revealing that it sells petrol at N960 per liter for ships and N990 per liter for trucks. This pricing comes in the wake of fuel associations IPMAN and PETROAN, who claimed that they can import petrol at lower rates (News Extracts, 2024). Both organizations claimed that they can import PMS at lower prices than that sold by the Dangote Refinery. However, Anthony Chiejina, the Group's Chief Branding and Communication Officer, counters their claims that they (Dangote) benchmark their prices against international prices and believe that their prices are competitively relative to the price of imported products (News Extracts, 2024). Chiejina (News Article 2024) argued that "if anyone claims they can land PMS at a price cheaper than what they are selling, then they are importing substandard products and conniving with international traders to dump low-quality products into the country, without concern for the health of Nigerians or the longevity of their vehicles." Furthermore, the organization made it clear that the regulator (NMDPRA) does not even have laboratory facilities that can be used to detect substandard products when they are imported into the country. According to Dangote, NNPC set the pace by selling PMS to domestic marketers at N971 per liter for ships and at N990 for trucks. This set the benchmark for our pricing, and we have even gone lower to sell at N960 per liter for sale into ships, while maintaining N990 per liter for sale into trucks (Chiejina, News Extract 2024). Chiejina reaffirmed the refiner's commitment to quality and stood by its decision to sell petrol at rates lower than those set by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), which had established prices of N971 per liter for

ships. The Dangote Company maintained that starting the price at N960, it aims to provide consumers with affordable fuel options while maintaining high quality. In the same vein, Dangote raised alarm over an international trading company setting up a facility near its refinery, suggesting that the company plans to blend substandard products to compete with Dangote's higher-quality offerings. According to Dangote, this move threatens the growth of Nigeria's domestic refining industries to provide jobs and grow the economy (News Extracts, 2024). This implies that the company has to maintained and professionally manage its corporate reputation in the face of these challenges to remain afloat in the market.

In one of the news articles by Shehu Sani titles "*The price war between Dangote Refinery and the NNPC is a skit*". Sani (News Extract 2024) branded the price dispute between Dangote Refinery and the Nigeria National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC) as a "skit". Sani argued that the Federal Government's decision not to intervene, and mediate the pricing conflict between the two entities is not a good move to the industry. However, the Federal Government made their position known, that it would remain neutral in the petrol price standoff between NNPC and Dangote Refinery that both parties were free at their liberty to set their own fuel prices based on market conditions. The Federal Government also admits that the deregulation of the petroleum sector means that stakeholders have the freedom to operate within the boundaries of the market dynamics, allowing them to determine pricing independently. This move aligns with the government's stance on maintaining a competitive market environment without direct interference (Onanuga, 2024). According to Sani, "now that the FG will not intervene in the price war between Dangote and the NNPC shows that 'the war' is a skit." Sani expressed doubt about the seriousness of the pricing dispute, implying that the battle between the two major players in the petroleum industry may be more theatrical than substantial. This underscores the broader perspective of market dynamics and its impact on the stakeholders and the corporate reputation of Dangote Petroleum Refinery.

However, the Dangote Petroleum Refinery says it has reduced the price of its Premium Motor Spirit from N990 per liter to N970 per liter as the year ends. The Group Chief Branding and Communications Officer of the Dangote Group, Anthony Chiejina, says that as the year comes to an end, it is the way of appreciating the good people of Nigeria for their unwavering support in making the refinery a dream come true. He stated that the refinery would not compromise on the quality of its petroleum products while assuring Nigerians of the best quality products that are environmentally friendly and sustainable. Corroborating Chiejina's stand, the spokesperson of the Independent Petroleum Marketers Association of Nigeria, Chinedu Ukadike, affirms that the agreement between IPMAN and Dangote is gradually pushing down the price of PMS, which is also due to the deregulation of the downstream oil sector. Based on the agreements, the NNPC, marketers, and other traders, such as depot owners, will patronize the Dangote refinery by lifting the 28 million liters of petrol that was agreed to supply to the Nigerian market (Punch News, November 25, 2024). Again, PETROAN admitted that stakeholders in the downstream sector, including the NNPC, the Nigerian Midstream and Downstream Petroleum Regulatory Authority, the President of Dangote Group, Alhaji Aliko Dangote, and marketers, reached a resolution. Therefore, the corporate reputation of Dangote refinery is crucial in maintaining a positive reputation.

In a related development, intense pricing competition emerged when the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited reduced its ex-depot price of Premium Motor Spirit to N899 per liter. This follows the reduction of the petroleum price of Dangote Refinery to N899, as confirmed by the Petroleum Products Retail Outlets Owners

Association of Nigeria (News Extracts, 2024). NNPC's price reduction is seen as a response to the competitive impact of deregulation, which has led to increased competition in the downstream sector. Many stakeholders have commended Dangote refinery for its earlier price reduction, which had helped to stimulate competition in the downstream sector. Furthermore, the President of the Dangote Industries Limited, Aliko Dangote, commended President Bola Tinubu for the positive impact of the naira-for-crude swap deal on the Nigerian economy, which has led to a reduction in prices of petroleum products in the country. Dangote also called on other oil marketers, including the NNPC Retail, to work with the company to ensure that Nigerians enjoy discounted prices for high-quality petrol. Consequently, Joseph Obele, the National Public Relations Officer, Petroleum Products Retail Outlets Owners Association of Nigeria (PETROAN), has admitted that NNPC has reduced its price to N899 per liter. He opined that the response resulted from the competitive impact of deregulation in the downstream sector.

Again, the Dangote Petroleum Refinery and Petrochemicals (DPRP) denied claims that the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC) used a \$1 billion loan secured through a crude forward sale agreement to support the refinery during a liquidity crisis. Chiejina, the company's Chief Branding and Communications officer, argued that the NNPC's stance was a distortion of the facts and a misrepresentation of the situation as \$1bn is just about 5% of the investment that went into building the Dangote Refinery. Chiejina further stated that the refinery's decision to enter into a partnership with the NNPC was based on the refinery's recognition of its "strategic position in the industry as the largest off taker of Nigerian crude." At the time, the refinery was the sole supplier of petrol into Nigeria, and "we agreed on the sale of a 20% stake at a value of \$2.76 billion. Chiejina admitted that the company agreed that they would only pay \$1 billion while the balance will be recovered over a period of 5 years through deductions on crude oil that they supply to them and from dividends due to them" (News Extract, 2024). Chiejina argues that if the company was struggling with liquidity challenges, they would not have given NNPC such generous payment terms. Thus, NNPC was subsequently unable to supply the agreed 300,000 barrels of crude per day. He stated that the shortfall was because the NNPC had committed a greater part of their crude cargoes to financiers with the expectation of higher production, which they were unable to achieve. Chiejina affirms that Dangote subsequently gave NNPC a 12-month period for them to pay cash for the balance of their equity given their inability to supply the agreed crude oil volume, yet NNPC failed to meet the deadline, which expired on June 30th, 2024. Consequently, their equity share was revised down to 7.24%.

Consequently, the Petroleum Retail Outlet Owners Association of Nigeria (PETROAN) finalized the pricing and supply terms for petrol from the refinery with Nigeria's Independent Petroleum Marketers Association, signaling that the negotiations are nearing completion. However, IPMAN National Publicity Secretary Chinedu Ukadike attributed the delays to political factors but emphasized that IPMAN is well-positioned to off-take fuel from the refinery (News Extract, 2024). Ukadike noted that the refinery is expected to dramatically reshape the Africa's fuel market, and the results would herald a new era in Nigeria's oil industry. Therefore, the move by Dangote to engage directly with oil marketers follows a recent shift in Nigerian government policy, allowing petroleum marketers to lift petrol directly from local refineries, bypassing the NNPC (News Extract, 2024). The Dangote Petroleum Refinery also admitted that it has received four cargoes of crude oil from the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited under the naira-for-crude sale agreement. It was also asserted that the four cargoes of crude were delivered to the refinery within the period when the government kick-started

the sale of crude to local refineries in the local currency; however, the refinery was still expected to receive more crude oil cargoes from NNPC (News Extract, 2024). Accordingly, Alhaji Aliko Dangote, the President of the Dangote Group, accused the international oil companies of sabotaging the investment by refusing to supply crude oil. The Dangote Group alleged that the IOCs insisted on selling crude oil to its refinery through foreign agents (News Extract 2024).

Thus, the uncertainty around pricing has pitched the management of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC) and that of Dangote Refinery in a battle to determine petrol price acceptable to all stakeholders in the petrol supply value chain (Vanguard News, 2024). The contention between the two organizations includes the social impact factor in balancing market with affordability; this suggests a wide gap that exists between offer prices given by both parties, a situation which has stalled the negotiations and, making it difficult for Dangote to go ahead with rolling out its product to local marketers because NNPC adopted a subsidy-compatible pricing, while Dangote opted for positioning a market-reflective pricing. However, Olufemi Soneye, the Chief Corporate Communications Officer of NNPC Ltd, asserted that negotiations are ongoing and that they are optimistic that a mutually agreed price and other terms would be reached eventually. NNPC will be guided by its obligations as provided under the Petroleum Industry Act, PIA, in agreeing to any price (Soneye, Vanguard News Extract, 2024).

Regarding fuel pricing, the Nigerian government has announced that petroleum marketers can purchase Premium Motor Spirit (Petrol) directly from Dangote Refinery; this officially put an end to the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited being the sole off-taker of Dangote Petroleum products. It was believed to be an outcome of the meeting of the Implementation Committee on the Sales of Crude Oil and Refined Products, which is expected to revamp local production, and enhance efficiency in product availability, and stabilize market conditions for the benefit of all Nigerians (Edun, News Extracts, 2024). In a twist of event, Olabode Sowunmi, an oil expert, said Dangote Refinery did not commence domestic production of premium motor spirit (Petrol) to sell at a cheap price to Nigerians. Sowunmi spoke because of the continued petrol pump hike, which stood at N1030 per liter at the Nigerian National Petroleum Company retail outlets nationwide, despite the arrival of Dangote Petroleum. He argued that assuming that Dangote Refinery would reduce the price of petrol was misleading. He claimed that because Dangote Refinery is a business, its petrol price may be more expensive than imported ones, as NNPC is the sole off-taker (Sowunmi, News Extract, 2024). Accordingly, upon lifting Dangote Petrol, NNPC increased the fuel price to N898 per liter. This informed the President of Dangote Group, Aliko Dangote, to reiterate that its Refinery's petrol is 15% cheaper than imported ones (News Extract, 2024).

In addition, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC), released the estimated prices of PMS, obtained from the Dangote Refinery in its retail stations nationwide. The prices are based on September 2024 pricing. The NNPC said it bought fuel from the Dangote Refinery at N898 per liter for PMS offtake (Soneye, News Extract, 2024). However, Chiejina (Newspaper Extract, 2024) described the NNPC disclosure as misleading and mischievous, aimed at undermining the refinery's milestone achievement in addressing Nigeria's energy insufficiency. Furthermore, he urged Nigerians to disregard NNPC information and wait for a formal announcement on pricing by the Technical Sub-committee on Naira-based crude sales to local refineries. Chiejina informed consumers that the current stock of crude was procured in dollars and sold to the NNPC in dollars against the current imports. In view of the foregoing, the NNPC Spokesperson argued that

it's in line with the provisions of the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA), PMS prices were not set by Government, but negotiated directly between parties on an arm's length (Newspaper Extract, 2024).

Again, the Vice President of Dangote Industries Limited, Devakumar Edwin, asserted that the local marketers are boycotting Dangote Refinery's petrol despite offering lower prices. However, Soneye argued that NNPC is currently negotiating with Dangote Refinery over petrol pricing ahead of its official start of PMS supply. The Executive Vice President of Downstream of the Company, Adedapo Segun affirms that NNPC will lift Dangote Refinery Petrol, as the President of Dangote Group officially announced the rollout of Dangote Refinery's petrol. Meanwhile, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPC) claimed to have quit its role as the sole buyer of Dangote Refinery's PMS (petrol) to enable petroleum marketers to purchase petrol directly from Dangote Refinery to take off the burden from the NNPC (News Extract, 2024). The NNPC also stressed that Dangote Refinery is free to sell its PMS to marketers. However, Aliko Dangote, the President of Dangote Refinery, refutes the claim that the rollout of his petrol was dependent on NNPC and will be dependent on NNPC. Meanwhile, NNPC argued that it will only fully offtake PMS from the Dangote Refinery Limited if the market prices of PMS are higher than the pump prices in Nigeria. Therefore, this study has provided Nigerians with valuable insights into the operations of these two organizations, as the corporate reputation of any entity is paramount to its longevity.

Conclusion

Based on the data gathered in this paper, it has been established that addressing negative narratives about individuals or organizations and sharing the authentic perspectives of key stakeholders without bias or attacks can yield positive outcomes. Therefore, it is significant for every organization to prioritize the safeguarding of its corporate reputation and refrain from engaging in politics. Rather, the focus should be on proactively managing and upholding this reputation at all times. Organizations should not solely react when faced with reputational crises or questioning; instead, they should proactively communicate their endeavors to the public and objectively address the issue. By providing regular updates and timely and genuine information, stakeholders can be assured of being well-informed at all times.

The paper concludes that no corporate organization or individual should dismiss any negative narratives lightly; instead, they should address them promptly before they escalate and tarnish one's reputation.

Recommendations

From the findings of the research, the paper therefore recommends the following

- i. When faced with image or reputation challenges, organizations should take a proactive stance rather than reactive one.
- ii. Stakeholders should be equipped with accurate information before forming judgments or opinions about any organization.
- iii. Corporate reputation building should be a sine-qua-non for every organization who wishes to rewrite their negative narratives.

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