



Country Image of Nigeria: A Preliminary Study of Factors Affecting the Perception of Nigeria in 21st Century

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Received: 05 April 2022

Accepted: 21 June 2022

Published: 29 July 2022

Abstract: Purpose- *This study aims to empirically identify the key factors affecting the perception of people about Nigeria as a country and its citizens.*

Methodology- *The study adopts a qualitative design using Focus group discussion as its instrument for data collection. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling technique. Four focus group discussions were conducted using four groups; a group for Nigerian nationals and groups for respondents from nine countries*

Findings- *The research found out that Nigeria as a country suffers from image crisis and reputation, and Nigerians in diaspora are largely perceived as people with questionable character. However, perceptions about a nation could change if people perceive positive image of that country or when the country leadership is proven credible, as respondents give very different responses after watching a 5-minute video clip about Nigeria.*

Research limitations/implications- *The scope of the study which covered only three out of the seven continents calls for further study on the subject to cover a range of the seven continents for a more representative sample and outcome.*

Practical implications- *The outcome of this study will help policy makers and other stakeholders in rebranding campaigns for direct foreign investments, tourism industry and national orientation and development.*

Social implications- *Nigerians at home and at diaspora do have an informed way to be aware of how they are seen. This may help them to look inward and adjust their attitude to become good ambassadors of their countries so to gain respect and dignity through tackling all factors that damage their image in the eyes of other nationals.*

Originality/value- *Although studies were conducted on Nigeria's image and rebranding projects, this study sought to probe the perception of other nationalities about Nigeria and Nigerians.*

Keywords: *Image, Perception, Place Branding, Nigeria*



1. INTRODUCTION

Perception plays a vital role in determining how one is treated, perceived and even interacted with. Perception is said to be the conversion of sensory inputs into meaningful experience (Severin, W.J & Tankard, 1992). Country's image and how its people are perceived surpass the mere attributions of sensory inputs underlying only what we see in terms of object's or person's physical features. Many other factors do influence how a particular country is perceived and how its people are treated. Twenty first century attained a zenith of information technology with globalization as its offshoot. Things are virtually done in uniform and images assume almost linear pattern whereby what is seen as positive in one continent is usually viewed with the same tone in other continents; global village (Maral & Bousquet, 2009). Mass media, news agencies, satellite channels are the major architects of world perception. People's attitudes also affect in no small measure how their country is perceived. Therefore country's image is dependent upon number of factors ranging from its physical and geographical features, its relative position in the scheme of the universe whether or not it is among the super powers, developed or undeveloped nations, its economic status, race, leadership style, quality of life and attitude of its people in diaspora among others (Awaritefe, 2004).

Image, Branding and Perception

Image is the mental picture of an object, person or place. While image is perceived brand and identity are always expressed by the client (Ajala, 2001). Image making and reputation building are more associated with Public Relations and public affairs in governmental relations. Branding is associated more with products and services. But today place branding becomes an area that attracts patronage from countries and organizations. Place branding will also be defined as the process whereby a town, region, country (place) actively seeks to create a unique and competitive identity for itself, with the aim of positioning it internally and externally as a good destination for trade, tourism and investments (Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heolop, & Mourali, 2005) (Nworah, 2006).

Notable countries who succeeded in place branding for direct foreign investment, tourism and trade are India, UK, U.S.A, South Africa, China, Wales, Spain, Malaysia and Ireland. Their success is however dependent on the stable economy, security, quality of life and considerable degree of transparency in the political system of those countries (Nworah, 2006) (Camilleri, 2001).

Action always speaks louder than voice. In order to change the perception of people towards a particular product, place or persons, their state of affairs have to always align to the conventional and mainstream popular and acceptable norms and standards. At international level, bad image cause a country its influence and respect (Ajayi, 2006). The country's brand can be influenced through the behaviors and actions of its people abroad (Wetzel, 2006; and Gilmore, 2001 in Akram 2014). Therefore the leadership style of the current administration under President Muhammadu Buhari as reported by Premium Times seemed to have positive impact on Nigeria's image at the international arena. Remark of the Queen Elizabeth II and David Cameroun during the anti-corruption summit in London demonstrated how leaders'



credibility gives a nation a good image. Similarly US foreign policy towards Nigeria has improved steadily with the credibility of the incumbent leader. Trump was reported to have expressed interest in sharing security, economic, and governance priorities with Nigeria as a result.

Country Image of Nigeria: *Reviewing the Literature*

Nigeria a giant of Africa as it is sometimes called undergoes transitional changes regarding its image at global arena. Somewhere around the turn of 20th century, Nigeria and Nigerians are perceived as great country with wonderful people. Nigeria's green passport guaranteed its citizens access to countries, and paved them upper hand for business transaction and public trust. Today Nigeria is suffering from a battered image and its people are despised and sometimes avoided in public places or treated with contempt at international airports (Ajala, 2001). The bad name and image Nigeria and Nigerians are suffering from has for long been sensed and bitterly felt by individuals and governments. Many branding projects and image building strategies were variously launched by The Federal Government of Nigeria. One of such efforts is the *Heart of Africa Project* 2004 and before it *Giant of Africa* (Fulani, 2012). Many factors culminated into the state of affairs regarding the country image of Nigeria. Some of these factors are internally propelled while many others are the outcome of external factors (Sunday, Ogaboh, Ekwuore, & Francis, 2009). The *Boko Haram* insurgency for example which is widely covered by the international powerful media outlets; BBC, VOA, Aljazeera has seriously damaged the image of Nigeria, Niger Delta militants kidnapping of foreigners working for oil companies scared foreign investors and tourists into the country, endemic corruption cases by public office holders widely reported by the media made the country a corruption hub in Africa, and recent execution of suspected drug pushers Nigerians in Indonesia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia have further aggravated the extent to which Nigeria's image is tarnished and how its citizens are perceived by other nationals. For several years, Nigeria has been at the bottom of Transparency International's (TI) Corrupt Perception Index (CPI) ranking (Obuah, 2013). However, many other good attributes of Nigeria and Nigerians are either largely ignored or else unknown by many nationals. To mitigate the image onslaught on Nigeria, two inseparable measures have to be concurrently taken by Nigeria and its people beyond mere branding projects. Governments at different levels have to undergo serious overhaul by adhering to the rule of law, and assume the standard of good governance so to improve quality of life among its citizens (Awaritefe, 2004). Nigerians should be good ambassadors of their country wherever they may find themselves. No matter what effort a particular country is making to polish its image, the unfavorable perception will continue to surpass so long as its citizens behave indecently and are widely reported by the media to have been accused and or apprehended of crimes in diaspora (Ajala, 2001). The large number of Nigerians in diaspora and the unfolding migration drive today made presence of Nigerians more visible in Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Ireland besides Europe and America. Unlike in 70's and 80's when most Nigerians in diaspora belong to professionals and expatriate bodies, today large number of these migrants belong to indecent profession as sex workers, asylum seekers and refugees (Haas, 2006). From Edo state alone. more than 10,000 young girls migrated to Italy as prostitutes (Haas, 2006). Scattered evidence on the origin of Nigerian immigrants in Europe and the US strongly suggest that the majority originated from the relatively developed and densely



populated southern provinces. The Igbo from the southeast and the Yoruba from the southwest, and, to a lesser extent the Edo and the Ogoni ethnic groups seem to constitute the majority of Nigerian migrants in the UK (van Loon, 2008) (Hernandez-Coss *et al.* 2006). The majority of Nigerians trafficked to Europe seems to originate from Edo state, and Benin City in particular. Edo and, to a lesser extent, the Delta states are known as the main origin of sex workers. A total 158 Nigerians are waiting to be executed over drugs related offences in China, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/drug-trafficking-158-nigerians-on-death-row-in-china-malaysia/136038.html>

The above figures suggest a clearer picture of the presence of Nigerians abroad, and by implication their respective status and attitudes invariably reshape people's perception of what is Nigeria and who are its people.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research work employs a qualitative approach with Focus Group as its research design. Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretative/theoretical frameworks. The researcher collects data through examining documents, observing behavior and interviewing participants (Creswell, 2013).

The research therefore falls within the ambit of exploratory type with primary objective of getting more insight of perception of people belonging to different nations about Nigeria as a nation and its people. To precisely capture the main thesis of the study, Yin Fan and Akram Shahani work on the Country image of Pakistan (2014) was replicated. Rita Camilleri book; *Attitudes and Perceptions in Australia-Malaysia Relations* also guided the approach employed in this study. Data was collected from 2nd January 2017 and 25th April, 2017 using purposive sampling technique via personal networks and relations in the research area. This type of sampling is justifiable in exploratory researches of this nature. A total of 31 respondents were carefully selected in the context of nationalities for different focus groups. They were all staff or postgraduate students at the International Islamic University Malaysia aged between 20 and 35 years, including two females and 29 males.

The lopsidedness of respondents' gender cropped in due researcher's difficulty to get the female respondents ready to join the Focus Groups. Respondents were then divided into four groups of various sizes: African (Six), Arabs (Eight) Asian (Seven) and Nigerian (Ten). The questionnaire used in the discussion was pretested in a pilot study, and revision was made to remove 8 questions that were deemed either too complicated or irrelevant. The final questionnaire contains 19 questions for the Nigeria group and 15 for the other three groups.

The profile of respondents and the questionnaires are provided in Appendixes 1 and 2. The study was conducted in an informal and friendly environment so that respondents could easily express their point of view. Each focus group session lasted from 45 to 60 minutes; all discussions were recorded and transcribed. One of the useful features of focus groups is to



transcribe views of the respondents, which later on helped the researcher to analyze what was said in either emotional or sarcastic tone, and even nonverbal behaviors such as grimaces or smiles are of importance in the interpretation of the content. Projective technique in attitude study was employed using rating and multiple option questions 15, 16 and 17 to probe the inclination of respondents' attitude towards the subject under study.

Findings

Among the total number of the respondents, Nigeria received negative perception and Nigerians largely seen as people of questionable character. None of the respondents ever visited Nigeria. However, few respondents expressed rather divergent view that seek to segregate Nigerians who study as hardworking, and other Nigerians who roam streets in Kuala Lumpur as miscreants. Ignorance of what Nigeria means as a country seems to have influenced most judgment offered by the international respondents. Many of them never knew even the geographical location of Nigeria on the globe let alone its rich culture, history or human and natural resources. Asian group were particularly irritated about the rampant cases of cybercrimes and drugs most Nigerians are identified with. With the influx of more students pursuing postgraduate studies in Malaysia in recent years, a paradigm shift on the image of Nigerians seemed to have emerged. Some respondents went even further to cite examples of their Nigerian colleagues who are hardworking and even best students in their respective areas of specialization. A respondent from Europe is the least knowledgeable about Nigeria and its people. Media portrayal of the country as an African nation engulfed by poverty, savagery, HIV/Aids is the main perception they have about Nigeria. Some were amazed upon watching the short video clip on the City of Lagos. African group comprising nationals of Serra Leon, Ghana and Somalia expressed rather favorable remarks about Nigeria. This may not be unconnected to the fact that they belong to the same continent and the tendency to rely on the media portrayal is minimal. In contrast, a respondent from Bangladesh does not know anything about Nigeria except the *Boko Haram* insurgency which is widely reported in the international media.

Asian Group

This group comprises mainly of Malaysians and only one respondent from Bangladesh. Malaysian perception about Nigeria is generally vague due to the geographical and socio-political and cultural variations. Media portrayal of the country is still instrumental in reshaping their perception about reality. None of the respondents ever dreamt to visit Nigeria as they still thought it to be backward, primitive and poor. Nigerians are largely perceived as both criminals and good Samaritans as well. This perceptual shift took two interconnected phases; the first phase represents the coming of the first group of Nigerians who made their way to Malaysia decades ago as traders, business men and illegal immigrants. Their attitude and interaction with the local community and authorities were rather questionable. The second phase represents the influx of Nigerians as students in different institutions of learning across Malaysia. Hard working, intelligence and integrity are the visible characters Nigerians are identified with in the academic circle. Asian group therefore divided upon this background. Some were even making reference to incidences where cybercrime cases involved Nigerians as their substance of argument, yet others cited cases of best students that turn to be Nigerians in their respective departments.



Arabs Group

This group comprises of respondents from Arab countries and just one respondent from Europe, namely Saudi Arabia, Libya, Tunisia and Russia. Only one respondent from this group seemed to have little knowledge about Nigeria and its people. His contact and interaction with Nigerians is however scanty though when asked to choose the best description for Nigerians he opted for “ Drug Pushing”. The group showed no interest in the external or internal affairs of Nigeria as one respondent from Russia was in doubt whether Nigeria is a country or just a state in a country. When asked to just describe Nigeria in one word she said “*Boko Haram*” which showed her dependency on media on what other people should be. Ironically, respondents from Libya in spite of its African affiliation geographically seemed to express less interest in Nigeria compared to other black African countries like Somalia, Ghana and Serra Leon.

African group

African group comprises of respondents from Ghana, Serra Leon and Somalia. It becomes clear that proximity breaches communication gap and reduces the tendency of over dependence on media to shape our perception of reality. African respondent are very conversant with Nigeria, its people, and potentials. None of the respondents visited Nigeria in person. Although they have never been to Nigeria yet they could mention some of the Nigerian landmarks, cities, outstanding figures, literary scholars, sport celebrities and so forth. When asked to assign attributes that best describe Nigeria and Nigerians, their responses appeared more positive compared to other groups; largest black nation on earth, oil exportation, famous sports players among others. However, when it comes to describe Nigerians their responses tend to be negative; drug pushing, *Boko Haram* insurgency are some of their responses.

Nigeria Group

Nigerian group generally have negative self image due to the media portrayal of Nigeria globally, attitude of the fellow Nigerians in diaspora, rampant criminal cases at police stations and before the Nigerian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur. When asked whether they aspire to go back to Nigeria or seek job in other countries, most of them are very ready to go back to Nigeria for obvious reasons.

How to change a country’s image

Can bad image change to positive and polished one? Could perception of people about a particular stimuli, entity or persons be altered?. Informed advocacy, branding and rebranding could possibly be the answer. Experiment has been widely used in consumer research to study the changes in the consumer perception about brand or product attribute(Fan, Ying and Shahani, 2014) . A brief experiment was therefore conducted after each Focus group session to test the possibility of perceptive change. The respondents were shown a 5-minute video clip about Nigeria; *Lagos-Africa’s Model Mega City* produced by QCPTV and sponsored by Lagos State Government (LIRS), Eko Atlantic and Orlean Invest on laptop screen. The video clip contains images of the hectic city of Lagos, overhead bridges, good landscapes, tourism sites and hotels. The following are some randomly selected remarks from the respondents of different groups;

- Wow that is great (#1 RAG)
- So beautiful ! (#3 SAG, #4SeAG)



- I thought it is a desert (# 5 AGM)
- Really! (# 8LAG)

The outcome of this experiment demonstrated the relevance of an advocacy towards image building and correction especially in place branding to attract tourism and direct foreign investment.

3. CONCLUSION

This study strived to identify the key factors affecting the perception of people about Nigeria and Nigerians. The respondents represented a sample from three continents; Europe, Asia and Africa. The main findings of this study show that Nigeria and Nigerians unlike in the 80s are today (21st century) suffer the image and reputation crisis. Most factors affecting the image of Nigeria as a country and its people are internally propelled emanating from the attitude of Nigerians in diaspora, corruption engulfing the country and poor infrastructure. One externally propelled factor affecting the perception of Nigeria and Nigerians is the media portrayal of the country. The study also shows the possibility of altering the peoples' perception about a country when they are exposed to the real picture against their stereotyped image. However this study has limitations among which is the limited number of respondents and only representing three continents. The researcher's interpersonal relationship with respondents might influence their responses about his home country (in spite his effort to encourage them to do otherwise). It is therefore recommended that future studies on the subject matter would use more elaborate sampling frame to attain higher level of representation. Worth noting also is the impact of leadership credibility on the overall image of a country. The long dented image of Nigeria in terms of leadership and corruption for the last 16 years seemed to have improved with the new leadership in Nigeria. It is also recommended that the future study would cover the seven continents across the globe for a more findings against the new phase of Nigeria's socio-economic and political reform.

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**APPENDIX 1:
Profile of respondents**

	Size	Gender		Country represented
		Male	Female	
Asian group	7	4	3	Malaysia: 6, Bangaledash: 1
Arabs group	8	6	2	Algeria: 1 Saudi Arabia: 1 Libya: 3, Russia: 1
African group	6	6	0	Ghana: 3 Somalia: 1 Sudan : 1 Sierra Leone: 1
Nigerian group	10	9	1	Nigerians

**APPENDIX 2:
Summary of findings**

Asian group	Negative and partial positive image
	Attribute Nigerians to cybercrimes and drugpushing
	University community regards Nigerians as intelligent and hardworking
	Nigeria is described as a large black nation on earth and most corrupt as well
Arabs group	Negative or no image



	Minimal interest in interacting with blacks generally
	Describe Nigeria as poor and primitive nation
	Knew very little about rich culture, intellectuals, languages and economic activities
African group	Positive and partial negative image
	Regard Nigeria as Giant of Africa
	Described Nigeria as corrupt and rich country
	Are aware of its history, geography ,human and natural resource
	Describe Nigerians as friendly and religious
Nigerian group	Negative self images
	Aggrieved by myriad problems in Nigeria; insecurity, corruption, weak infrastructure
	Aspire for socioeconomic reform in Nigeria

APPENDIX 3:

Questionnaire used in focus groups

- Q1. What comes to your mind when Nigeria is mentioned?
- Q2. Do you know about any city, town or state of Nigeria?
- Q3. What is the approximate population of Nigeria?
- (a) 165 million (b) 50 million (c) 350 million.
- Q4. Which is the most commonly spoken language in Nigeria?
- (a) Hausa (b) Yoruba (c) Igbo (d)English
- Q7. Do you know about any famous artist or sportsperson of Nigeria?
- Q8. Do you know that Nigeria is one of the largest oil producing country?
- Q9. In your opinion, does Nigeria qualify to lead African continent?
- Q10. If you were shopping a leather jacket, would you buy one ‘Made in Pakistan’?
- Q11. Do you know about the Sports Goods and Surgical Instruments ‘Made in Pakistan’ forexport purposes?
- Q12. Which religious event is celebrated wholeheartedly in Nigeria? Like Christmas in other countries.
- Q13. How do you know about Nigeria, from friends, media, word of mouth or personal visit?
- Q14. While shopping, do you look for Made in Nigeria labels? Why?

The following rating and multiple choice questions are projective techniques in attitude study so to help the researcher understand the respondents’ inclination and perceptive pattern



regarding Nigeria and Nigerians.

Q15. How do you see Nigerian people? Give rating for each factor between 1 to 7.

Friendly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unfriendly
Jolly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Serious
Open	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Reserved
Exciting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Boring
Cool	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Aggressive
Religious	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Non religious
Flexible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rigid

Q16. Pick any three characters from the following; Nigeria is a or an,

- Muslim country
- Former world champion
- Developing/poor country
- Extremist
- Intellectual
- Hardworking
- Agricultural
- Semi-industrial
- Densely populated
- Holidays Destination
- Multi-lingual and traditional.

Q17. Of all the items/ attributes mentioned below, which one is Nigeria more identified with? Give 1-10 rating in order of magnitude. Where 1 stands for the most important attribute associated with it and 10 is the least attributable:

- Home of famous sport stars
- International Qur’anic competition medalists
- Drug pushing crime-
- *Boko Haram* insurgency
- Tourism and Rich culture
- Oil exportation
- Business hub
- Giant of Africa
- Largest black nation on earth
- Corruption

The following five questions are only for Nigerian Focus Group

Q18. Are you proud of being Nigerian?

Q19. Do you know about any recent or past crisis happened in Nigeria? What was your reaction?

Q20. What is your main source of getting information about Nigeria? Q21. If you had a choice, which country would you like to live and why?