
Harnessing the Potentials of Tourism in Nigeria through Public Relations

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Abstract: It is not in doubt that Nigeria is endowed with vast, diverse and captivating tourism resources that have the ability of transforming positively the nation's socioeconomic sector if properly managed and harnessed for the common good. Unfortunately, despite the availability of these enormous tourism potentials, we are not benefiting in any measure as governments of the three tiers, that is federal, state and local, do not even consider tourism or its development as a viable source of foreign exchange earnings and a catalyst for national development in this period of severe economic challenges confronting the nation. The first sign of lethargy is the conspicuous absence of strong institutions or policies that ought to be the fulcrum of the development of the tourism industry in the country. It is common knowledge that Nigeria is assailed by security challenges in virtually every part of the country. Apart from insecurity, the country is equally challenged by endemic corruption, kidnapping, terrorism and poor governance which is preventing it from developing a globally competitive tourism industry. This paper examines ways in which tourism policy, if well planned and effectively executed, will benefit the socioeconomic sector. It also highlights major challenges hindering the tourism industry and how effective and efficient public relations practices will create sufficient awareness on the problems and solutions in the industry. Findings revealed that the major setback faced by the tourism industry is lack of government interest in all ramifications.

Keywords: *Tourism, Public Relations, Policy, Socioeconomic, National Development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is about the most effective and efficient tool that can be used to promote the socioeconomic well-being and political image of a country. It is evident that the concept of tourism as an agent of change, growth and development, is a double-edged sword that has far reaching implications for both the socioeconomic and political development of any country.



The impact of a well implemented tourism policy on the economy of a country cannot be overemphasized because several countries with booming tourism sectors have enhanced GDPs, Gross Domestic Product. What is more, a thriving tourism industry, like other spheres of economic growth, has a multiplier effect on the development of allied industries which owe their sustenance on the viability of the tourism industry. Because tourists are in constant need of housing, transportation, food, clothing, interpreters, tour guides and memorabilia, a whole set of adjunct businesses are established along these lines. The allure of tourism is so strong that it can spur a significant change in a country's perception by others. In a country like Nigeria that is blessed with wonderful flora and fauna in its diverse geographical belts, from the fringes of the Sahara Desert in the far north to the Savannah vegetation of the middle belt and the southern rain forests, and rich cultural heritage, tourism can bring about unimaginable economic benefits and much needed diversification that will wean the country from its unhealthy dependence on oil and hydrocarbon. In most people, tourism creates a strong desire for leisurely indulgences and inspire an irresistible motivation to visit the wonders of nature and other man-made objects of awe as encapsulated by the natural habitats, rich cultural values, historical sites and relics, and astonishing artistic creations like the world acclaimed S.E.A. Aquarium in Singapore, contrived waterfalls and a host of others. Without a doubt, tourism is one of the key drivers of international commerce in recent years and a major source of revenue for several countries, and at the same time improve the standard of living of the citizenry (Anatusi & Nnabuko [1], Chizobam & Esi-Ubani [2], & Ogah et al [3]. Notwithstanding the much trumpeted economic benefits of tourism, only few countries deliberately develop their tourism infrastructure Petrovici [4].

Tourism development is not only about enhancing the quality of infrastructure and security, the role of public relations is equally important in the entire process. Public relations activities are carefully planned strategic form of communication that entails promoting the image of an organization, individual, government or even a country. It involves a deliberate policy of gaining and maintaining a sustainably mutually beneficial relationship between a country, its citizens and other countries. The focus here is the deployment of strategic communication tools to gain trust and build a two-way symmetrical beneficial relationship between the state and the public. Thus, public relations activities have a powerful and lasting impact on tourism development. The classical scenario is that the practitioner informs the public about an entity with emphasis on the benefits and other exciting prospects associated with the entity. The involvement of the public relations sector is vital to the success of tourism in a country as it helps to build an aura that will create a positive image and boost the awareness of the various tourism destinations and their unique qualities to potential tourists and investors. Through an avalanche of public relations activities, prospective tourists are able to gather relevant information about their destination even before they arrive. Public relations strategies are sustainable instruments and facilitators that are requisite to the revivification of the tourism industry in Nigeria. To further elucidate, [2] postulate that public relations strategies are like the veins and arteries that supply oxygenated blood from the heart to other parts of the human body. So is the impact of the activities of public relations to the tourism industry in that it is the vehicle that communicates messages and information to the entire system following a two-way process based on correlative knowledge in order to effectively harmonize destinations and tourist interest and bridge the credibility gap.

The advent of the internet has made the job of public relations practitioners easier due to the availability of several tourism-dedicated websites that serve as one-stop shops for all the information that a prospective tourist requires. Also, several countries have tourism offices stationed in the arrival terminals of their airports which provide ready-made answers to tourists and advertise attractive destinations. The benefit of meeting tourists as they arrive a country is indefinable given the lasting positive impression it leaves on the visitor.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED WORKS

2.1 Tourism in Nigeria

In its earliest organized form and structure, the origin of tourism industry in Nigeria can be traced to the mid-20th century when a group of Nigerians established the Nigeria Tourist Association (NTA) in the year 1962. The idea was well received and supported by the Federal Government of the day who provided take off funds and followed it up with annual subventions. Subsequently, the body became a member of the International Union of Official Travel Organization (IUOTO), the precursor of World Tourism Organization (WTO) in 1964. However, after its admission as a member of IUOTO, the tourism industry suffered a setback subsequently due to its inability to independently sustain itself, wean itself from government financial hand outs and shake off the domino effect of the burgeoning oil industry and the economic indolence it imposed on every aspect of our national life. In a bid to salvage the situation, the Nigerian government appointed the African Development Bank (ADB) to carry out a due diligence on the activities of the operations of the tourism industry in Nigeria and fashion out ways of improving its economic viability. This inquiry revealed that Nigeria has massive potentials for the development of tourism that will serve as a feasible economic catalyst and an additional source of foreign exchange earnings. To further buttress this, Ovat [5], stated that tourism is a cheaper means of increasing the revenue of a nation when compared with other sources and it also enhance a country's image as investor friendly and safe. When compared to the oil sector that is finite and exhaustible, the tourism sector is infinite and has the capacity to create more job opportunities for the citizenry and attract more investors than the oil sector. It is beneficial to public and private sectors as a means of revenue generation, guaranteed returns on financial investment, taxation on tourism products and foreign exchange (Agri et al) [6].

Nigeria is inundated with vast tourism resources as a result of its climate, vegetation, diverse cultural heritage and geographical location. The foremost tourism destinations in Nigeria include the renowned Yankari Game Reserve, Bauchi State, Ikogosi Warm Springs where warm spring and cold spring meets at a confluence in Ekiti State, the Lagos National Museum, Agbokim Waterfalls in Ikom, Cross River State, Olumo Rock, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Oron Museum, Awka Ibor State with over eight hundred ancestral figures of the Oron people, Zuma Rock, Suleja, Niger State, National War Museum, Umuahia, Abia State, famous for its collections of relics from the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, Ogbunike Caves, Anambra State, Old Oyo Park, Oyo State, and several others located across the nation. Sadly, most of these tourist sites have become derelict and abandoned due to bad management among other malaise that have sounded the death knell of the industry in Nigeria (Paul & Joseph) [7]. It is ironical that a nation with a population of over 206 million, 250 ethnic groups, vast landmass, 3000

kilometer inland water ways and over 870 kilometers of ocean coastline is blind to the massive benefits to be derived from the exploitation of these immense tourism potentials. Hamstrung by its dependence on crude oil, it has failed woefully to harness the allure of tourism, being one of the fastest growing industries, that has become a money spinner in several countries (Pepple 2022) [8].

In spite of the effort of the Federal Government to formulate a tourism policy in 1991 with the aim of making Nigeria a leading tourism destination in Africa, the policy yielded no significant result after 30 years as Nigeria has neither attained the status of a leading tourism destination in Africa nor generated any meaningful foreign exchange revenue during these years. Nigerian tourism figures, percentages and export values ranks among the lowest on the continent nay the world [5]. On the other hand, [8], believes that harnessing and sustaining the tourism industry in Nigeria will yield a turnover of about 10% or more to the GDP which will boost the economy and improve the standard of living of the people.

2.2 Influence of Tourism on National Development

In broad terms, the concept of tourism involves the temporary movement of persons to locations outside their abode for the purpose of leisure, business engagement or research, and allied businesses like transportation and services connected therewith. In reality, tourism is essentially an interim relocation from one's comfort zone to another destination where there are customized activities designed to cater for the needs of the tourist. It is the provisional movement to a destination outside the tourist's regular abode for the purpose of acquiring knowledge mostly through interaction with the locals about the culture, values and natural habitation of a place for self-development and recreation (Andini et al 2022) [9].

Today, tourism has become a major source of foreign exchange earnings in several countries who have used their experience to ensure that their economies are positively impacted by a well-established tourism industry. It is also a viable tool for economic growth and national development as it does not only portray the image of a country in a friendly and receptive manner, it also creates employment opportunities for the citizenry which improves their standard of living in the long run. There is no doubt that tourism related activities have significantly impacted the economy and sociopolitical structure of several countries to the extent that the footprints of tourism are pivotal on every aspect of their national life as it is a major catalyst for national development. In several countries, there is a conscious effort to create a composite economy by encouraging a paradigm shift from manufacturing in order to integrate tourism into their respective economies as an equally important aspect of job creation and improved income especially in the areas of transportation, accommodation, entertainment and leisure. In an analysis carried out by World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism ranks among the top five in export categories of 83% of countries surveyed and is a major source of foreign exchange of at least 38% of them. The WTO study acknowledged the multiplier effect of tourism on a nation's economy including its outstanding ability to also attract investors who bring in their much coveted foreign exchange into these countries thus engendering rapid growth and development to a nation. It also creates public awareness and portray the nation as a friendly and safe environment thereby promoting a positive international image (Abdulrahman et al [12], Bassey [11] & [5]).



On the sociocultural scale, tourism is an antecedent for good social ties as it fosters cultural integration, enhances world peace and serves as a tool for reducing poverty in a nation thus a medium of achieving national development goals as it creates employment of women and youths. Globally, the tourism industry is fast developing in all its ramifications and exceeds forecast expectations from time to time. According to the 2011 annual report of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism was responsible for 30% of global services exports and 6% of the entire exports of goods and services. Over the years, tourism has witnessed exponential growth rate on a global scale from 7% to 12% in over four decades, an unmatched rate in the economic field [7].

2.3 Public Relations and Tourism

Public relations activities are a significant aspect of our daily lives, whether in our personal capacities or corporate engagements, which is essentially about managing reputation in every aspect of human endeavor. It is a unique method of promoting the image of an organization and enhancing its visibility in public space. Hence, public relations activity is a consciously calculated and organized form of communication, whose sole aim is to influence public opinion, earn their trust, establish an interactive relationship between the government and its citizenry and between other nations. In the same vein, effective use of diverse communication strategies can enable a public relations practitioner to make a crucial impact in portraying a positive image of an organization or a country (Alsalami & Al-Zaman) [12]. In the tourism industry, public relations activities are more than a mere necessity, it is momentous and goes hand-in-hand with other policies that are put in place to boost the industry. One could have the best security, awe-inspiring tourism destinations, well developed 21st century infrastructure that is powered by cutting edge technology, yet will remain unknown without the deployment of a public relations strategy that will create the necessary awareness to the target audience about the existence of the tourism potentials that are available in that country. What it means is that huge investments in the tourism industry is meaningless and must be equally matched by a well-choreographed public relations blitz for it to yield the desired result.

Furthermore, the opinion of the tourist is also shaped by diverse factors such as climate, topography and language. Moreover, information that is gleaned from the media space goes a long way to influence the opinion and decision of the tourist and public relations in this context, is all about creating a captivating and rapturous impression in the mind of the tourist in order to influence their opinions and behavior. In this regard, it is the responsibility of the public relations practitioner to ensure that proper and verifiable information is made available at the right time to the right audience through the right medium. The hugely influential role of public relations in the ascendancy of tourism as a viable economic endeavor is incontrovertible as it encompasses creating awareness about tourism events and locations by promoting the image of the destination so as to heighten its attraction to prospective visitors and influencing their perception. A combination of an effective public relations campaign and tourism helps in promoting respect for a country's tradition and culture while simultaneously improving the harmonious coexistence and socioeconomic well-being of the citizenry: akin to killing several birds with one stone. In this complex arrangement, the goal of the practitioner is to create a hybrid scenario whereby the tourist cultivates a mutually beneficial relationship with the local

residents, businesses, pressure groups, suppliers, hotel services, car rentals, security personnel and other industry stakeholders.

Tourism industry is driven by the impression, perception and emotions formed in the mind and subconscious of the tourist about the tourism destination. Hence, with the advent of technological public relations tools, it has become easy to influence the opinions of the potential tourist from the comfort of your office. Public relations tools and strategies are employed by a practitioner in communicating and conveying positive destination images to potential tourists as these strategies have the ability to influence the opinion of its target public. In the tourism industry, public relations activities are a sine qua non to the success of efforts geared towards revitalizing the tourism industry in any country. The thrust of public relations as an enabler of the development of the tourism industry is to ensure that it is included in the entire planning process ab initio. Thus, as other experts in the tourism industry are being assembled by the government or planning authority, the public relations practitioner must have a seat on board because in public relations, perception is everything. It will be remiss to discountenance the importance and impact of public relations in a tourism project as it helps in creating favorable publicity for tourism destinations. A favorable image creates desires in the mind of the tourist which will propel him to make a presumably favorable decision (Erbay [13], [4]). However, the public relations practitioner must bear in mind that while creating these positive images in order to attract visitors, sustainability is key, because being able to maintain and sustain the positive image created is crucial to the long term survival of the project. The practitioner must be ready to come up, with uncommon regularity, with innovative ideas, strategies and plans for sustaining the positive perceptions formed in the mind of the tourist. It is, therefore, not difficult for one to see that the essence of public relations activities in tourism industry is to create, change and enhance the opinions of the tourists through subtle, yet effective persuasive methods and skills.

One of the most potent tools of public relations are materials such as brochures, magazines and tourist guides which contains adequate information about the activities, schedules, code of conducts for tourist's personal safety, maps and detailed information of tourism destinations, hotel accommodation, restaurants, and public spaces should be readily available to tourists. On the human angle, arrangement for interpreters and tour guides, who will provide premium services and meet the tourist expectations, should be made and effectively communicated. In this regard, public relations practitioners do not only play a part in attracting tourists to the different destinations, they also ensure that these tourists' high expectations are met during their stay.

The public relations team must ensure that, as a matter of policy, the potential tourist is properly enlightened and educated about the community, especially its cultural heritage and beliefs, in order to stave off potential crisis that may arise between the tourist and the host community as a result of a breakdown in communication. One can imagine the bedlam that will result from a female tourist who is dressed inappropriately, according to the ethos of that community, straying into a procession in a predominantly animist neighborhood during the annual ritual festivities of the locals. This can be done by conveying messages and information to the tourist through short video clips and graphics in order to keep them abreast with what to expect such as avoiding potential risks and flash points, opportunities that come with specific events, tours and cultural beliefs. The public relations practitioner is enjoined to employ strategies that will

create emotional connections and strong bond between the history and cultural heritage associated with that destination thereby creating a lasting and an unforgettable memory in the heart and mind of the tourist [13].

Another critical input of public relations in the tourism industry is the creation of awareness of the existence of these iconic tourism destinations because we might be shocked to know that many locals are ignorant of the huge tourism potentials that are available in their locality. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the public relations practitioner to educate and sensitize these grassroots dwellers on the importance and the need to protect and preserve the historical tourism sites around them, and make conscious and deliberate investment in it for wealth creation. The practitioner should also educate them on the need to maintain already established tourist sites, relics and artifacts within their communities. The public relations practitioner's duty does not end with just creating awareness. It, consequentially, extends to helping the grassroots dwellers to appreciate the socioeconomic and cultural benefits these tourism destinations will bring to their communities (Uban & Ngantem) [14]. Furthermore, public awareness will help in the dissemination of information and knowledge about tourism and this will improve the understanding of the people of the benefits attached to tourism and the transformation it can bring to the society (Offiong et al) [15].

It is also acknowledged that the expansion of the frontiers of Information Technology, which is a game changer, has made the world a global village which has seen most organizations use technology, like social media handles, blog sites and company websites, to their advantage and as a major tool for reaching out to their targeted public. Through these online channels, the public relations practitioner can reach millions of people in several countries and diverse geographical regions of the world simultaneously. Interactive mediums like Facebook, X, Whatsapp and Instagram have made it easy to receive feedback and allow the practitioner to have a personal interaction with potential tourists irrespective of their location. The Nigerian tourism industry has a lot to learn from countries who have successfully synchronized information and communications technology with their respective tourism industries and infrastructure in order to achieve better outcomes [7].

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper used literature based research as its methodology through the exploration of literary works of several scholars in order to acquire an in-depth understanding and information needed to come up with practical recommendations. Literature based research is a careful analysis of academic publications in order to find the nexus between existing body of knowledge and research findings. This methodology helps the author to plan the study in such a way that information and data relating to this work are systematically gathered and thoroughly examined by the author in order to arrive at a reasonable conclusion.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shown that truly, Nigeria as a country is endowed with numerous tourism destinations scattered all over the six-geopolitical zones of the country. Sadly, the Nigerian government is yet to fully harness the opportunities made available through tourism.

There are several factors that are mitigating against tourism development in Nigeria. Nigeria is yet to recover from a self-inflicted affliction that arose from the discovery of crude oil in 1956. Historically, Nigeria was an agrarian society in which agriculture in all its ramification was the mainstay of the economy at the communal, regional and national level. The discovery of crude oil, and its attendant ceaseless flow of petrodollars, changed all that. Free oil money made macroeconomic planners so myopic that they have become blind to the intrinsic prospects of economic diversification.

The activities of several criminal gangs like the notorious Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters, Fulani herdsmen, unknown gun men and persistent kidnappings in several parts of the country have created fear in the minds of the locals and foreigners alike so much so that everyone dreads unnecessary travels in Nigeria for any reason whatsoever. This has destroyed confidence in tourism and shattered whatever is left of the benefits of tourism beyond redemption since most of these tourism destinations are located in rural areas and remote places where bandits, terrorists, insurgents and other criminal elements operate unchallenged.

Tourism in Nigeria is also adversely affected by lack of proper planning, inadequate infrastructure, indiscriminate hunting of wildlife, poor record of tourism activities, social and political instability, lack of proper implementation, monitoring and transparency of tourism projects, abandoned tourism projects and sites, lack of integrated community-based management system and religious and cultural extremism. It is a notorious fact that the tourism industry in Nigeria is operating below par because it is largely unorganized, lacks structure and greatly neglected and isolated by the federal government. In spite of the numerous tourism destinations that abound in the country, Nigerians travel outside the country for vacation and leisure purposes. Today, the Argungu Fishing Festival, Calabar Carnival and a host of other local festivals do not appear to be as popular as they used to be. While other tourism sites like the Ikogosi Warm Springs, Yankari Game Reserve, Obudu Cattle Ranch and Olumo Rock in Abeokuta have witnessed consistently low patronage in recent years due to a combination of factors like poor economy and insecurity.

5. CONCLUSION

A community reading of this article leads to an irresistible conclusion that tourism is a viable tool for enhancing national development and a catalyst for promoting world peace as it offers a universal platform for exchange of ideas, cultural integration, enhancement of positive global image and economic emancipation. The role of public relations in creating and sustaining the requisite awareness about the existence of tourism destinations makes it indispensable to the development of the tourism industry. Unfortunately, tourism industry in Nigeria is not fulfilling this purpose due to lack of government support and absence of a conducive environment for the industry to thrive. The government must walk the talk by ensuring that words and promises are matched with necessary action. Consequently, there is no better time to look to tourism as a means of earning the much needed foreign exchange than now. The Nigerian government must do whatever it takes to harness the gains and benefits of tourism development before the country becomes bankrupt.

Recommendations

- Elimination of insecurity.
- Amendment of tourism laws and policies to make the sector investor friendly.
- Abandoned tourism sites should be resuscitated.
- Tourism destinations should be accessible by good roads, air, rail and water.
- Provision of social infrastructure and amenities.
- Training and recruitment of efficient manpower.
- Creating awareness on the availability of tourism destinations among the citizenry.
- Deployment of technology in the industry.
- Encouragement of public and private partnerships and collaboration.

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