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**PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A BRAND POSITIONING TOOL IN CRISIS  
SITUATIONS**

**SUBMITTED BY**

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**A RESEARCH WORK SUBMITTED TO THE GHANA INSTITUTE OF  
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AWARD OF A MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS**

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**SEPTEMBER, 2020.**

## **STUDENT'S DECLARATION**

I do hereby declare that the work presented is the result of my own effort, original research and findings and that no part of it has been presented for another degree or diploma in this University or elsewhere. All references to other people's work have been duly acknowledged. I am therefore to be held responsible for any error that might be detected in this project work.

**(Candidate's signature)**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Osafo Wiredu Emmanuel', written in a cursive style.

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**DATE: 28<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2020**

### **SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the preparation of this long essay was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for the supervision of long essays as laid down by the Ghana Institute of Journalism.

**(Supervisor's signature)**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ike Tandoh', written over a light blue horizontal line.

**DR. IKE TANDOH**

**DATE : 28<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2020**

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this study to the Almighty God for His direction and His help throughout my life in this Institution and also for inspiring confidence in me to go through with a positive zeal. I also dedicate this study to Madam Mavis Dankwa (late), my mother.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I thank the Almighty God for aiding me to complete this study successfully. My sincere appreciation also goes to my supervisor, Dr. Ike Tandoh for all the patience and times he had for me throughout my work regardless of his busy schedule. His guidance and pieces of advice were very helpful and contributed tremendously to the completion of this long essay.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Several researchers fostered the essence of positioning a brand as well as echoing the relevance of PR. Even more propagated the need to employ crisis communication, a function of PR in order to salvage a crisis situation. This study, therefore, sought to explore PR as a brand positioning tool in crises. In approaching the issue, the study employed the qualitative approach in line with the descriptive nature of the study. The findings of the study indicated that PR could affect the brand positioning therefore, PR could be used to position brands during crises. Also, the study identified a number of relevance of brand positioning during crises. The study again recommended that PR be given more attention in the case of corporate organizations wanting to position brand especially in crises.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

B2C - Business-to-Consumer

COVID-19 - Corona Virus

CEOs - Chief Executive Officers

CSR - Corporate Social Responsibility

GIJ - Ghana Institute of Journalism

IABC - International Association of Business Communicators

IPR – Institute of Public Relations (Ghana)

PR – Public Relations

PRAG - Public Relations Association of Ghana

PRSA - Public Relations Society of America

SCCT - Situational Crisis Communication Theory

SMEs - Small to Medium Enterprises

SPSS - Statistical Package for Social Sciences

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 BACKGROUND OF STUDY AND CONTEXT

Public Relations (PR) according to Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) (2012) is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. Although seemingly emergent as a *profession* in many parts of the world, the formal practice of what is now commonly referred to as PR spans as far back as the early 20th century. A brand as posited by Manocha (2014) is a name, sign, symbol, slogan, or anything that is used to identify and distinguish a specific product, service, or business where the brand is the image of the product in the market. Manocha (2014) further quotes Jeff Bezos in an attempt to break down the concept of a brand where he explains that, “*a brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well*”.

As the world comes to grips with the global Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic, there is a palpable recognition that our lives have changed. Ipsos (2020) states that 2020 started with 75% of people around the world optimistic that 2020 would be a better year for them and their families. Just three months later, there is a growing consensus that the coronavirus poses not just a threat to the country, but people’s jobs and livelihoods (Ipsos, 2020). In line with these developments, this paper seeks to assess Public Relations (PR) as a brand positioning tool in crises.

In the same line of argument, Janiszewska and Insch (2012) espouse the view that while in the concept of positioning a brand’s communication activity is the major area of reference, it is now emphasized that positioning has a broader market impact and refers to a brand’s

broadly defined marketing activity. Therefore, brand positioning refers to all its external activities and, at the same time, it determines behaviour within an organization (Ellwood 2009; Janiszewska and Insch (2012). The recent understanding is that brand positioning is one of the key concepts conditioning a brand's competitive market position (Guidry, 2011). Lizarraga (2010) is of the view that a positive corporate image provides organizations with individual features that lead to brand recognition. Worcester (2009) in aligning with this notes that this improves consumer and employee loyalty as well as the corporate reputation that corporate image consists of product image, brand image and brand consumer image. Yeo and Youssef (2010) in line with this argument asserts that corporate image could be present a source of competitive advantage. This assertion is made in light of the argument that corporate image can only be formed over a long time, it becomes difficult to imitate. Besides corporate image creates consumer trust and deters competitors from entering the market (Yeo and Youssef, 2010).

Ailawadi, Luan, Neslin and Taylor (2011) note that organizations which care about well-being of society, environmental protection is seen favorably in comparison with a company which does not. Lizarraga (2010) notes that an increasing number of companies strive to express their corporate social responsibility in order to improve their corporate image. Smailiene and Jucevičius (2009) also espouse the view that corporate image influences corporate reputation. Further, the claim is made that corporate image is due to one's sudden associations of a company, whereas reputation is deep, settled over a period of time belief in a company's abilities to act in one or another way (Smailiene and Jucevičius, 2009).

### **1.0.1 Overview of Public Relations Practice in Ghana**

The historical account brings into sharp relief the fact that PR has long moved beyond being "a mere appendage of the corporate governance structure and has become, increasingly, the fulcrum around which organisational image building and public goodwill revolves (Adjei,

2013). PR practice in Ghana according to Baidoo (2013) has evolved and segments these eras into four stages namely; the pre-independence stage, the post-independence stage, the professionalization stage and the revival stage. According Baidoo (2013), the kind of PR which was practiced during the colonial era was basically focused on public information. This form of PR involved practices where the colonial administration used one-way communication as a vehicle to disseminate information to the general populace and also to garner support for their various policies and initiatives. This style involved the colonial administration's agents who were mostly British and who were assisted by a local who did the interpretation for them (Baidoo, 2013).

Baidoo (2013) accounts that in the post-independence stage, the birth of independence. As part of the numerous changes that took place in the government sector. The government established the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) in 1959 to train PR professionals to replace the colonial practitioners (Asante, 2016). The professionalization stage as stated by Baidoo (2013) commenced in 1971 with the establishment of the Public Relations Association of Ghana (PRAG). This initiative according to Atawura (2010) was championed by Hermann Alah with a small group of practicing journalists as PR practitioners. This hitherto, some professionals of PR in Ghana joined foreign PR associations. Nevertheless, the complications associated with the PR practice in Ghana started not long ago after its establishment (Baidoo, 2013). These problems Baidoo (2013) note was largely on membership and leadership disagreements.

Odelele (2016) notes that the development in West Africa the development of PR is more noticeable in Nigeria and Ghana. In an attempt to rebrand, the PRAG was re-organized as Institute of Public Relations, Ghana (IPR) with a new constitution and code of ethics were adopted in 1991 (Atawura, 2010). The revival of the profession ensured the establishment of the highest standards of practice and integrity for the vibrant and growing profession. Asante

(2016) notes that then IPR became the sole professional body for PR practitioners in Ghana. As part of its roles, IPR exists to provide a professional structure for the practice of Public Relations and to enhance the ability and status of its members as professional practitioners (Asante, 2016).

Ever since the revival of the profession, the practice of PR has also evolved from the stages of Press Agency to Two-way asymmetrical communication. The two-way asymmetrical was founded on behavioural and social sciences during World War I (Grunig and Dozier, 2009). This model employs research in determining the appropriate communication channels and messages which are more likely to produce support of an organization's publics without changing the organization. In some areas of the professional practice, there still exist elements of the press agency, public information and the two-way asymmetrical kind of communication. Atawura (2010) notes that even though from 2000, the practice has become stronger and research work is strongly encouraged within the practice.

The issue of gender in the discipline, the literature indicates that PR is usually synonymous with a profession of males traditionally. Ghana is not homogenous, and each community is highly influenced by the views of its leaders, tradition and religious doctrine (Gender Policy for Ghana, 2011). Gender affects individuals, especially women in diverse ways. Gender issues are present in employment, education, division of labour and violence (Ridgeway, 2011). Thompson (2008) concretizes this in her study as she found that, female respondents earned a modal annual basic salary which was lower than their male counterparts. Women are still employed in under-valued positions even when they have higher levels of education and qualifications.

However as argued by Grunig (2001) the discipline is quickly being filled with women. The main issue surrounding the idea of feminization is the concern that the increasing number of

women working in a traditionally male occupation will devalue the profession, resulting in less management autonomy and lower salaries (Horsley, 2009). A study conducted by Horsley (2009) stated that even though the number of women in PR was increasing, the pay disparity between men and women, as well as the lack of advancement opportunities for women, prevented women from achieving the same career goals as men in this profession. This, therefore, evidences the existence of inequalities in the practice of PR.

### **1.1 STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM**

With Flavian, Guinaliu, and Torres (2005) stating in Virvilaite and Daubaraitė (2011) that a positive image empowers the company to attract new customers and increase stakeholders' trust in the company, positioning is among the essential strategic pillars brands employ to echo their existence (Temporal, 2002; Janiszewska and Insch, 2012). Slabbert and Barker (2011) argue that if communication is fully utilized as a management function, crisis communication will add significant value to the operations of organizations. For this reason, this study attempted to explore how PR as a brand positioning tool in crises.

However, even though there is a presence of PR practice in Ghana, Anani-Bossman (2018) argues that despite these signs of increasing development, very little is known about PR practice in Africa and Ghana, for that matter. Mersham, Skinner, and Rensburg (2011) further establish that in fact, most of the scholarly body of knowledge on PR since the beginning of the 21st century has mainly been in the USA and Western Europe, a view shared by other scholars.

Even though there have been several works done on PR and brand positioning there appears to be little work done on how PR can be harness as a brand positioning tool with a special focus on crisis situations. This study again helped add on to indigenous literature on PR

which draws on local Ghanaian cases and examples. In light of the gaps identified, this study aims to address this lacuna by assessing PR as a brand positioning tool in crisis situations.

## **1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

As much as the main objective of the study was to assess PR as a brand positioning tool in crises, the researcher attempted to explore these specific objectives:

1. To determine whether PR can affect the brand positioning
2. To find out how PR can be used to position a brand in during crises
3. To ascertain the relevance of brand positioning during crises

## **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In ascertain answers to the objectives of the study, this section poses a research question set by the researcher to probe to address the research objectives.

1. Can PR affect brand positioning?
2. How can PR be used to position a brand in during crises?
3. What is the relevance of brand positioning during crises?

## **1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The principal relevance this study is to become an important source of acquiring information on understanding how PR can be used as a brand positioning tool in crises. In this regard, this paper envisages being a relevant material to help explain the synergy between the concepts of PR and brand positioning. This paper anticipates becoming a relevant source of information especially as it references and situates the study in the Ghana setting. This thus served as a

scholarly reference point on the subject within the West African ecosystem and the whole of Africa by extension.

## **1.5 METHODOLOGY**

With the aim of the study to attempt to assess Public Relations (PR) as a brand positioning tool in a crisis, the descriptive approach was adopted. Descriptive research design according to Bryman and Bell (2015) is a process of collecting data in order to answer questions concerning the current status of the subjects in the study. Kvale (2007) supports this by emphasizing that this approach is often preferred by the researcher in social science and has frequently been used. The research design provides a tense for how the research is carried out; it contains an overview of the methods used and the procedures followed and also it contains reasons or justification for choosing specific methods and or procedures.

### **1.5.1 Research Method**

There are three (3) research methods as suggested by Creswell (2011) namely; qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approach to research. Notwithstanding the various methods of research available, this paper dwelt more on the qualitative approach because it is the method which is employed for this study. Also, this study adopted the qualitative method of research in line with employing a descriptive approach to research.

Creswell and Clark (2011) further note that a qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of respondents, and conducted in a natural setting. In qualitative research, several analysis methods can be used, for example, phenomenology, hermeneutics, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenography and content analysis (Burnard, 1995: Bengtsson, 2016). In contrast to qualitative research methods,

qualitative content analysis is not linked to any particular science, and there are fewer rules to follow. During the entire process, the researcher must adhere to a qualitative perspective, and the main issue is to achieve the rigor and credibility that make the results as trustworthy as possible. However, in content analysis, different concepts of credibility can be chosen in the discussion of trustworthiness (Bengtsson, 2016).

#### **1.5.1.1 Content Analysis**

Berelson (1952) as cited in Bengtsson (2016) defines content analysis as a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. This method helps researchers quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts. This then allows researchers to make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of surrounding the text (Bengtsson, 2016). The study in extension explored the use of secondary data.

#### ***1.5.1.2 Secondary data***

Secondary data is every dataset that is not obtained by the author (Boslaugh, 2007; Martins and Serra, 2018). Vartanian (2010) suggests that secondary data may include data that has been previously gathered and is under consideration to be reused for new questions, for which the data gathered was not originally intended. Martins and Serra (2018) again suggest that the usage of secondary data in research has proven to be a valuable approach to finding suitable data and encourage that this should be used more often in research. By doing so, research may be done at a quicker pace, without loss of quality and confirmability (Martins and Serra, 2018). As a result of the methodology adopted, this study relied mainly on secondary data. The secondary data which was used spun books, journal articles,

online/internet materials, among other publications on PR and brand positioning especially in the context of crises.

## **1.6 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

This paper comprises of four (4) chapters where the first chapter is the opening part of the paper and includes a background to the study, problem statement, research objectives, among other salient sections. The next chapter bothers on the reviewing of literature. This chapter discusses literature relevant to the study as well as drawing on empirical studies to guide this study. The next chapter covers discuss the findings of the study. The fourth chapter gives a summary and conclusion to the study primarily. This extends to the reflections from the researcher as well as recommendations made by this study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter is segmented into two (2) which discusses the theoretical framework as well as a review of empirical studies. This was done in an attempt to give theoretical grounding to this study. Literature was a review with the expectation that relevant information would be obtained to help shape and enrich the study. This in the long run, showed the depth this study brings to the table especially in terms of scholarly discourse.

#### **2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework is a framework based on existing theory in a field of inquiry that is related and/or reflects the hypothesis of a study (Adom, Hussein and Agyem, 2018). Adom, Hussein and Agyem (2018) further assert that it is a blueprint that is often ‘borrowed’ by the researcher to build his/her own house or research inquiry. It serves as the foundation upon which a research is constructed (Adom, Hussein and Agyem, 2018). This study thus drew on Excellence Theory and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

##### **2.1.1 Excellence Theory**

The Excellence Theory is a general theory of PR which resulted from a 15-year study of best practices in communication management funded by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation (Saylor, 2020). The Excellence Theory first explained the value of PR to organizations and society based on the social responsibility of managerial decisions and the quality of relationships with stakeholder publics. To behave in

socially acceptable ways, organizations must scan their environment to identify publics who are affected by potential organizational decisions or who want organizations to make decisions to solve problems that are important to them. Then, organizations must communicate symmetrically with publics (taking the interests of both the organization and publics into account) to cultivate high-quality, long-term relationships with them (Grunig, 2008).

Grunig (2008) states that the interviews with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and senior PR officers revealed that good relationships were of value to organizations because they reduced the costs of litigation, regulation, legislation, and negative publicity caused by poor relationships; reduced the risk of making decisions that affect different stakeholders; or increased revenue by providing products and services needed by stakeholders. Based on this theoretical premise about the value of PR, the Excellence Theory derived principles of how the function should be organized to maximize this value. First, the research showed that involvement in strategic management was the critical characteristic of excellent PR. PR executives played a strategic managerial role as well as administrative manager role. PR also was empowered by having access to key organizational decision-makers in other words, the dominant coalition (Grunig, 2008).

Second, Grunig (2008) indicates that the study showed that PR loses its unique role in strategic management if it is sublimated to marketing or other management functions. Sublimation to another function resulted in attention only to the stakeholder category of interest to that function, such as consumers for marketing. Sublimation to marketing also usually resulted in asymmetrical communication. An excellent PR function was integrated and programs for different stakeholders were gathered into a single department or coordinated through a senior vice president of corporate communication. An excellent PR

function did work with other management functions to help them build relationships with relevant stakeholders (Grunig, 2008).

Third, the Excellence study according to Grunig (2008) showed that a symmetrical system of internal communication increased employees' satisfaction with their jobs and with the organization. However, internal communication generally was not practiced unless organizations had a participative rather than authoritarian culture and a decentralized, less stratified (organic) structure rather than a centralized, stratified (mechanical) structure.

Grunig (2008) further states that the Excellence study examined the effect of the growing number of women in PR and evidence those women had difficulty entering managerial roles. The research showed that organizations with excellent PR valued women as much as men for the strategic role and developed programs to empower women throughout the organization (Grunig, 2008). The emphasis on gender also led to inclusion of diversity of race and ethnicity as a fifth part of the Excellence Theory. This focus, along with the international nature of the project, expanded the theory to make it appropriate for use outside the United States – in diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts (Grunig, 2008).

Replication of the study in Slovenia according to Grunig et al. (1998) as cited in Grunig (2008) showed that the Excellence Theory is generic to many contexts, as long as the theory is applied differently when contextual variables are different. The research in Slovenia also resulted in the addition of ethics to the Excellence Theory – a sixth component (PR Ethics). Since the completion of the excellence study, scholars in this research tradition have continued to improve and enlarge the theory by conducting research to help PR professionals participate in strategic decision processes. This research has been on environmental scanning and publics, scenario building, empowerment of PR, ethics, relationships, the return-on-investment of PR, evaluation, relationship cultivation strategies, conflict resolution, complexity theory, specialized areas of PR, and global strategy (Grunig 2006: Toth 2007).

This theory is relevant to this theory because it touches on the very important tenets that make up the basis on organizational success. Even though the theory is purely from the PR outlook, it extends to other disciplines such as Human Resource, Marketing and Quality Control.

#### ***2.1.1.1 Critique and how the theory relates to the present study***

Looking at the twelve (12) characteristics of excellent organizations as suggested by the excellence study, the first six look at human resources, organic structure, intrapreneurship, symmetrical communication system, leadership and culture are all related to one another, with symmetrical communication being integral factor for attaining organizational excellence (Grunig, 1985; Essandoh, 2018). The last six characteristics or attributes-strategic planning, social responsibility, acceptance of women and minorities in organizations emphasis on quality and effective operating systems all suggest attributes of excellence for organizations (Essandoh, 2018).

From the communication point of view, this theory underpins this study because it proposes certain criterion which organizations who want to be excellent should strive to achieve. In line with this study's aim, it helped to get a broader picture of an organization. As Grunig (2002) posits excellent PR is the glue that holds excellent organizations together. A perceived excellent organization in one way or another is likely to translate into a good reputation for the organization.

This theory is relevant to this paper because it breaks down the practice of PR and fortifies it in the theoretical arena even more. Three books were published from the research (J. E. Grunig 1992; Dozier et al. 1995; L. A. Grunig et al. 2002). The theory was tested through survey research of heads of PR, CEOs, and employees in 327 organizations (corporations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and associations) in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Survey; Interview). The survey research was followed by

qualitative interviews with heads of PR, other PR practitioners, and CEOs in 25 organizations with the highest and lowest scores on a scale of excellence produced by statistical analysis of the survey data.

As important as this theory is to the practice of PR, a critique is that the sample used for the research which led to the propounding of the theory was not enough to be able to be generalized the world over. Further, the sample was centered only in the Western world therefore different variable may have affected the conclusion if for instance Africa or Asia was factored.

With these critiques notwithstanding, the theory has provided grounds for the re-conceptualization of PR. It further touches on an essential component of an organization which is its internal publics. The theory proposes ways of achieving employee satisfaction by suggesting ways like engaging employees in two-way symmetrical communication to inform them, gather information about their needs, and cultivate relationships. To add on PR professionals in the dominant coalition can task themselves to be the ethical conscience of their organizations. One way or other, all these helps grow the PR prowess of an organization so that it can be formidable in times of a crisis like a pandemic outbreak.

### **2.1.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is a normative theory that matches the organizational response to the level of responsibility attributed to an organization where its central focus is managing an organization's reputation during a crisis (Ma and Zhan, 2016). It offers a framework for understanding perceptions of the organization and its communicative response during a crisis (Coombs, 2007). A key aspect of SCCT is the level of responsibility stakeholders attribute to the firm for the crisis. Ma and Zhan (2016) again note that this attributed responsibility, in turn, is a function of a firm's performance history which has to do with how often have such events previously occurred and the severity of the crisis which

usually reflects the perceived extent of harm associated with the crisis event. Crises are negative events that cause stakeholders to make interpretations about crisis responsibility, affecting how stakeholders interact with the organization (Coombs, 2007). Guerber, Anand, Ellstrand, Waller and Reychav (2019) are of the view that an organization with a prior reputation for wrongdoing is more likely to receive higher attributions of blame for a given transgression. Also, the severity or magnitude of harm caused by the crisis is an important moderator as Guerber, Anand, Ellstrand, Waller and Reychav (2019) suggest that it increases the amount of responsibility stakeholders attribute to the firm also increases. This affirms the view of the Attribution Theory which holds that people constantly look to find causes, or make attributions, for different events, especially if those events are negative or unexpected. The SCCT thus suggests that effective crisis response depends on the assessment of the situation and the related reputational threat.

In supporting this assertion, Coombs (2007) distinguishes three clusters of crises which are the victim, accident and intentional. The first is explained as a case where the organization is a victim of the crisis which presents a minor reputational threat. Accidental crises is where the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional which could be in the form of equipment or product failure, accusations from external stakeholders which may present medium reputational threat. Intentional crises are those which involve organizations knowingly took inappropriate risk, this presents major reputational threat to the organization.

The SCCT builds on Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Model once the levels of crisis responsibility and reputational threat have been determined. This theory then identifies a limited set of primary crisis response strategies which include denial, diminishment and rebuilding. Denial could be in the form of attacking the accuser, denial of the story, scapegoating among others while diminishment may include offering excuses, justification of

what happened and rebuilding has to do with compensating victims, offering apologies, taking full responsibility among others. Even though there could be other strategies, it is important to note that neither Benoit (1997) nor Coombs (2007) consider silence as a strategy. Coombs as cited in Coombs and Holladay (2012) states that silence is too passive and allows others to control the crisis.

#### ***2.1.2.1 Critique and how the theory relates to the present study***

While the SCCT has proven its applicability its weaknesses includes the scarcity of discourse on the value of crisis history and relational reputational considering that Coombs (2007) clarifies that they are intensifiers and are prominent contributors to a crisis' effect on the organization's reputation. Bayarong (2015) states that according to Coombs (2007), crisis history and prior relational reputation have both direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat posed by the crisis. And yet in the paper, only two paragraphs were dedicated to explaining them, their effects and the how they "intensify" the stakeholders' behavioral response to the crisis (Bayarong, 2015).

Also, Coombs (2007) describes crisis and relationship history as something that an organization possesses or not. Kynh (2008) as cited in Bayarong (2015) however notes that previous case analysis indicated that the perception of whether or not a history of previous crises exists might differ among the different stakeholders. This theory points out the effectiveness of the crisis response especially as it influences how the organization managed the pre-crisis phase and the post-crisis phase. Whereas the dynamics of social media limit the time for thinking a crisis response through, time can be won in the preparation phase, as social media offers various opportunities to see a crisis coming. Again, the SCCT strongly focuses on corporate reputation repair. In developing a crisis response strategy, there are factors not included in SCCT that might also be considered to determine reputational threat.

Potentially influential factors might be the role of culture, the role of visual elements in crisis media coverage or other factors that are recognized by Attribution Theory, Contingency Theory and Complexity Theory. The relevance of this theory to this study is that it proposes ways which suggest that crisis managers could benefit from understanding how crisis communication can be used to protect reputational assets during a crisis. The theory also offers a framework for understanding this dynamics. The theory also provides a mechanism for anticipating how stakeholders will react to a crisis in terms of the reputational threat posed by the crisis. Moreover, In line with Coomb's (2007) argument, the theory projects how people will react to the crisis response strategies used to manage the crisis.

## **2.2 EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

Several researchers have done work on PR and brand positioning however this paper looked at some which are in line with the work. This paper reviewed Hlatshwayo (2015), Makasi, Govender and Munyoro (2014) and Tandoh and Aovare's (2020) study.

Hlatshwayo (2015) examined how brand positioning could be implemented as a marketing framework in growing and sustaining business-to-consumer (B2C) SMEs. Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have a vital role in both developing and developed economies (Hlatshwayo, 2015). The study entailed conducting a literature review on current marketing practices in the quest for recommending a brand positioning strategy relevant to B2C SMEs.

Hlatshwayo (2015) the collected data through face-to-face interviews with 15 SME B2C owners who represented 15 SME sectors.

Following the interrogation of the data, Hlatshwayo (2015) confirmed that SMEs indeed lack marketing skills. Hlatshwayo (2015) further found out that SME marketing practices and tools were not well structured and that marketing guidance was required. Following these

findings, Hlatshwayo (2015) recommended that in order to develop and sustain B2C SMEs, positioning elements in the form of positioning by corporate identity, target user positioning, features and attribute positioning and competitive positioning were an essential SME brand positioning framework that could be employed for the sector (Hlatshwayo, 2015).

The purpose of Makasi, Govender and Munyoro's (2014) paper was to investigate the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in corporate brand positioning in the printing and packaging industry in Zimbabwe. The research was conducted reviewing various streams of literature and interviews with 10 representatives from 5 companies and 10 customers also participated in this research which employed the use of a semi-structured questionnaire. Two representatives from each of the ten competing companies were selected while customer representatives were selected using the companies' customer records as the sampling frame.

Makasi et al. (2014) espouse the view that these were selected based on the ratio of their revenue contribution which stood at a ratio of 1:2 in favour of industrial customers. All qualitative responses were grouped into themes for coding purposes. Makasi et al.'s (2014) data gathered were coded and captured to form panel data for further analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19. Results of the research indicated that 15 out of the sampled respondents of 20 confirmed that indeed CSR directed towards employees through the provision of health care services and education and other activities as highlighted help to improve corporate image and position (Makasi et al., 2014).

Makasi et al. (2014) concluded that communities are intertwined with companies and their perceptions matter in corporate brand positioning. Using the results of the T-Tests, it was concluded that CSR programs directed towards the environment play an important role in positioning corporate brands. Future research can refine CSR input by recognizing these differences and theorizing about employees' reactions (Makasi et al., 2014).

Tandoh and Aovare's (2020) study was a comparative one that evaluated the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility and Profitability in the fuel and gas sectors in Ghana. The paper employed the use of descriptive survey design and quantitative methods to find a relationship between innovations in strategic stakeholder engagement with corporate profitability or bottom-line, with the mediating role of strategic stakeholder engagement leading to a firm's bottom-line.

The study analysed strategic stakeholder engagement and bottom-line of selected fuel and gas companies in the Kumasi Metropolitan, Asokore Mampong, Oforikrom, and Ejisu Municipalities in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Tandoh and Aovare (2020) used a five point closed-ended Likert Scale self-administrable structured questionnaire and researcher guide to aid participants answer relevant questions. This was in an attempt to confirm that the innovations in strategic stakeholder engagement fueled increases in corporate bottom-line of selected companies.

Tandoh and Aovare (2020) found a statistically significant agreement among stakeholders that their companies engage in CSR actions to support their employees, customers, government, organizations, society, and the environment. The findings, in general, showed the positive effects of employee perceptions of CSR in all the sampled organizations as well as variable indicators except for society. This Tandoh and Aovare (2020) posit suggest that the critical role of CSR concerning customers' perception influence an organization's image. This also indicated that a positive image by employees about CSR impact on an organization's image and organizational growth and survival (Tandoh and Aovare, 2020).

## **2.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed theories that served as a guiding principle to place this study in a proper theoretical perspective. Various research works that have been done which is

significant to this study were reviewed as well. The next chapter discusses the findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

#### **3.0 INTRODUCTION**

With the main aim of the study to explore public relations as a brand positioning tool in crises, this section discusses the specific research objectives set.

#### **3.1 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

##### **3.1.1 To determine whether PR can affect the brand positioning**

Public Relations (PR) is the management function that evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization according to Miller and Dinan (2007) as cited by Hailu (2018) with a public interest, and executes a program of actions to earn public understanding and acceptance. This indicates PR being a part of management function dealing with organizational communication activities by measuring public attitude, analysing policies, executing program of action, where upon keeping public interest to win public attention and acceptance.

Jefkins (2004) as cited in Hailu (2018) espouses the view that if an organization is perceived to have a bad image which affects its reputation, PR has to work around organisational communication. The resulting effect if this is that a good reputation is essential and requisite to develop good image. Thus, PR must be alert to transform negative states to positive ones, which lead to goodwill and reputation (Hailu, 2018). Stacks (2016) notes that shortcomings of managing reputation may threaten a well-deserved and long cultivated favourable image

and identity. For organizations who meet their objectives, they may not even value the role of reputation.

For PR practitioners however, this trend raises serious causes for alarm because matters of corporate reputation are primarily in their domain (Davis, 2004; Hailu, 2018). This means failure to garrison the reputation of an organization in the positive light could possibly lead to the destruction of the corporate or organizational image and identity, which could in turn generate negative public opinion (Botan and Hazleton, 2010). These could possibly pose a challenge to organizations preventing them from achieving their objectives and successes as a whole.

For instance, a PR function like social media management comes in handy to exemplify how PR can be used to position a brand. WARC (2019) notes that the popularity of social media has prompted corporate brands to employ online personalities, who endorse the brand and influence followers' perceptions with their communications. These personalities, also known as SMIs, have amplified the popularity of influencer marketing globally (Schomer, 2019). Schomer (2019) further emphasize that reports indicate that over two thirds of multinational brands around the world plan to increase expenditure on influencer marketing within the next few years (World Federation of Advertisers, 2018), with global spending in the area expected to reach \$15 billion by 2022.

Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) argue that SMIs enhance consumers' positive perceptions about a brand and consequent purchase intentions. Hwang and Zhang (2018) are of the view that this is prevalent especially when influencers are able to build a connection with consumers and are perceived as credible (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in Cocker and Cronin (2017) thought to tend to gain credibility and popularity by forging communal relationships based on collaboration and the sharing of mutual benefits

with followers. Singh, Crisafulli, and Xue (2020) state that existing studies suggest a positive impact of SMIs' presence on consumers' perception, thereby indicating that brands benefit from investing in influencer marketing.

### **3.1.2 To find out how PR can be used to position a brand in during crises**

Today, companies compete in markets that are fragmented and crowded with offerings, where even strong brands face difficulties in creating sufficient differential advantages over their competitors (Clancy and Trout, 2002; Fuchs and Diamantopoulos, 2010). Keller and Lehmann (2006) state in Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2010) that corporate executives seek to establish appropriate brand associations in the mind of consumers to differentiate the brand from competitors by employing brand positioning.

Effective positioning in the view of Adina, Gabriela and Roxana-Denisa (2014) may be influenced by a series of external associations, related to competition, cultural or social factors. Moreover, in a global context, international positioning raises new positioning challenges, such as managing country-of-origin effects (Adina, Gabriela and Roxana-Denisa, 2014). In order to achieve this feat, organizations could employ PR as a tool to position their brands in the minds of their publics.

Tella, Suraya, Bonsu and Anani-Bossman (2020) indicate between 2017 and 2019, many of Ghana's financial institutions were collapsed. During the dissolution, several frustrated customers lamented the inadequate or lack of accurate information on their savings and investments. Customers and other stakeholders also expressed angst at the communication approaches and messaging of these financial institutions during the crisis. Tella, Suraya, Bonsu and Anani-Bossman (2020) assert that some of these institutions were criticized for poor customer relations and inadequate response to crises. Those criticisms were visible in the cases of the Midland Savings Loans Company (Midland) press statement in connection

with an assault on a customer by a police officer (Sasa, 2018: Tella, Suraya, Bonsu and Anani-Bossman, 2020).

In an attempt to reposition itself, the management of Midland employed the Corrective action Mortification strategies of image restoration. The management of Midland after series of correspondence with the assaulted client arrived at a settlement. In a statement released, it read,

“...Midland Savings and Loans would like to take this opportunity to once again deeply apologise to all our customers and the public for this unfortunate incident. Rest assured that steps have been taken to ensure that an act of that nature never occurs at any of our branches ever again...” (Graphic Online, 2018)

Even though this initiative gain Midland some amount of goodwill after the backlash, Tella, Suraya, Bonsu and Anani-Bossman (2020) state that many of these criticisms targeted the PR departments of the financial institutions as PR practitioners were denounced for not doing enough in using communication to respond to issues stakeholders considered crucial. Practitioners should have, on behalf of their institutions, engaged and explained to stakeholders, the role their institutions played in the crisis (Mensah, 2018: Tella, Suraya, Bonsu and Anani-Bossman, 2020). This falls in sync with Coombs (2010) assertion that reputations are created through direct and mediated contact with an organization. When a crisis hits an organization, measures must be adopted to lessen the damage from the crisis (Coombs, 2014).

### **3.1.3 To ascertain the relevance of brand positioning during crises**

The Institute of Public Relations (2020) affirms that there are plenty of definitions for a crisis. It however defines crisis as a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly. In crisis management, the threat is the potential damage a crisis can inflict on an organization, its stakeholders, and an industry (Institute of Public Relations [IPR], 2020). Crisis management according to IPR (2020) is a critical

organizational function that can result in serious harm to stakeholders, losses for an organization, or end its very existence. Bearing in mind Guerber, Anand, Ellstrand, Waller and Reychav's (2019) assertion that once a firm has been accused of ethical wrongdoing, a key issue lies in regaining the trust of stakeholders, it is important organizations strive to be better positioned in the minds of their publics.

In Keller, Apéria and Georgson's (2012) view brand positioning bothers on actions that couch the brand or organization's offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target consumer's mind. Adina, Gabriela and Roxana-Denisa (2014) espouse the view that it is mainly the process through which a brand aims to be perceived as distinct and offering superior value about competitors. Successfully managing consumer perceptions is thus essential for effective brand positioning (Adina, Gabriela and Roxana-Denisa, 2014). In the positioning process, a product becomes significant for the consumer, through the creation of strong, favorable and unique brand associations (Keller, Apéria and Georgson, 2012).

In general, a well-positioned brand should appeal to the particular needs of a customer segment because a differential advantage/value proposition is created, since consumers' needs are more exactly satisfied (Day, 1984: Fuchs and Diamantopoulos, 2010). The end result of positioning is the successful creation of a customer-focused value proposition, a cogent reason why the target market should buy the product" (Kotler, 2003: Fuchs and Diamantopoulos, 2010). Indeed, according to the literature, Fuchs and Diamantopoulos (2010) state that positioning is expected to shape the preferences of consumers and lead to high consumer loyalty, consumer-derived brand equity, and willingness to search for the brand. This, therefore, goes to amplify the relevance of brand positioning especially in times of crises.

### **3.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND FINDINGS**

This section discusses the relationship between theory and practice. This was done by juxtaposing the findings of the study against the theoretical positioning which underpinned the study. On the first objective, the theory and practice seemed to have a positive correlation as it was established that PR could indeed affect brand positioning. Also, the findings indicate that there are PR strategies and tactics which could help position brands in during crises. Further, the study was able to ascertain some of the relevance of brand positioning during crises. This again was in line with the literature as that had been Coombs' (2014) argument in several instances. It is interesting to note that there was no point of departure as both the theoretical position and findings were in sync.

### **3.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter discusses the specific research objectives set for the study. The next presents a summary and conclusion to the study and also proffers recommendations.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION**

#### **4.0 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter concludes the study's aim of exploring public relations as a brand positioning tool in crises. The discussion was on a summary of the findings of the study and further outlined the originality of this study as well as recommendations made for stakeholders and future research.

#### **4.1 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This study has some implications for brand positioning and the expected role of PR. Firstly, this study gave a background to the study to put the argument in the proper context. Several researchers fostered the essence of positioning a brand as well as echoing the relevance of PR. Even more propagated the need to employ crisis communication, a function of PR in order to salvage a crisis situation. In furthering the need to communicate effectively especially in times of crisis, Slabbert and Barker (2011) argue that if communication is fully utilized as a management function, crisis communication will add significant value to the operations of organizations.

This study, therefore, sought to explore PR as a brand positioning tool in crisis situations. The study then set the objectives to determine whether PR can affect brand positioning, to find out how PR can be used to position a brand during crisis situations and to ascertain the relevance of brand positioning during crises. The findings indicate organizations or brands and by extension PR professionals must be confident in deploying crisis communication strategies as

it segues into Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes and Vliegenthart's (2017) line of argument that if stakeholders are left on their own to make sense of the crisis without the strategic intervention of the organization, stakeholders will find it challenging to understand the position of the organization.

#### **4.2 RESEARCHER'S REFLECTIONS**

This section discusses the views of the researcher which are represented as reflections. This section intends to portray the originality of the study. The contribution of this paper to the body of knowledge cannot be underscored. This study is relevant as it has raised certain pertinent questions about employing PR as a brand positioning, probed, and answered them. The originality of this study can be seen in the approach it employed to conduct this study. This paper broke down the key concepts of brand positioning and PR as well as how they were interlinked. The study continuously exhibited the role PR played in which argument was being made as well as citing appropriate examples to solidify a point being made. With the scope covered by this study, this served as an essential material for scholarly discussion on employing PR as a brand positioning in the context of crises.

#### **4.3 RECOMMENDATION**

Juxtaposing the literature reviewed and reconciling with reality, the study recommends that PR be given more attention in the case of corporate organizations wanting to position brand, especially in crises. This could be in the form of instituting corporate policies that see that PR has a seat in the dominant coalition so that practitioners can make inputs that will help carve a favourable image and reputation which will help position the brands positively in the minds of their various publics. Further studies can be conducted with a special focus on measuring

the impact PR makes if adopted as a brand positioning tool. This could further elaborate on the essence of PR to brands and organizations in general.

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