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## **Qualitative Analysis of the Status of Celebrity Public Relations in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of public relations has gained acceptance all over the world. Goodwill for an organization today is secured not so much as a result of the organizations mere existence but as a result of sustained strategic planning, execution and evaluation of the perception of the their publics in relation to the organization. Nigeria today appears to be witnessing a wide spread of celebrities popularly referred to as influencers, especially on the social media space. These perceived celebrities have the ability to influence the behaviour of the masses and their attitudes towards consuming or patronizing products, services and brands which has made them a strategic tool for marketing and promoting businesses brands and others. The research was aimed at establishing the efficacy of the deployment of influencers for endorsements of products and brands, to investigate the perceptions of public relations practitioners on the use of celebrity endorsements on brand image, and to



ascertain opinion of public relations professionals on celebrity brand endorsement. The research work took its theoretical leaning from the Social Cognitive Learning Theory and the Symbolic Interactionism Theory. The study used in-depth interview for data collection from 30 participants drawn from Plateau State based organisations. Some of the findings of the research revealed that public relation officers are often overlooked when using public influencers for brand endorsements and the content of messages used are often not in line with professional standard. The research recommends training and re-training of public relations officers, increased budgeting for public relations departments and increased research in public opinion research.

**Keywords:** Brand Endorsement, Brand Image, Celebrity Public Relations, Public Influencers, Public Relations

### **Introduction**

Public Relations means different things to different people depending on the nature of the organizations they belong to and the perception given to the concept. This is why there appears to be several misconceptions on the perception of the practice in several quotas which has in the long run, resulted to the proliferation of unprofessionalism and misconduct in some cases in the professional parlance of same. The concept of public relations has gained acceptance all over the world. This is because the influence of public relations on society is a continuous one. It is no wonder Ya'aqub (2017) posits that "the relationship between society and public relations will continue to attract diverse comments for some time to come because of how it positively and negatively affects the society". This negative side which constitutes some of the misconceptions of the concept of public relations can be ameliorated through the professional standards and ethical conduct in practice. These could go a long way in smothering the negative perceptions of individuals and institutions on the concept of public relations. In a similar vein, Bowen (2020) is of the view that "negative connotations of the field persist among those outside the discipline or among journalist. Ideological confusion among publicity, marketing, advertising, integrated marketing communication and propaganda, has further degraded understanding of the function and purposes of public relations". This



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anomaly could portray the practice of the profession as one devoid of regulation and control which could open up a cankerworm of issues that could mar genuine professional practice.

Several people find themselves in the practice of public relations for several reasons amongst which could be to attain a public figure personality or to become an influencer as the case may be, according to the 21<sup>st</sup> century trend. This presents a glaring possibility as to why we have a lot of people in the practice that have no idea what the practice itself is all about. It was in this light that Wearejam (2017) asserts that “people often confuse PR with advertising as being one and the same. The easiest way to explain the difference between the two is, advertising is telling everyone how great you are, whilst PR is getting others to tell everyone how great you are. Advertising aims to sell a product or service, whilst PR is focused on making a brand desirable to its target market through building up relationships with key audiences”. Most people easily confuse advertising for public relations, and thus, the need to become popular overnight as a result of mention on advert placements has become one of the motivating drives for a lot of people who have “accidentally” delved into the practice without knowledge of the demands of same.

Consequently, public relations can also go beyond image enhancement. It entails among several other factors, the promotion of good will for organizations and their publics. This is why Buike (2021) is of the view that “in any organization, the need to maintain the image of the organization is of great importance. No organization can satisfy its numerous public without being perceived first by the publics as trusted and dependable. The dependability of the organization depends on the degree of the comfort given to the publics and her goodwill”. It is widely accepted that the aim of any business organization is to achieve growth, increase in turn over, assets and profit. But all of this is dependent on the goodwill of the organizations publics. Goodwill is secured not so much as a result of the organizations mere existence but as the sustained strategic planning, execution and evaluation of the perception of the their publics in relation to the organization. Tilahun (2020) points out that public relations is affected by different factors. One of the important factors, for the success of high level officers, is the basic ingredient to make a good decision that can contribute to



the goals of an organization. On the other hand, lack of efficient public relations practitioners is the supposed impact on the provision of managers with effective or good information which may be vital for managers in order to impart the right decisions. The communication perspectives of public relations are, therefore, used to provide genuine data or information about organizations.

Vehemently, most politicians today, make use of public relations to benefit themselves by shaping the public image about them and their rival parties. This is to aid them and ensure that their image does not get too tainted. Public relations strategies have been influenced by the emergence of the web; and organizations that understand the new rules of marketing and public relations develop relationships directly with their publics. Celebrities use social media to engage their audience, keeping relations active to create mutually beneficial relationships through managerial processes and societal engagements (Keren, 2019). In addition, celebrities like politicians, are influential media figures who are seen as part of social elites and engage in public relations. People often believe that objects that are owned or touched by celebrities are valuable and are willing to pay high amounts to possess them, even when those objects are mere artifacts. Monday and Ukpai (2021) further emphasize that “celebrities are often revered, respected and are seen as role models, especially by young adults who occupy the personalities of such celebrities to enhance their self-worth”. Despite the huge cost of securing celebrity endorsers, celebrity endorsement has become a common practice in public relations campaigns today.

The study is aimed at assessing the impact, relevance and efficacy of celebrity public relations in the promotion of brand image and brand products by organizations.

### **Objectives of Study**

The research aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i. Establish the efficacy of the deployment of influencers for endorsements of products and brands.
- ii. Investigate the perceptions of public relations practitioners on the use of celebrity endorsements on brand image.



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- iii. Ascertain the extent of familiarity with the concept of celebrity public relations among practitioners.
- iv. Clarify the intricacies surrounding the relevance of brand endorsements by public influencers as it pertains product and brand image perceptions.
- v. Understand the perception and comprehension of celebrity public relations among public relations officers.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### **Celebrity Public Relations**

Celebrity public relations are publicist who generate and maintain publicity for high-profile public figures. This generally involves being in charge of all the individuals public communications, including writing press releases, organizing interviews and conducting press conferences. Much of the job requires handling the media on behalf of a client and managing the clients' social media presence. It is advisable for aspiring celebrity publicists to have a strong command of social media platforms in order to build their clients brand effectively (Learn, 2023).

Celebrity public relations practice often subsumes the services of individuals who either through appointments or social status in the society, serve as spokespersons for a brand or product. They create and maintain corporate relationships with their clients' stakeholders through activities on the traditional and social media. Aspire (2022) sees celebrity public relations as the "management of the public image and perception of celebrities, including actors, musicians, athletes and other high profile individuals. This can involve managing media relations, promoting the celebrity's brand or image and handling crisis management". Celebrity public relations professionals work to ensure that the celebrity's image and reputation are protected and maintained, often through media interviews, press releases, and other forms of public communication. Celebrity public relations can also involve managing the celebrity's social media presence and interacting with their fans.



## **Theoretical Framework**

The research work takes its theoretical leaning from the Social Cognitive Learning Theory. Albert Bandura is known as the father of the social cognitive theory. Social cognitive learning theory (SCLT) is a theory that provides a framework for understanding, predicting and changing human behavior (Green and Peil, 2019) the theory places a heavy focus on cognitive concepts. It is also focused on how children and adults operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these cognitions then influence behavior and development.

Bandura (2016) asserts that individuals learn both behaviors and cognitive strategies by observing the behavior of others, and these acquisitions can be learned without being directly reinforced. McCormick and Martinko (2017) based on their studies, introduced some basic assumptions of Bandura's social cognitive learning theory. They claimed that: People can learn by observing others and that learning is an internal process that may or may not result in a behavior change. Another assumption of the theory was that learning can occur without a change in behavior (observation without imitation).

They also went further to present the following five that can influence behavior in the social cognitive theory: Expectations of future consequences and responses based on current situations, vicarious experiences of others consequences. They further contend that expectations about future consequences affect how we cognitively process new information while expectations affect decisions about how to behave and that the Nonoccurrence of expected consequences effects.

The theory is premised on the socio-psychological tradition of mass communication which holds that a person's behavior is influenced by something or someone, and that a person's communication pattern and the communication pattern of others vary. The theory falls within the communication context of interpersonal, and public communication. The theory also has its standing from within the positivistic and imperialist approach to knowing.

The theory is relevant to the discourse from the angle of the first assumption which states that people learn by observing others. This observation could come from someone they admire, adore or look up to in



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the society, which in this context is a public influencer, otherwise referred to as a celebrity publicist. People look up to celebrities in the society, especially their personal lives. This is because they believe celebrities and influencers alike model an ideal life that is replete with opulence, luxury and consequence, hence the need to imbibe them at all cost.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Celebrity Brand Endorsement in the Digital Era**

Celebrity brand endorsement has become a trend in most organizations today. It enables the facilitation of brand appeal to target publics in no small measures and creates limitless possibilities for organizations to achieve set goals. To support this claim, Amanda, Ravi and Bettina (2019) believe that celebrity endorsement influences advertising effectiveness, brand recognition, brand recall, purchase intentions and even purchase behavior. Prasad (2021) supports that the trend has become a winning formula for corporate image building. It is safe to say that the concept hopes to a favorable reaction from a target group via social influence that stimulates a favorable disposition towards a brand or product. Local celebrity endorsers are sufficient for improving brand credibility and have equity of global brands. They provide direction for global firms seeking entry into a new national market by highlighting endorsements as a means of localizing a marketing strategy and connecting with consumers and boosting brand evaluations.

In a similar vein, Christian (2018) argues that celebrity endorsements represents excellent vehicles to achieve the major objectives of marketing communication, creating awareness and differentiating the brand and its products from competitors in order to influence consumers' buying decisions. This position connotes that sectors such as cosmetics, jewelry and financial services make frequent use of celebrities that are known to the general public. Contrary to the sectors of telecommunications, retail, fashion and apparel, where only few campaigns feature celebrities that are known to the general public.

Endorsements impact on people who make a choice on particular brand products from observations on celebrities who endorse these brands.



Janusz (2020) asserts that most organizations have become strongly interested in the use of digital influencers in their marketing activities, and have allocated more and more of their promotional budgets to this form of activity. This buttress the fact that persons respected in their communities, who have a large group of committed supporters and audience can be used to create specific content to build a reputation for an organization because they are considered experts in their communities.

With the coming of the social media however, digital influencers have more and more influence on the way the promotional activities of modern organizations are conducted, and change the ways the online promotional system works. Nnamdi, Reginald and Ibitun (2019) emphasized that image management of an organization is inevitable because the image of any organization depends solely on public perception of that organization. This position portends that every organization has a primary role of monitoring public perception of its image and management of that image through good public relations strategies.

Since public relations management goal is to persuade and inform, the management functions of public relations should be the priority of every image maker of an organization. Notably, building and sustaining positive corporate image for an organization is a process that is systematic, continuing and consistent. Organizations today must engage in image management in order to be successful". This is important because image determines responses towards organizations and image makes possible, the independent relationships that exist between organizations and stakeholders.

### **Public Relations Versus Brand Management**

Corporate branding experts believe that successful corporate brands provide organizations with considerable leverage because of the positive assurances that are linked to the company name. Ifeyiwa and Stephen (2021) submit that most companies today promote their commodities to specific target audience. With time, the users become loyal customers of the brand. Organizations need to take decisive steps to address the larger audience, both internal and external, about its background, brand values, current activities of public interest and relations with the industry (Bhasin, 2018). This places the role of public relations in brand management as first and foremost to serve as



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a creator of narrative, that is, the conversation and as the purveyor of the medium to facilitate the conversation, which is the mass media including the social media.

According to Muhammad, Guntur and Resi (2020), people are usually using social media to respond to advertisement messages on social media such as brand pages that have a positive relationship with purchase intention. Successful branding campaigns should create and nurture emotional connections with customers. This is because people respond much better and more consistently when they feel an emotional connection to the message (5W, PR, 2023). Endorsers have several characteristic attributes such as attractiveness, extra-ordinary lifestyle or special skills that will be unique to observe. With the existence of celebrity endorsers that display a positive image, it is believed to be able to apply positive thinking to brand image philosophy.

### **The Emergence of Virtual Media Influencers as Celebrity Publicist in the Digital Era**

The emergence of the key opinion leader (KOL) or influencer phenomenon in this digital era is increasingly widespread, one of which is the presence of a virtual influencer. Virtual influencers are human avatars created by computers with a large social media following. They have amassed a sizable following on social media in recent years, particularly on image-based platforms like Instagram. In terms of physical appearance, personality and behavior, the majority of them resemble humans. Through their posts and interactions with their fans, they demonstrate human characteristics (Rafki and Chairani, 2022). Mauro and Pier (2022) further noted that in 2016, a relatively new phenomenon known as virtual influencers emerged, which can be thought of as an evolution of virtual idols and virtual YouTubers. This phenomena quickly gained traction on Instagram, which is one of the most effective platforms for influencer marketing. These characters were actively involved in marketing and social media campaigns, and thus, identified as “influencers”.

Laila (2022) postulates that the higher the visibility of virtual influencers on social media, the more views, likes, comments and forwards of their endorsed advertisements and the stronger the audiences' customer



brand engagement. She further asserts that those with more interactions can motivate extrinsic motivations, while the content of the advertisement can motivate intrinsic motivations by satisfying the audience's needs for love and belongingness, cognitive and self-actualization. The appeal of using virtual influencers instead of social media influencers is their higher level of reliability and predictability compared to social media influencers, as humans can be irrational. Additionally, they offer brands all the control and power of the sponsored content (Taffesse and Wood, 2021).

### **Public Influencers as Transgressive Elements in Public Relations**

In another dimension, it was recently established that there were negative implications that accompany celebrity brand endorsements which has far reaching implications on reputation of organizations in executing their public relations policies. Hayley, Rebecca and Kate (2021) contend that new challenges and risks presented by celebrity public relations which makes it less desirable by some public, viewed as transgressive include issues of underhand endorsements, over-emphasis, over-saturation and over-indulgence. Each of these transgressions were surrounded by a moral responsibility surrounding celebrity brand endorsements. These perceived limitations could come from the celebrities themselves or the brand endorsed by these celebrities as observed by some target publics in the above empirical research findings.

Throwing more weight to the issue of transgressions by celebrity and social media influencers, Jazyln and Rusty (2022) further revealed that consumers of brand products perceive the issue of verification in the context of social media influencers as an issue directly associated with some negative trends such as when an advertiser is using a public influencer to advertise a product that does not fit with their brand. Consumers in this context are significantly less likely to trust such endorsements, which results to eventual loss of interest on such brands. Reinikainen (2021) notes that mismanaging the relationships between influencers, followers and brands can also lead to negative emotions, while negative experiences and emotions may spill over from the original target to another target in a public relations campaign (Tan, 2021).



### **Impact of Celebrity Public Relations on Brand Perception**

A myriad of celebrities now endorse products in Television advertisement and act as human brands acclaimed by the public. The effects of symbolic communication between consumer and product can be maximized when the characteristic of the endorser and those of the product match. This has been validated in many studies indicating which types of endorsements are most effective. Seanjseop, Ja-Young and James (2020) refers to this phenomenon as trustworthiness, which in their context, denotes the degree to which a celebrity is perceived by customers as transferring a message of integrity, honesty and believability. Trustworthy endorsers according to them, have been found to improve the credibility of a brand, alleviate doubts, and promote economic gains. In line with the context of this research work, this tendency can have an overwhelming impact on brand acceptability and can even go as far as establishing growth in relationship between an organization and its target public.

Hyo (2019) presents another side of this perception. In her view, the attitude towards a celebrity transfer to the endorsed brand, and once a direct link has been formed from a celebrity brand, the negative information about the celebrity may reflect on to the endorsed brand. In a practical example, a professional golfer, Tiger Woods, was involved in one of the largest celebrity scandals in 2009, which influenced the brand images he endorsed. The negative publicity involving his infidelity affected the brand and how the brand was perceived. Because of his scandal, Nike, a footwear company that used him for endorsement, lost \$1.7 Billion on total sales and almost 105,000 customers (Thwaites, 2012). The involvement of celebrities in public relations activities has become of essence in modern competitive environments today, due to high recognition and creation of strong product perception. These days, this practice has been extremely noteworthy and the impact celebrities have on people is unparalleled.

### **Research Methods**

The study is an empirical one which combines qualitative analysis of relevant literature with primary data gathered from 30 participants using a convenience sampling technique in an 11 point in-depth interview. The participants were picked from tertiary Institutions (Plateau State Polytechnic



and College of Health Technology, Vom), private companies (NASCO and Vitafoam) and some ministry departments (Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Women Affairs) within the Joseph Gomwalk Secretariat, Jos, Plateau State, all of whom have diverse publics with strong public relations activities among their target audience within the period of 4 days spanning from Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> to Saturday, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2023.

### Presentation of Findings

The responses from the participants were collated, analyzed and presented below:

#### Q1: Socio-Demographic Distribution

Sex	Frequency	%
Males	21	80
Females	9	20
Total	30	100
Age Range	Frequency	%
25-35	9	25
35-45	10	55
45-55	6	15
55 and above	5	5
Total	30	100
Years of Experience	Frequency	%
0-5	6	10
5-10	10	55
10-15	12	30
20 and Above	2	5
Total	30	100
Membership of Professional Body	Frequency	%
Associate Members	16	75
Members	4	20
Intending Members	10	5
Total	30	100

Source: Field Survey 2023



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Table 1 above has four sub-tables that deal with the demography of participants ranging from gender, age, years of experience and membership of professional bodies. The first sub-table indicated in the first column the gender of the participants. The second column states the frequency, while the third column shows the percentages of the samples.

The second sub-table shows the differences age distribution differences of the participants. The lowest age bracket is between 25 and 35 while the highest age bracket is between 45 and 55.

The third sub-table reveals the years of experience of the participants. The lowest among same was between 0 to 5 years, while the highest was 20 and above.

The fourth and last sub-table deals with the membership status of participants with relevant professional body, in this case, the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). A total of 16 of the participants were associate members while a total of 4 of the participants were members and a total of 7 of the participants were only intending members.

### **Q1: Familiarity with the concept of celebrity public relations and perceptions on same**

Three (3) of the participants who were not registered members with the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations declined consent to continue with the interview session, while two (2) of the registered participants also declined consent to continue with the interview due to office engagements that came up in the course of the interview. Consequently, a total of six (6) of the participants admitted they had heard the concept of celebrity public relations, while the rest of the nineteen (19) participants admitted they had never heard about the concept. However, the interviewer had to take some time to explain the concept of celebrity public relations to the participants that admitted their ignorance, and after due explanation, they readily admitted they knew the concept but were not familiar with the nomenclature.

Having established an understanding of the concept of celebrity public relations, a total of eight (8) of the participants were of the opinion that celebrity public relations is a public relations strategy that works for specific public relations activities in order to establish an understanding concerning a new policy or presentation of a particular method, such as how



to protect oneself from being contaminated by a disease such as coronavirus, while six (6) of the participants were of the view that celebrity public relations is all about means and methods of relating to target publics in a unique way to create more attraction and generate more followership for an organization or a brand.

The rest of the eleven (11) participants were of the general view that celebrity public relations was an improved means of carrying out public relations activities to meet up with global standard.

### **Q2: Comprehension of the term “brand image”**

The term brand image means different things to different professionals. The interviewer had to contend with divergent arguments among participants on the acceptable definition of the term, due to familiarity from the term arising from attendance of workshops, seminars, knowledge from books and interaction with same from industrial experience.

A total of thirteen (13) participants revealed that brand image to them, was a reflection of how people view what an organization represents, which stems from interaction with an organizations’ staff at official and private intervals, attitude of an organizations’ staff towards visitors, researchers and mass media practitioners and non-verbal communication to visitors from infrastructural appeal and image performance.

The rest of the twelve (12) participants indicated that brand image represents to them, the entrenchment of organizational policy, premised on hierarchical and marshaled attitudinal conduct of organizational staff and their loyalty to organizational policy.

### **Q3: Perceptions on contributions of celebrity public relations to brand image and promotion of brand image by celebrity public influencers**

Participants were required from the interactive session to elucidate on their view of the contribution of the growing trend of celebrity public relations to brand image and how same can be used to promote brand image by public influencers adopted by organizations.

Eight (8) of the participants proffered that Celebrity Public Relations to them, serves as an abdication from obsolete thinking to creative and global driven initiative of interaction with organization publics and attracting them



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to identify with an organizations initiative aimed at creating more opportunities for future interactions. Ten (10) of the participants indicated that though, brand image promotion by celebrity public influencers appears a capital intensive exercise, the benefits could attract sales and attract more publicity to a brand. The rest of the seven (7) participants generally indicated that Celebrity Public Relations could result in policy acceptance, even in the midst of apparent hostility to initiatives that were executed in the absence of celebrity brand influencers. In other words, to them, Celebrity Public Relations engenders public acceptance where there was none.

### **Q4: Reasons for adoption of celebrities for endorsements by organizations**

Asked to state reasons why some organizations adopt the use of Celebrities to endorse their brands, some of the responses from the participants were predominantly assertive. Majority of the participants totaling sixteen (16) were of the general view that the trend results from the hasty need from an organization to project a desired image, even in the midst of non-performance, in order to propagate a saleable view of the organization in question for acceptance and relatable purposes within a target public. The rest of the nine (9) participants dwelt on traditional reasons, based on the fact that to them, reasons arising from Celebrity brand endorsements stems from the inability of Public Relations professionals within such an organization to live up to their professional expectations in carrying out their primary responsibility of creating, and sustaining relationships with an organizations public in order to generate brand acceptance.

### **Q5: Future of Public Relations amidst celebrity brand endorsements**

The interaction with participants conversely required them to state their position on their perceived projections of Celebrity brand endorsements and the prospects of Public Relations in the near and distant future. To start with, seven (7) of the participants believe that it is a trend that has come to stay and that it was left for the Public Relations experts to leverage on providing preliminary training sessions for such celebrities before giving them the task of brand endorsements in order to surmount any perceived challenge that may accompany the task. Meanwhile, nine (9) of the participants posited that working hand in hand with celebrity brand



influencers might bring up a crisis of interest and conflict arising from assertion of authority on who creates the message content. This to them might evolve into tarnishing the image of the profession in the long run. Notably, three (3) of the participants believed that a middle ground can be created for both parties to work in harmony in the near and distant future, while the rest of the six (6) participants strongly believed that the trend will erode the relevance of professionals eventually.

The participants were required to state their understanding of what is required of them as Public Relations experts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to meet up to global best practice. A total of thirteen (13) of them stated that it was important for contemporary Public Relation practitioners to understand how to use the internet and establish their presence professionally in the social media. However, eight (8) of the participants asserted that it was mandatory for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Public Relations expert to be versatile in the area of speech writing, public opinion research, vast reading and ability to interact with people especially online. The rest of the four (4) participants indicated that it was necessary for a Public Relations expert in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to have social skills in addition to knowledge of the demands and culture of their target public.

#### **Q6: Inundation of Celebrity Public Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

A total of sixteen (16) of the participants revealed that Celebrity Public Relations is a trend that every Public Relations practitioner must learn to accept and know how to cope with. They posited that deployment of celebrity public relations to achieve set goals and objectives by organizations was just a matter of affordability, and that those who are not using the technique were unable to do so because they can't afford it and not that they don't desire it. The rest of the nine (9) participants were of the general view that the trend has come to stay due to the way the profession has been inundated with quacks who have no idea of the do's and don'ts of the profession that leaves their employers with no option but to deploy Celebrity Public Influencers to complement their inefficiency.

In a bid to ascertain how acceptable the trend has become especially among participants, nine (9) of them found the trend as acceptable while five (5) of the participants expressed reservations, noting that it was a challenge



they believe will come and go, while eight (8) of the participants believed that the trend was acceptable to them on the condition that organizations carry them along, while the rest of the five (5) participants found the trend unacceptable to them.

### **Discussion on Findings**

The first objective of the research was to determine the efficacy of the deployment of influencers for endorsement of products and brands. The survey from the interview shows that the participants were of the general view that product and brand endorsements by influencers is a trend that has come to stay, which should be accepted by every well-meaning practitioner of public relations. This lends credence to the position of Amanda, Ravi and Bettina (2019) who affirmed that celebrity endorsers are sufficient for improving brand credibility and have equity of global brands. Their findings provides a direction for global firms seeking entry into a new national market by highlighting local celebrity endorsements as a means of localizing a marketing strategy and connecting with consumers and boosting brand evaluations. This also corroborates the stand-point of the Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT) which posits that people can learn by observing others and that learning is an internal process that may or may not result in a behavior change (McCormick and Martinko, 2017).

The second objective of the study was to investigate the perceptions of public relations. Practitioners on the use of celebrity endorsements on brand image. Most of the participants in the interview generally indicated that celebrity public relations could eventually result in public acceptance, even in the midst of apparent hostility to initiatives that were executed in the absence of celebrity brand influencers. To buttress this point, Seanjseop, Ja-Young and James (2020) refer to this phenomenon as trustworthiness, which in their context, denotes the degree to which a celebrity is perceived by customers as transferring a message of integrity, honesty and believability of a brand, alleviate doubts and promote economic gains. This tendency can go as far as establishing growth in relationship between an organization and its target public. This substantiates George Herbert Mead and Max Weber's theory of Symbolic Interactionism which assumes that people respond to elements of their environments according to subjective meanings they attach



to these elements such as meanings being created and modified through social interaction involving symbolic communication with other people (Carter and Fuller, 2015).

The third objective of the study was to clarify intricacies surrounding the relevance of brand endorsements by public influencers. The participants were of the general position that the inability of some professional public relations officers to carry out their professional assignments leads to the adoption of celebrity public influencers to create, maintain and promote relationships with target publics. Some of the participants were of the view that the dire need for organizations to project their products and brands interlaced with activities of public influencers creates a complexity of perception of boundaries between public relations and brand influencers. Jazlyn and Rusty (2022) on this note, revealed that consumers of brand products perceive the issue of verification in the context of social media influencers which could be transgressive and make it less desirable to some people. Erving (2017) harps on one of the criticisms of the symbolic interactionism theory to emphasize this point. The critique states that the theory has the tendency to down-play or ignore large-scale social structures. This could have far reaching implications on needs, motive, intentions and aspirations of target publics.

The fourth objective of the study was to ascertain the comprehension of the concept of celebrity public relations among public relations officers. The study discovered that only six (6) of the participants had heard about the concept of celebrity public relations, while a total of nineteen (19) of the participants had not come across the term but understood the concept after elucidation had been given to them on same. Some of the participants were of the view that the concept was a public relations strategy that only works for specific public relations activities, while some, were of the opinion that the concept represents a unique way of reaching out to a target public. Another opinion from the participants was that the concept to them was an improved way of carrying out public relations activities.

The general view of the participants falls in-line with the position of Janusz (2020) who asserts that most organizations have become strongly interested in the use of digital influencers in their marketing activities, and have allocated more and more of their activities. This reveals that public



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influencers have more influence on the way the promotional activities of modern organizations are conducted. This is also in consonance with the standpoint of the social cognitive learning theory that provides a framework for understanding, predicting and changing human behavior. The concept of celebrity public relations among most public relations practitioners today has found a place to stay amidst mixed reactions and sometimes, feelings of skepticism. While some may not be aware of the nomenclature of the concept but are well acquainted with the practical application, celebrity public relations has been used by some organizations to achieve certain goals and to also gain public acceptance.

Competing for public attention and public relevance is a common practice among most organizations that desire influence amongst a target public, and thus, when members of the said public look up to an identified personality whose opinion shapes that of the target public, it becomes a matter of necessity for such a personality or personalities to be deployed. This could inflate the budget expenditures of such organizations, but the benefits appears to outweigh the financial burden this technique may incur.

The fifth objective of the study was aimed at exposing some of the criticisms associated with brand endorsement and how issues from such criticisms can be mitigated. A total of five participants who expressed reservations about the trend, believed that it would soon phase out while another five (5) of the participants found the trend unacceptable to their professional acumen. This may not be far from Hayley, Rebecca and Kate's (2022) point of view, who contend that consumers of products may not find such product desirable when an influencer uses or endorses a product that does not fit with their brand. These criticisms arise from the fact that some celebrities endorse brands and products to portray an unreal lifestyle which can have far reaching negative implications on the target publics. Razie and Mohammed (2020) further buttressed this point in their criticism of the social cognitive learning theory. They submit that the theory is loosely organized and is ridden with controversial issues and creating questions of reinforcement in learning questions and stability of self-efficacy.



## **Conclusion**

The twenty first century has brought about a lot evolutions, not just to the technological industry, but also to social science and public relations to be specific. This evolution has led to new approaches to professional conduct and responsibility especially as it pertains to interaction with target public. The adoption of public influencers for promotion of brand image and maintaining mutual relationship with the public from organizations is a trend that has come to stay. Never has there been a time to adjust the thinking in planning public relations activities than now. This reality has not come to put public relations professionals out of work, but to enable them re-strategize and re-create their professional skills for better interaction and interface with their public. It is no doubt that the remodeling of public opinion today has been greatly enhanced by the activities of public influencers who command and shape public opinion in the long run undoubtedly. The time has come for conventional public relations practitioners to fully embrace this new twenty first century strategy in order to blend into contemporary global best practice, and to align their psyche toward progressive professional conduct. It is no wonder, why companies and organizations that have embraced this practice experience massive improvements in public perception, brand acceptance and better service delivery. This is a lesson to upcoming professionals in the industry who aspire to carve a niche for themselves in line with what the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) stands for which is “professionalism and excellence”.

## **Recommendations**

The research paper hereby recommends the following:

- i. Public Relations Officers should be given opportunities by their employers to attend national and international seminars and conferences in order to stay up to speed in global best practice.
- ii. There should be increased budgetary appropriations to public relations departments across board to enable professionals the leverage to incorporate public influencers in public relations activities.
- iii. Professional associations saddled with regulating public relations activities need to ensure proper training and tutelage to would be



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professionals before registering them as members in order to mitigate the conduct of quacks within the profession.

- iv. Organizations willing to adopt public influencers for promotion of brand products and services should do so with close guidance and recommendations of public relations professionals within the organization.
- v. Qualitative public opinion research should be conducted by organizations in order to avoid aversion towards certain public influencers by target public.

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