

# **Assessment of Public Relations Advocacy Campaigns of Young Entrepreneurs of Nigeria (YEN) in Benue State**

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## **Abstract**

This paper evaluates public relations advocacy campaigns of Young Entrepreneurs of Nigeria (YEN) in Benue State. This was done within the context of leadership communication component of the entrepreneurship communication paradigm. Anchored on the Personal Influence theory, qualitative data was collected through In-depth interviews in three towns of Benue State – Makurdi, Otukpo and Katsina-Ala. Findings show that despite the cultural and geographic differences of the three towns, the leadership communication of youth entrepreneurs in Benue State under the umbrella of YEN is generally uniform. The study found that most of the youth entrepreneurs adopted two primary empowerment approaches related to leadership communications acts as public relations advocacy: transferring social awareness to encourage self-worth and involvement; and transferring skills to develop competence and encourage self-empowerment. Based on the findings, the study concludes that unlike the modest business world where transferring of social awareness and skills is considered top secrets for competitive business advantage, youth entrepreneurs in Benue tend to create open communication, focusing on persuasion, skills sharing, motivation and support for other youth's engagement in entrepreneurship. The study thus recommends

support, training and enabling environment for youth entrepreneurs to thrive and add a chain-value to the economy.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Leadership Communication, Youth Entrepreneurship  
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## **Introduction**

Human beings naturally are compulsive communicators. All humans communicate in the course of their daily activities in the society with people around and in far places through various means - face-to-face conversations, telephone, internet, letter and a host of others. The significance of communication is very crucial to the continued understanding, cooperation and development of society. This is because no human or formal organisation is an island. Each interacts and maintains a system of social networks and each exists within a framework of interrelated system of relationships (Bettinghaus & Cody, 1994). There is therefore the need for coordination which can be achieved through communication. Effective communication prevents conflicts that could jeopardize the fortunes of the individual, group, or organisation.

In this fast paced environment where the interaction of individuals with other individuals has become very important, we most certainly feel the need for good communication skills. It has been observed that the English language today holds a vital importance for an individual's success as one of the most domineering language in the academic and business arena around the world. However, effective communication within the context of the entrepreneurship paradigm does not simply mean understanding of the English Language. Rather, it refers to entrepreneurial leadership communication – a two way communications process that plays a vital role in the development

of entrepreneurial skills and competence. Entrepreneurs must be capable of exploring new ideas so that their businesses could survive and grow in the modern, constantly changing world. Having *entrepreneurial* leadership communication and negotiation skills are the qualities needed for a successful entrepreneurship mentoring. Generally, this means that an entrepreneurship mentor should be able to persuade and engage in endless negotiation, the ability to overcome obstacles, inspire others to action, and risk losing what you actually may want to obtain.

This is where an understanding of the meaning and function of public relations becomes important. Baker & Martinson (2002) argue that public relations is an integral part of this subsystem and its effective practice is bound to the health of an individual, organisation, group or society. Public relations provides a way for the individual, group, organisation or members of a society to monitor and interact effectively with the other key groups in this subsystem. In recent time, most countries of the world, particularly developing countries of Africa, such as Nigeria, have been rocked by an unprecedented unemployment crisis. Occasioned by mismanagement, looting and plundering of national economic resources as well as the global economic downturns, particularly in falling oil prices which has been the key source of economic strength for Nigeria, the country's unemployment rate has reached a desperate level. The phenomenon has brought about substantial changes in global economic development dimensions around the world, with entrepreneurship skills suggested by analysts as one of the critical ways out of the situation (Duhé & Sriramesh, 2009).

The phenomenon of youths becoming entrepreneurs has further been described as one of the key factors that could retract national economies from total collapse and aid the process of recovery, growth and stability. According to Rae (2005), youth entrepreneurs have played and will continue to play an important

role in developing current and future economic levels for nations plagued with unemployment crisis. Youths are also choosing to become entrepreneurs in some parts of Nigeria, such as Benue where the activities of Young Entrepreneurs of Nigeria (YEN), Benue State Chapter has become prominent. The popularity and effectiveness of their *Go Start Something* and *Lets Go Farming* youth entrepreneurship awareness and mobilization advocacy campaigns have re-engineered enthusiasm and determination of Benue youths to veer into various entrepreneurship ventures. Gbandi & Amissah (2014) observe that youth entrepreneurs, especially those who own small and medium businesses, comprise one of many aspects that can determine the success of nation building. This is because youth entrepreneurs are dedicated to unlocking the enormous potential of enterprises to create decent, long-lasting jobs through self-employment.

According to Muritala, Awolaja & Bako (2012), self-employment is a concept that has arisen as a result of youth entrepreneurship. Given the enormity of the unemployment challenge and the saturation of the Nigerian labour market as well as the current economic recession, young people after graduating from universities and colleges are now looking inwards, and need an avenue to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a productive manner. This requires that the environment for this is conducive for them to set up (Gbandi & Amissah, 2014). The government has a role by ensuring a stable political, social and economic environment that will ensure the smooth start of the enterprises. In addition, funds should be availed for viable projects that have passed through the relevant testing by experts before the proposals are presented for deliberation. This acts to ensure that resources are optimally utilized. On their side, prospective youth entrepreneurs need to be creative and innovative enough to put on paper ideas that have a business angle, ideas that do not just lead to their own self-fulfilment but also puts the needs of the society they serve into account.

Remarkably, while the interest of youths in

entrepreneurship is seemingly plausible, the intensity of global competition has created new challenges for youth entrepreneurs resulting in more demanding business requirements that need to be fulfilled in order to survive and stay competitive. Many believe that a skilled and motivated entrepreneur would be able to survive turbulence business situations (Edelman, Brush, Manolova & Greene, 2010; Felin, Foss & Hiemericks, 2012). However, studies have confirmed that entrepreneurial leadership communication have important influences on the effort of enhancing business performance (Wright & Stigliani, 2013; Simsek & Heavey, 2011; Collins & Smith, 2015). Greater focus on the entrepreneurial leadership communication skills and capacities of mentors may in fact enhance the ability to predict and support entrepreneurial success, as suggested by Collins & Smith (2015).

Furthermore, the dynamic Nigerian environment which today's youth entrepreneurs operate, as characterized by economic uncertainties and a growing concern for business ethics, makes entrepreneurial leadership communication even more critical. This is because several studies have generally concluded that as the founder of a new business, the entrepreneur should have substantial skill, strong character and determination, as well as willingness to invest the time and effort needed to overcome the challenges and the difficulties that may arise (Edelman, Brush, Manolova & Greene, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Many researchers have suggested that leadership communication skills of youth entrepreneurship mentors is the most relevant factor in determining the good traits of mentored entrepreneurs and ultimately the ability of their businesses to achieve significant levels of performance (Cassar, 2006; Edelman, Brush, Manolova & Greene, 2010). Although much research has shown that Nigerian youths are endowed with a lot of potentials that can turn around the economic fortunes of Nigeria and provide decent

employment to many people around that are now trapped in poverty (Popoola, 2014; Ubong, 2013; Ikechukwu & Okechukwu, 2012), studies on youths and their own organizations, as the owners and leaders is scarce.

Shane & Venkataraman (2000, p. 218) note that, “while the importance of youth entrepreneurs has been acknowledged as essential to sustainable economic growth, their activities are rarely a topic of academic research.” It is glaring in Nigeria also that many scholars have not paid attention to youth entrepreneurs as empowered leaders, even though youths have been acknowledged to have an important role in Nigeria's development. Consequently, there is no available literature on entrepreneurship communication as an emerging paradigm in public relations and marketing communications in Nigeria. There is also no research evidence on the extent to which youth entrepreneurs in Nigeria are engaged in entrepreneurship mentoring. Similarly, there is no research evidence regarding the extent to which youth entrepreneurship mentors in Benue State under the auspices of YEN attach importance to leadership communication as a crucial skill that needs to be transferred to the mentees. This collectively creates a research gap and portends a problem on evaluation of the contributions of youth entrepreneurs to economic development of Nigeria. Against the backdrop of bridging the gap, this study evaluates public relations advocacy campaigns of youth entrepreneurs in Benue State as leadership communication component of the entrepreneurship communication paradigm.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Public relations is without doubt an expanding and diversifying discipline, explaining the emergence of entrepreneurship communication as a paradigm in contemporary public relations practice. The broad objective of this study therefore, is to provide a critical perspective on the entrepreneurial leadership communication advocacy campaigns of youth entrepreneurs in

Benue State as a critical component of the emerging entrepreneurship communication paradigm. Based on the broad objective, the study specifically seeks to:

- 1. Determine the extent to which Benue youth entrepreneurs are consciously employing leadership communication as a public relations advocacy strategy in their entrepreneurship mentoring campaigns.**
- 2. Ascertain how Benue youth entrepreneurs are transferring social awareness to encourage self-worth and involvement of all Benue youths in entrepreneurship through leadership communication.**
- 3. Find out the extent to which public relations advocacy campaigns of Benue youth entrepreneurs are transferring skills to develop competence and encourage self-empowerment.**

### **Research Questions**

Based on the objectives set out by the study, the following research questions were put forward to guide in data collection and analysis:

- RQ1.** To what extent are Benue youth entrepreneurs consciously using leadership communication as public relations advocacy in their entrepreneurship campaigns?
- RQ2.** How are Benue youth entrepreneurs transferring social awareness to encourage self-worth and involvement of all Benue youths in entrepreneurship through leadership?
- RQ3.** How is the public relations advocacy campaigns of Benue youth entrepreneurs transferring skills to develop competence and encourage self-empowerment?

### **Conceptual Definition of Terms**

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate public relations contributions to youth empowerment in Benue State using the

leadership communication component of the emerging entrepreneurship communication paradigm. Therefore, it is important to conceptualize the focus of the paper by defining the following terms that would enable us evaluate how youth entrepreneurs communicate as leaders to inspire and empower other youths through public relations advocacy campaigns:

- 1. Public Relations:** Public relations has variously been conceptualized and defined, leading to a plethora of definitions. Within the context of youth leadership communication as a component of the entrepreneurship communication paradigm, we adopt the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) definition. It says “public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony” (Fenton & Langley, 2011, p. 1172). This implies that public relations helps entrepreneurs helping startups to sustain their vision and inspire others by serving as role models, thereby driving society's strategic economic interest. This perhaps explains why Forman & Argenti (2005, p. 246) defines public relations within the entrepreneurship communication paradigm as “(1) the capacity to act and accomplish something; (2) the ability to exercise control over individual or group self-interest; (3) the capacity to influence others; and (4) in certain circumstances, the will and capacity to command or control others.”
- 2. Youth Leadership Communication:** Youth leadership communication within the entrepreneurship communication paradigm has been defined as the ability of youths to inspire confidence and support among peers towards the attainment of organized societal objectives.

More tacitly, Laskin (2009, p. 38) defines it as “a process whereby an individual youth influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal through organized communication activities. This signifies that youth leadership communication is the process by which an individual youth or agent influences and induces the positive behaviour of another youth or group to achieve a predefined objective. Youth leadership communication according to Sha (2010) is the process of articulating a vision of goals, serving as a role model and encouraging others to act in such a way as to achieve those goals. This indicates that a youth leader's life experiences play an important role in acts of youth leadership communication. As such a youth leader must be an embodiment of a spiral of experience, beginning with observing day to day events, reflecting on those events, and then determining and producing leadership communication acts accordingly.

3. **Entrepreneurship Communication:** Current literature on corporate communication, organizational communication, public relations and entrepreneurship education across the globe has identified the emerging entrepreneurship communication paradigm as vital for entrepreneurship success. The emerging entrepreneurship communication paradigm deals with concerns essential to the success of entrepreneurship startups with generating their competitive advantage as well as inspiration of the upshot of budding business ideas. Dagnino (2005) defines entrepreneurship communication as the strategic communication's long-term aims and outcomes of combining the endogenous and exogenous perspectives for the generation of startups' competitive advantage within a given economic, social and cultural environmental context. This implies that entrepreneurship communication offer significant insights into the enabling

and the constituting components of communication activities that brings about a unified strategy for the success of business startups.

- 4. Youth Empowerment:** Milburn (2000, p. 48) defines youth empowerment as a “Process in which an individual youth or group of youths gain control and mastery over social economic conditions, over democratic participation in their communities and over their own stories.” This implies that youth empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps youths gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Youth empowerment concerns how each individual youth uses power (acquired socio-economic skills) to lead either their own self or others. It connects both economic potential and the ability of each individual youth to find his or her creative aspects.

### **Public Relations and the Entrepreneurship Communication Paradigm**

A growing number of communication and management scholars have been theorizing on the institutionalisation of the strategic role of public relations in all spheres of human endeavour (Hansen, 1995; Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Banning & Schoen, 2007; Hallahan, 2008). Today the field of inquiry of public relations appears rich, broad, and multidisciplinary, albeit highly fragmented due to the diversity of management perspectives to which authors refer. Public relations deal with concerns essential to the success of organizations; in other words with generating their competitive advantage. For this reason, public relations' long-term aims and outcomes might be defined as referring to those managerial perspectives which are concerned with organizational survival.

The Entrepreneurial Communication Paradigm attempts to integrate or leverage on the components of public relations support towards the attainment of entrepreneurship objectives in society. According to Bruning & Galloway (2003), the entrepreneurship communication paradigm comprises four roles/dimensions that can be defined as its Aligning, Energizing, Visioning, and Constituting activities.

The *Aligning* dimension of entrepreneurship communication paradigm includes public relations' environmental scanning and boundary spanning activities, as well as bridging and engaging ones. Entrepreneurial studies indicate that strategic decisions are modelled by continuous gate-keeping activity (Hallahan, 2008). Thanks to its boundary spanning function, public relations holds a privileged position for observing and interpreting the context in which entrepreneurs operate (Banning & Schoen, 2007). The monitoring and interpretation of on-going dynamics in environmental scanning stimulates entrepreneurs to formulate strategies and processes aligned with the same on-going dynamics in the environment's social context and with the most relevant expectations of stakeholders. This facilitates the progressive legitimisation of the entrepreneur in his/her environment, which is a necessary condition for maintaining its long-term sustenance (Hansen, 1995) and developing supportive networks of stakeholders, who are one of the major drivers of entrepreneurial activity (Bruning & Galloway, 2003).

Entrepreneurship needs social interaction in order to generate support from others and to shape and develop new ideas (Banning & Schoen, 2007). Assuming an approach of this type means building bridges between the entrepreneurs and their most vital stakeholders, as well as activating and facilitating their participation and involvement. So beyond boundary spanning and environmental scanning, the *Aligning* dimension includes bridging and engaging with the most important stakeholders,

developing solid symmetric relations and long-lasting partnerships with them (Hansen, 1995; Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Banning & Schoen, 2007; Hallahan, 2008).

The *Energising* component deals with the role of public relations as a communication function of stimulating entrepreneurial partners' orientation to innovation and creating collaborative networks to drive innovation through the combination of existing resources, the development of capabilities and the spread of knowledge. Public relations supports entrepreneurs in reassuring stakeholders about changes due to innovation by supplying adequate information, and listening to what happens in the environmental context (Hallahan, 2008). Successful entrepreneurs should be innovation-driven and entrepreneurial studies stress how orientation toward innovation is important in using resources, competences and capabilities in innovative ways and in promoting individual entrepreneurial behaviours (Echols & Neck, 1998).

The *Energising* dimension of public relations within the entrepreneurship communication paradigm focuses on transmitting an innovative spirit to all entrepreneurship partners, stimulating them and giving them room for expression. As the efficacy of decision making increases proportionately to the number of participating members (Forman & Argenti, 2005), strategic decisions should be grounded in the interchange between the entrepreneurs and their most important interlocutors, rather than being defined only autonomously by the dominant coalition. Successful implementation of strategies is a result of involving people all throughout the entrepreneurship scheme (Milburn, 2000; Forman & Argenti, 2005). Public relations within the entrepreneurship communication paradigm therefore has the aim of rendering entrepreneurship partners responsible by virtue of their being of key importance in implementing innovative processes (Hallan, 2008); professional communication practitioners should concentrate more on facilitating rather than

on managing communication.

The *Visioning* dimension of public relations within the entrepreneurship communication paradigm concerns the definition and diffusion of corporate mission, strategies and guiding values in order to envision and share a common vision of the future, as well as to deliver coherent messages. Entrepreneurial leadership studies highlight the transformative and visionary role of entrepreneurship leaders in modelling corporate strategies and creating a meaningful vision around entrepreneurship projects (Hallen, 2008). In this regard, communication activity focuses on what to communicate in order to obtain the desired effect (Forman & Argenti, 2005). Thus *Visioning* means communicating decisions regarding strategic entrepreneurship choices in order to channel collective energy towards common goals consistent with the entrepreneurship scheme's mission and guiding values. Public relations activities are essential in shaping a single, clear entrepreneurship scheme's position in the minds of its stakeholders, as well as in developing a solid long-term reputation (Cornelissen, 2004). The *Visioning* dimension corresponds to the enabling role of communication (Hallen, 2008), which means that communication facilitates the implementation of entrepreneurship decisions.

*Constituting activities* within the entrepreneurship communication paradigm, public relations become something more than an infrastructural component of the entrepreneur. It feeds the decisional process, influencing its contents through the reflective activity of the analysis and interpretation of the competitive and organizational context. The constitutive component plays a crucial role in the definition of the communicative aspects of decisions, completing the different ways in which public relations contributes significantly to the corporate decision making process.

## **Public Relations and Entrepreneurship Development**

Entrepreneurship has been touted in developing countries around the world as the engine of economic growth and development, the back-bone of national economies, the highest employment-generators, and a potential tool of poverty alleviation by creating self-employment avenues. This idea has also resonated with Nigeria and a variety of strategies have been employed, particularly targeted at the youth to get them involved in entrepreneurship of varying scales. Amongst the strategies employed, public relations advocacy enjoys a centre-stage with definitive campaigns mounted by government institutions, corporate organisations and groups to persuade, motivate and encourage entrepreneurship. Notwithstanding various definitional issues and data problems, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2016) report shows that there is an estimated total of around 17,547,372 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria as a direct off-shoot of the entrepreneurship campaigns. The report indicates that these enterprises employ about 75-90% of the domestic workforce, especially youths.

With the exception of some few States however, entrepreneurship activities through SMEs are not yet so important from output contribution perspective due to their low productivity because they lack the enabling environment to thrive. Also, advanced technologies, sophisticated methods of production and skilled workers are primary challenges in most States. Notwithstanding, youth's entrepreneurship development in Nigeria has a tremendous potential in empowering youths and transforming the economies of all States in Nigeria.

Existing literature on the entrepreneurship communication paradigm suggest that there are three categories of youth entrepreneurs, that is “chance”, “forced” and “created” entrepreneurs (Das, 2007). These different categories are based on how their businesses got started, or the main reasons or

motivations behind starting their own businesses. *Chance* entrepreneurs are those who start a business without any clear goals or plans. Their businesses probably evolved from hobbies to economic enterprises over time. *Forced* entrepreneurs are those who were compelled by circumstances (e.g., unemployment, death of benefactors, the family facing financial difficulties) to start a business, their primary motivation, hence, tend to be financial. *Created* entrepreneurs are those who are “located, motivated, encouraged and developed” through, for instance, entrepreneurship development programmes such as Benue YEN's *Go Start Something* and *Lets Go Farming* programmes.

According to Thaddeus (2012), the degree of youth entrepreneurship development is closely related to the degree of economic equity and empowerment, which in Benue State as the case with some other States in Nigeria is generally lower than that in economically viable States like Lagos, Kano, Imo and Anambra States. The degree varies, depending on many factors, including level of economic development, average level of per capita income, social, cultural and political factors. However, a study by Gbandi & Amisah (2014) indicates that the most common reasons for youth entrepreneurship in developing countries such as Nigeria before now, were either financial reason or to keep busy. Consequently, only about one fifth of youths were created entrepreneurs and drawn to entrepreneurship by “pull” factors.

Public relations is a social communication phenomenon that ensures the protection of mutual interests through the production and sharing of meaning. It is a kind of human instrument used to achieve specific purposes, including achieving power through sharing or exchanging a variety of symbolic meanings (Cutlip, 1994; Lawniczak, Rydzak&Trebecki, 2003). The scholars in the field note that public relations is vital for entrepreneurship communication and successful implementation of entrepreneurship programmes. This implies that leadership

communication as a key component of the entrepreneurship communication paradigm is underscored by the ideas that though sometimes elusive, humans are not passive during social interactions; rather, individuals actively perceive others' symbols and react using a variety of meaningful symbols chosen, rooted in the individual's self-consciousness.

The Benue YEN's leadership communication initiative as part of the public relations entrepreneurship communication paradigm has changed the trend and has provoked youths in Benue towards the need for a challenge, the urge to try something on their own and to be independent and to show others that they are capable of doing well in business. Youth entrepreneurs in Benue State construct their leadership communication acts in building relationships with others through the entrepreneurship communication processes. While basic education and perhaps intimate friendship may help youths develop socially and interpersonally, leadership communication helps youths in building mentoring relationships that help them develop professionally and advance their careers (Duhé & Sriramesh, 2009). This explains why advocates of the entrepreneurship communication paradigm sees leadership communication as a way to achieve entrepreneurship impact at a scale and degree of sustainability that differs from what can be achieved through direct services policy or programmes of government alone.

### **Entrepreneurship Communication and Personal Influence Theory**

The primacy of public relations practice is to try to persuade audiences to learn new information, to change emotions, and to act in certain ways. Public relations is thus the use of communication in an attempt to shape, change, and/or reinforce perception, affect (feelings), cognition (thinking) and/or behaviour. Personal

influence theory, a forerunner of Katz's 1972 Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication states that human behaviour is continuous reciprocal interaction between influences of the individual (cognitive, namely attention to and retention of information), his/her actions, and his/her environment (Taylor, 2001, p. 674). According to Taylor (2001), theory has become an important theory of public relation practice since its first application to the field by Edward Barneys in 1992.

Personal influence theory describes how practitioners cultivate good relations with key publics, and exert influence by interaction through a mixture of internal and external processes in which they shape behaviour. These processes include social modelling influence. Individuals influence others who observe them by their credible conduct. Taylor (2001, p. 672) avers that socializing is one of the most important activities for a public relations practitioner while the best way to gain influence is to provide credible leadership through communication. According to Sullivan (2000), personal influence is dependent upon interaction between individuals and the extent to which they succeed or fail in promoting emotional and practical skills, shaping self-perception and perception by others.

Applying personal influence theory to entrepreneurship communication, Pruett, Shinnar, Toney, Llopis & Fox (2009) propose that entrepreneurial behaviour is determined by social context and situations, including role-sets, leadership communication, mentoring and patterns of social interaction leading to entrepreneurial self-efficacy in relation to specific resources. In the case of the Benue youth entrepreneurs' 'go start something' and 'let's go farming' initiatives, culture, class, gender and the social environment of Benue youths will affect how they view their life in the future and determine the courses of action on the campaigns as a personal influence variant.

## **Methodology**

The research was executed using In-depth Interview as research design based on the qualitative exploratory research philosophy. Fisher (2010) avers that in-depth interview is most useful in qualitative research because of the awareness of reality being socially constructed as well as the focus on understanding the people/organisation that are a part of the research. Since comments and opinions of Benue youth entrepreneurs are valued as key component of data for the study, this approach seemed most appropriate. Quiring (2009) notes that in order to keep an open mind regarding the points of view of the study sample and reasons for acting in a certain way, in-depth interview is most helpful.

Self-selection sampling was used to select only the leaders of Benue YEN (Chapter President, Secretary and Training and Mobilization Coordinator as well as the Zone A, Zone B and Zone C Chairpersons). Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009) note small sample of expert participants is more useful in qualitative studies. Therefore, in-depth interviews supplemented with semi-structured interviews where certain details are required were conducted with the three state leaders and three Zonal leaders of YEN in Benue State.

## **Findings/Discussions**

The broad objectives of the study is to provide a better understanding of how youth entrepreneurs in Benue State, Nigeria are using leadership communication as public relations advocacy to engage with other youths and to address knowledge gaps, through mentoring and transfer of skills to encourage entrepreneurship development. This was explored through qualitative research based on in-depth interview. Data collected for this study was first transcribed, after which the researcher identified common themes and patterns upon which the responses would be appropriately sorted, coded, and summarized in

response to the research questions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were then colour coded to facilitate the retrieval of data segments categorized under the same codes. Qualitative interview methodologies require relating data to one particular topic that is not conveniently found packaged together in the same areas of each interview (Wright & Stigliani, 2013). Therefore, the researcher grouped answers from various participants together by common questions and by analyzing different perspectives regarding central research issues.

Three themes emerged in line with the research questions: Leadership Communication as Public Relations Advocacy; Transferring of Social Awareness to Encourage Self-worth and Involvement; and Transferring Entrepreneurship Skills to Develop Competency and Self-empowerment as **leadership communication component of public relations advocacy**. In answering the research questions and discussing the findings, each theme is illustrated with quotes from the data and quotes from the literature relating to the issue. The interview questions drawn from the research questions provided a descriptive analysis framework from which conclusion was reached and recommendations made.

### **Leadership Communication as Public Relations Advocacy**

The first research question sought evidence on the extent to which youth entrepreneurship mentors in Benue State are consciously using leadership communication as a public relations advocacy tool to mobilize Benue youths into entrepreneurship ventures. Results of the interviews showed that only the three state officials of YEN understood and deliberately employed leadership communication as a public relations advocacy tool. The data shows however, that even the three state officials in spite of their knowledge of leadership communication as a public relations advocacy tool lacked professional competence to incorporate tangible public relations strategies that are informed by research. Nevertheless they used their knowledge of public relations

advocacy to effectively mobilize, appeal, mentor and engender interest of Benue youths in entrepreneurship.

Within this context, the interviewees saw public relations **advocacy** as advice, guidance and technical support that would enable Benue youths engage and prosper in diverse entrepreneurship ventures. For instance Chapter President avers that: “we do not have any professional training on public relations advocacy, however, OXFAM trained us on motivation and how to inspire youths with business ideas and skills that will arouse their interest in entrepreneurship”. This perhaps explained why the leadership communication of Benue YEN focused on business themes, ideas, values, and supports the dialogue on social and political issues within the context of business. According to one of the interviewed Benue YEN officials – the Training and Mobilization Coordinator, advocacy “is a catch-all word for the set of skills we use to create a shift in the youths' perception and motivates them to mobilize the necessary resources and forces to build, nurture and grow their businesses”. The advocacy activities of Benue YEN corroborate the explanation of Heath (2007) that advocacy seeks to increase the power of people and groups and to make institutions more responsive to human needs. It attempts to enlarge the range of choices that people can have by increasing their power to define problems and solutions and participate in the broader social and policy arena (p. 27-28).

Public relations practitioners have long sought for the “value-added” paradigm in their efforts. In fact, one of the major critiques of the field is the failure to show direct financial impact on an organization. Responses to this study demonstrate that leadership communication as a conceptualized function of public relations has that ability. The impact of leadership communication of Benue YEN on the socio-economic development of Benue State is glaring as their *Go Start Something* and *Lets Go Farming* youth entrepreneurship awareness and mobilization advocacy campaigns have resulted into tripling of the number of small and

medium scale entrepreneurship ventures in Benue State. This signifies leadership communication as a variant of the emerging entrepreneurship communication paradigm of public relations that needs to be harnessed to boost Nigeria's economy.

### **Transferring of Social Awareness to Encourage Self-worth and Involvement**

Transferring social awareness creates self-worth in Benue youths to engender involvement in their vision is a critical aspect of the entrepreneurship communication paradigm that Benue YEN has uniquely achieved. Findings of the study indicate that the need for Benue youths to understand that entrepreneurs need to align their personal goals with their business goals is one of the reasons for the advocacy campaigns. Three of the interviewees (State Leaders) stated that they were privileged to be trained in Singapore, Norway and Thailand by OXFAM through the Central Bank of Nigeria North-Central Entrepreneurship Development Centre, Makurdi and Bank of Industry on Start-Up Advisors and training Mentors. It is evident from our data that the training received by youth entrepreneurs in Benue has been enabling them to empower their fellow youths through social awareness by interpreting and articulating their experiences of being empowered and transmitting or spreading their perceptions among the youths. This is done based on the fact that while so many have ideas that can make them successful entrepreneurs, lack of social awareness and self-worth hinders their ability to explore and try out their ideas.

The aim of this public relations advocacy component of the leadership communication campaigns carried out by Benue YEN is informed by the recognition that the youths really had to know what to do when dealing with those already in the business

within their environment. According to one of the interviewees, “all the trainings I have received both within and outside Nigeria, transferring of social awareness as an entrepreneurship mentor has been constantly emphasized as the driving force”. Another interviewee corroborates by noting that “we were told that it's only by sharing our experiences that other youths can become creative and get challenged to start something”. These constructions depended on how the youths interpreted daily life experiences and their nature or position as youths within the business context. This is against the backdrop that the youths in Benue State have several different social backgrounds - multi-dynamic culture and local knowledge colouring. The differences could intervene in their bargaining relationships with other youths that could affect their success without building a common front on desired goals. Therefore Benue youth entrepreneurship leadership communicators seemed more sensitive to creating social awareness and building self-worth that will create the enabling environment for skills transfer and competence building. This explains why they were comfortable giving tasks to the youth without expectation of reward.

### **Transferring Entrepreneurship Skills to Develop Competency and Self-empowerment**

Findings from the study on this theme show that Benue youth entrepreneurship leaders are skilled in various categories of business start-ups, and as successful entrepreneurs, they transfer their skills to other youths to become self-competent to successfully initiate a business idea, nurse it and also grow it to success. Simsek & Heavey (2011) argue that the most important decision for any entrepreneur is choosing what sort of business he or she wants, yet most entrepreneurs give little thought to this

aspect. Therefore, the skill transfer and competency building component of the public relations advocacy programmes of Benue YEN is to build confidence and ensure sustainability. The interaction between Benue youth entrepreneurs and their fellow youth in Benue State through leadership communication also involve the exchange of meaningful symbols that provide a social order formed from the dialectic understanding process between each entrepreneur's self and the social environment.

Benue youth entrepreneurs approach skills transfer and competence building as empowerment that will enable Benue youths 'find' themselves, so they have power and control over their lives. Regarding how they feel, sharing their skills which should have served as a business secret, the President of Benue YEN notes that: "Sharing your skills as an entrepreneur empowers you to also learn and be more current with trends in your area of business interests". She notes also that "Being an entrepreneurship mentor allows you to build confidence within a multi-dynamic culture mix." Benue youth entrepreneurs also demonstrate their potential to influence social change and economic order in Benue State as their "*Go Start Something*" and "*Lets Go Farming*" campaigns have motivated, inspired and empowered so many youths in the State who are taking care of their businesses from the beginning and are receptive to change. According to the State Secretary, "the training we received abroad was based on the condition that we will transfer the knowledge and skills to empower as many youths as possible for free that is why we have been massively mobilizing and training youths in the State".

The Benue youth entrepreneurship lead communicators' experiences in a multi-dynamic culture mix also has motivated them to ensure that all Benue youths are empowered with the competency skills that can turn around the economy of the State

within its unique cultural environmental context. Accordingly, the entrepreneurs transfer their skills through leadership communication in such a way as to make youths in the State inspired and feel comfortable as well as confidence of venturing into entrepreneurship – conditions necessary for helping them develop self-awareness and self-confidence. They also train youths in the State to be youth entrepreneurship leaders by meeting expectations, indicating that Benue YEN share power to help youths in the State develop the capacity to accomplish entrepreneurship ventures on their own.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Findings from our study show that public relations advocacy through leadership communication as a component of the entrepreneurship communication paradigm is central to the success of motivating entrepreneurship ventures in society as seen in the successes of Benue YEN. It is thus pertinent to conclude that youth entrepreneurs play an active role in supporting entrepreneurship and economic growth, yet little research has been conducted in Nigeria to support the leadership communication initiatives of youth entrepreneurs in Nigeria. However, findings of this study corroborates the evidence from the studies of Dagnino (2005), Cassar (2006) and, Collins & Smith (2015) which demonstrate that entrepreneurship communication is fundamental to improving entrepreneurial performance and economic growth. This implies that entrepreneurship communication holds potentials for navigating Nigeria out of recession onto a path of economic growth and stability. Overall, the study show the qualitative benefits of youth leadership communicators working with young entrepreneurs and how this can lead to young people growing in confidence and becoming successful both personally and professionally, thereby

contributing greatly to Nigeria's economic recovery and growth. However, this cannot be achieved without consistent support structures from the government at every stage, from engagement, to the young person achieving independence and ultimately letting the client 'fly'.

Based on this, the study recommends that findings should primarily create a platform from which further research can be conducted. It has evaluated the current position with respect to entrepreneurship leadership communicators in Benue State under the auspices of Benue YEN.

The Federal/State Government agencies and parastatals handling various entrepreneurship schemes should embrace entrepreneurship communication as one of their fundamental objective of engendering entrepreneurship spirit through social awareness, skills transfer, and competency building.

Youth entrepreneurship leaders under the auspices of the Young Entrepreneurs of Nigeria (YEN) should be assisted as practicing entrepreneurship communicators to help in mentoring and building skills that will expand the scope of entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

The desire of youth entrepreneurs under YEN is to grow professionally and personally. Consequently, schemes should be put in place by government, financial agencies and non-governmental agencies such as grants and funds as well as business referral schemes to support initiatives of YEN. YEN's sense of achievement as evidenced in the successes of their campaigns in Benue State should be recognized through special awards and responsibilities to spur more youths to serve as entrepreneurship communication leaders.

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