



SCALING UP PREVENTION OF MOTHER-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION (PMTCT) OF HIV/AIDS IN BENUE STATE: LEVERAGING PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES FOR BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This study, 'Scaling Up Prevention of Mother-To-Child Transmission (PMTCT) Of HIV/AIDS Benue State: Leveraging Public Relations Strategies for Behavioural Change' has investigated Public Relations strategies used by NACA in the prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State, and to determine the factors which necessitate the use of Public Relations strategies by NACA in the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. The study was anchored on the Health Belief Model, which proposes that a person's behaviour can be predicted based on how vulnerable individuals consider themselves to be. Survey research was used to design this study, while questionnaire was deployed as the research instrument for data collection. Quantitative data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics, while multivariate frequency distribution tables and percentages were used as tools for analysis of the quantitative data. Findings revealed among others that several Public Relations strategies such as mass media & IEC campaigns, advocacy Public Relations, community engagement and peer group meeting were used by NACA in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. The study concluded that NACA employs a range of Public Relations strategies in the implementation of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) of HIV/AIDS programme in Benue State, with mass media campaigns emerging as the most dominant strategy. Consequent upon this, the study recommended among other considerations that NACA should complement mass media with more grassroots mobilisation through traditional leaders, women groups, and peer educators.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, Mother-to-child Transmission, Prevention of Mother-to-child Transmission, Public Relations, Strategies, Public Health

Introduction

Across the globe, organisations do not exist in a vacuum. Each is composed of an internal system of social networks and exists within a framework of an interrelated system of relationships with key stakeholders such as competitors, consumers, regulators and the media (Lamb and McKee, 2005), with each having a tremendous impact on the overall success of the organization.

For the organization to perform maximally there is therefore the need for proper coordination, which can be achieved through communication. Effective communication prevents fallacy, uncertainty, and conflicts. This is where an understanding of the genuine meaning and function of Public Relations becomes important (Nwanne, 2016).

It could be noted that we live in an interdependent world. This suggests that it is practically impossible for any individual, group, organisation or even nation, to survive entirely by itself. If ever a country were to survive along that line, it means such a state is in complete autarchy. But the reality is that all forms of development, success or advancement are achievable within the context of cooperation and

collaboration. This partly explains why successful individuals and corporate bodies are those who work in harmony with others. Individuals need honest, intelligent, and hardworking friends who would influence them to work harder and attain lofty goals and achievements.

Organisations must necessarily work in concert with different groups and categories of people, often called ‘publics’ in order to attain, sustain and, preferably, improve the bottom line in their operations. This is usually a product of goodwill and support from the relevant publics. This is where the idea of public relations, being a major contributor to organizational success, comes in because without the intangible, yet potent, force of goodwill and support, no organisation could have a taste of success on a sustainable basis (Nwanne, 2016).

Since no organisation operates in isolation of its subgroups and stakeholders, the role of public relations becomes central in linking the organisations with such various subgroups for effective performance. To this effect, public relations is regarded as “an integral part of the subsystem and its effective practice is bound to the health of an organisation” (Lamb and McKee, 2005, p. 1) as it provides a way for the organization to monitor and interact effectively with the other key groups in the subsystem. Previous empirical studies have also revealed how public relations is employed by different organizations to achieve the purpose for which they operate.

One of the most significant studies on the role of public relations, the Miller study, was published in 1967 in the United States. The announced objectives were threefold (Nwanne, 2016): (i) To find out from company chairman and presidents their role in relating company policies to public attitudes; (ii) To examine, through the eyes of chairmen and presidents, today’s trends in public relations, particularly with trends having to do with the institutionalisation of the relationship between company policies and public attitude towards the company; and (iii) To find out at first hand from company chairman and presidents, what sort of training and experience a person needs for the top public relations job in a large corporation. It thus sought to obtain information for the guidance of schools of business administration setting up a practical, well rounded, and worthwhile sequence in public relations.

Several empirical and theoretical studies (Hardy, 2017; Lynch, 2017; Oladele, Igbozuruike & Chukwuemeka, 2016; Ogunboji, 2014; Amiresmaili, Rostami & Isfahani, 2012; Tomic, Lasic & Tomi, 2010) specifically indicated that public relations performs different functions in health organizations. For instance, Lynch (2017) found that public relations in health institutions consists of crisis public relations, where the public relations professional works to either prevent or respond to an emerging situation.

This begins with environmental scanning and then creating plans to anticipate potential crises by considering on-going political, social, environmental, and technological developments. The second consists of science popularisation, where the public relations office provides journalists with story ideas and information that they can use to write their stories. Much of this information is provided in the form of press releases. Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) is one of the areas in which NACA is working hard to achieve its goal of joining the global community in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

It can be noted in the Revised National HIV and AIDS Strategic Framework 2019-2021 that Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with the highest number of people living with HIV. Over the past two decades, partners in the global AIDS response have intensively supported our Government and institutions, as elsewhere, to scale-up prevention, treatment, care and support, with a concomitant synergetic impact on a vast range of interrelated public health and development challenges.

Nonetheless, HIV/AIDS remains a leading contributor to the burden of disease and a significant public health threat in the country. Much more must be done if we are to achieve our shared goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Our vision remains an AIDS-free Nigeria, with zero new infections, zero AIDS-related discrimination and stigma. The vision can be achieved by fast-tracking the national response towards ending AIDS in Nigeria by 2030 (NACA, 2019).

Having identified the need to end the HIV pandemic by 2030 as well as the associated stigma against people living with the disease, the same framework also indicates that Nigeria has a high number of new HIV infections among children. Mother-to-child transmission of HIV accounts for 90% of HIV infections in 5 children. Prevention of mother-to-child transmission programmes at all levels are characterised by poor ownership, with funding gaps and dwindling donor funding.

Although attendance at antenatal care by pregnant women has improved (76.5% in the NAHS), mother-to-child transmission services are still highly concentrated in public health facilities. Even in states where HIV counselling and testing coverage is high, it is not accompanied by similar high coverage for those who received antiretroviral therapy. This can be attributed to weak referral systems, linkages and follow ups on positive pregnant women. A further challenge is inadequate coverage of EID (NACA, 2019).

There are, however, still gaps in the implementation of MTCT of HIV/AIDS programme. Since public relations is recognized as one of the communication tools in achieving the goal of every organization, and given the fact that achieving HIV/AIDS free society by the year 2030 through PMTCT as encapsulated in the Revised National HIV and AIDS Strategic Framework 2019-2021 remains one of the desired goals of Nigeria through NACA, it becomes necessary that this study is conducted to evaluate how public relations has been used by this agency in preventing Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS (PMTCT) in Benue State. That is why this investigation is necessary.

Statement of the Problem

The usefulness of public relations strategies in the area of health communication has been acknowledged by scholars. Accordingly, they see public relations as a distinct management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics.

It involves the management of (health) problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and be responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management to keep abreast of and effectively utilize change; serves as an early warning system to help anticipate trends (Tench and Yeomans, 2006; Tomic, Zoran, Davor & Teo, 2010; Lynch, 2017; Hardy (2017); Skinner et al, 2010; Smith, 2010; Amiresmaili, Rostami & Isfahani, 2012; Ogunboji, 2014; Asemah, 2011; Oladele, Igbozuruike & Chukwuemeka, 2016).

A number of empirical studies have also identified the link between knowledge of HIV, Mother-to-Child Transmission (MTCT) and Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) and uptake of PMTCT services (Adeleke, Muktar & Gwarzo, 2009; Hembah, Hilekaan, Swende and Bito, 2011; Olugbenga, Adebimpe, Osundina and Abdulsalam, 2013; Ngwu, Okechukwu & Ekwe, 2013; Jideani, 2014). Other studies have carried out systemised reviews on the effect of PMTCT programmes on health care services and prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS knowledge and acceptability of PMTCT (Mutabazi, Zarowsky and Trotter, 2017).

The above reviews indicate that PMTCT of HIV/AIDS is one of the crucial health issues that attract scholarship in recent times. The impact of public relations in health promotion and development has also been examined by previous scholars (Hardy, 2017; Lynch, 2017; Oladele, Igbozuruike & Chukwuemeka, 2016; Ogunboji, 2014; Amiresmaili, Rostami & Isfahani, 2012; Tomic, Lasic & Tomi, 2010).

However, what seems to be the gap in the previous studies is that none of them was specific on the utilisation of public relations strategies for the prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State, hence, the gap in our knowledge on the Public Relations strategies used by NACA for Preventing Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State; how such strategies are used; the effectiveness of such strategies; the problem(s) (if any) associated with respondents in the adoption of such

strategies; and challenges encountered by NACA in the use of such strategies for Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State.

It is to bridge the above research gap that this study seeks to investigate the public relations strategies used by NACA and how the use of such strategies assisted the agency in the implementation of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the public relations strategies used by NACA in the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. The specific objectives are:

1. To find out the Public Relations strategies used by NACA in the prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State.
2. To determine the factors which necessitate the use of Public Relations strategies by NACA in the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS in Benue State.
3. To investigate how NACA utilizes its Public Relations strategies in the implementation of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS programme in Benue State.

Literature Review

Conceptualization of Public Relations

Different authors have defined public relations differently. However, the definition provided by the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) suffices in this study. It defines public relations as a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Revised November 1987). This definition portrays public relations as an on-going attempt that involves deliberate forethought and actions in organizing activities, developing strategies, and outlining tasks and schedules, in order to establish a good working relationship between an organization and its publics. Jefkins (1998) expatiates on this definition of Public Relations.

Accordingly, he explains that Public Relations is the “deliberate, planned and sustained efforts”, meaning that public relations activity is organized as a campaign or programme, and is a continuous activity, not haphazard. Its purpose is to establish and maintain understanding between an organisation and its publics, implying that public relations is tailored towards ensuring that an organization is understood by others.

This mutual understanding is thus between an organization and its publics, since many groups of people are involved. This could be by way of soliciting community involvement, customer’s recognition, and using a respected leader or celebrity to endorse products or services. One of public relations’ key points of power rests with helping to establish credibility for a product, company or person.

Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS (MTCT)

Mother-to-Child transmission of HIV, also known as perinatal transmission of HIV, or vertical transmission, occurs when HIV is passed from an HIV-positive woman to her baby during pregnancy, labour and delivery, or breastfeeding. For an HIV-positive woman not taking HIV medications, the chance of passing the virus to her child ranges from about 15 to 45% during pregnancy, labour and delivery. If she

breastfeeds her infant, there is an additional 35 to 40% chance of transmission (De Cock, Fowler and Mercier 2000).

In many developed countries, paediatric HIV has been virtually eliminated (WHO 2015). According to CDC 2012, in the US in 1994, the Public Health Service recommended HIV counselling and voluntary testing and AZT therapy for all pregnant women after the clinical trial known as “076” showed that AZT reduced rates of MTCT by two-thirds. Although the estimated number of perinatal HIV infections in the US continues to decline, women of colour, especially black/African American women are disproportionately affected by HIV infection and as a result, perinatal HIV infection is highest among them (63%), followed by Hispanics/Latinas (22%).

Although effective interventions have led to a significant reduction in the number of perinatal infections in the US, perinatal transmission still occurs. To close the final gap, the CDC has proposed a new framework to eliminate mother-to-child HIV transmission (EMCT). This framework focuses on key areas that include: comprehensive reproductive health care alongside family planning (FP); preconception care and comprehensive case-finding of pregnancies in HIV-infected women that is conducted through comprehensive clinical care and case management services for women and infants; case review and community action; continuous quality research in prevention and long-term monitoring of HIV-exposed infants; and thorough data reporting for HIV surveillance at the state and local health department levels (Nesheim, Taylor and Lampe, 2012).

Evolution of PMTCT programme in Nigeria and Nigerian efforts at preventing Mother- to-child transmission (MTCT) of HIV/AIDS

The initiative for the establishment of the PMTCT programme in Nigeria started with the inauguration of the PMTCT National Task Team (NTT) in December 2000. The PMTCT NTT was saddled with the responsibility of developing the proposal, framework, guidelines, monitoring and evaluating (M&E) the PMTCT programme.

Actual PMTCT services in Nigeria commenced as a pilot project in July 2002. The goal, objectives and targets of the PMTCT programme have undergone some reviews over time in line with national realities and international demands such as the global initiative for the elimination of MTCT by the year 2015. The current overall goal as documented in the 2010-2015 scale-up plan is to contribute to improved maternal health and child survival through accelerated provision of comprehensive and integrated PMTCT services. (UNAIDS, 2015).

One of the main outputs of the PMTCT NTT was the development of the National Guidelines on implementation of the PMTCT. The national guidelines took into consideration the World Health Organization (WHO) four-prong strategy on PMTCT (WHO, 2003). The first guideline, produced in 2001, was reviewed in 2005, 2007 and 2010 in line with scientific developments and international best practices based on WHO recommendations (FMOH 2001, 2005, 2007, 2010). The National PMTCT standard operating procedure was also developed to assist with the implementation of the guidelines (FMOH, 2006).

The main elements of the National PMTCT programme according, to Agboghroma (2013), include:

- i. HIV information and counselling provided to pregnant women and their spouses, while HIV positive clients receive on-going counselling and support.
- ii. Routine rapid HIV testing (with an option to decline) for all women during the period of pregnancy and/or labour.
- iii. Antiretroviral (ARV) treatment or prophylaxis to HIV infected women. While single-dose nevirapine (SDNVP) in labour was the ARV drug intervention in the first 2-3 years of the

programme, a more effective combination of ARV regimen in form of highly active antiretroviral therapy or Zidovudine (AZT) Monotherapy, are now the recommended drugs.

- iv. ANC and delivery supervised by a skilled health worker to ensure safe delivery and prevent MTCT. Though the importance of caesarean section is acknowledged, its use as a public health measure was restricted with the availability of ARV and lack of access to the service in most health facilities.
- v. Infant feeding counselling on exclusive breastfeeding and breast milk substitute were the initial practice. Current guidelines emphasise only exclusive breast feeding while the mother and/or infant are on extended use of ARV drugs.
- vi. ARV prophylaxis (NVP or AZT) for the infant for 6 weeks.
- vii. Infant follow-up and HIV testing at 18 months was the goal at the early stage of the programme. The National PMTCT programme has recently introduced polymerase chain reaction services for early infant diagnosis (EID) at 6 weeks.

The 2013 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reveals that infants and under 5 mortality rates in the past five years are 69 and 128 deaths per 1,000 live births respectively. At these mortality levels, one in every 15 Nigerian children dies before reaching age one, and one in every eight do not survive to their fifth birthday.

Infant mortality has also declined by 26% over the last 15 years, while under-5 mortality has declined by 31% over the same period. Childhood mortality rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Also, childhood mortality rate is 37 deaths per 1,000 live births. The neonatal mortality rate is 37 deaths per 1,000 live births, the post-neonatal mortality rate is 31 deaths per 1,000 live births, and the perinatal mortality rate is 41% per 1,000.

The Nigerian (PMTCT) HIV programme is one of the health sector responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country. Efforts of the Nigerian Government to control HIV/AIDS in the country led to the establishment of The National Agency for the Control of AIDS - formerly National Action Committee on AIDS - in 2000 with the responsibility to lead a multi-sectoral response (NACA 2007). The HIV/AIDS division in the Department of Public Health of the FMOH, formerly National AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases Control Programme is charged with this health sector response.

Approaches to the Control and Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS

Perinatal transmission encompasses a variety of highly effective interventions that have huge potential to improve maternal and child health. According to Nakayiwa, Abang, and Packer (2006), the following approaches can control and prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS:

i. Preventing unintended pregnancies

Advances in treatment and new classes of drugs have provided the opportunity to greatly reduce rates of perinatal transmission worldwide like through preventing unintended pregnancies. Preventing unintended pregnancies is one of the most effective ways to prevent HIV infection in infants and stop the spread of the epidemic to children. For this reason, preventing unintended pregnancies among women living with HIV and offering family planning to delay, space or end childbearing is one of the four WHO pillars in the comprehensive approach to preventing perinatal transmission.

ii. *Access to free or low-cost prenatal care and voluntary HIV testing and counselling*

In order to reduce perinatal transmission, all pregnant women should have access to free or low-cost prenatal care and voluntary HIV testing and counselling. If a pregnant woman is HIV-positive, she should have access to lifelong ART to treat HIV and improve her own health thereby decreasing the chances of HIV infection to her infant. In June 2013, the WHO published updated guidelines on the diagnosis of HIV, the care of people living with HIV (PLHIV), and the use of ART for treating and preventing HIV infection.

iii. *Use of Antiretroviral Drugs in Pregnant HIV-Infected Women for Maternal Health and Interventions to Reduce Perinatal HIV Transmission*

Perinatal transmission can be reduced to less than 2% if a woman is on ART, has a low or undetectable viral load, follows the recommended treatment regimen, and does not breastfeed. Careful management during labour and delivery can also help reduce perinatal transmission, for example, by avoiding unnecessary instrumentation and not prematurely rupturing membranes.

Also, although universal prenatal HIV testing is the standard in the US, if prenatal care has not been provided and the patient has HIV, or her HIV status is undocumented, it is critical for hospitals to determine a labouring patient's HIV status upon admission. Even without the use of ART during the pregnancy, the use of ART during labour and for the infant can reduce the risk of perinatal transmission to between 6 to 13% (Kourtis, Lee & Abrams, 2006). Branson, Handsfield & Lampe, (2006) recommend that rapid HIV testing be performed in labour and delivery units on pregnant women with no HIV test during their pregnancy or with risk factors for infection since their last test.

The ultimate goal is to find the most effective and sustainable regimens for HIV treatment and the prevention of perinatal transmission worldwide. Economics, politics, poor infrastructure, poor access to healthcare and medications, stigma, and cultural norms all pose significant challenges to providing this standard of care everywhere and not all PLHIV have equal access to treatment.

Review of Empirical Works/ Studies

Musa (2016) engaged in the study on “*Public Relations Strategies for Information Service Provision in Federal University Libraries in North Western States of Nigeria.*” In this study, Musa investigated the Public Relations Strategies for Information Service Provision in North Western States of Nigeria. A total of One Hundred and Fourty Six (146) library staff from the relevant division of the four selected Federal University Libraries reference division, serial customer service and ICT were drawn from the study population and used as sample size for the study.

The four selected university libraries were Kashim Ibrahim library ABU Zaria, Bayero university library, Kano Abdullahi Fodio library, Sokoto and federal university library Dutse, Jigawa. Questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The data collected were presented and analysed using frequency distribution tables percentages and histograms.

Findings in the study revealed that providing information at the right possible time, politeness with customers, uplifting the standard and status of the library, and giving full attention to the customers, were the major PR techniques used by the selected University Libraries for information management in the North Western State of Nigeria. Findings also revealed that notice board, library newsletter, handbook, news bulletin, and posters were the popular types of communication media used for communication with the customers in the selected University Libraries within the study areas.

The study, among other things, concluded that PR has indeed improved relationships, has led to mutual collaboration among University Libraries, and has also helped establish better contact between libraries and customers. The study recommended the need for intensified efforts at attracting customers based on University libraries through quality information service provision, training and retraining of library staff, regular communication and feedback from the customers, and customers' forum, should be established so that potential customers would be free to make suggestions on how to improve the library services.

Though this study differs from the current study in terms of the phenomenon investigated, it is relevant because the study identifies the public relations strategies, how those strategies were used, and the impact of those strategies on the provision of the Library Services. The current study can be guided by this study to establish how public relations may be still useful in the implementation of the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS by NACA in North Central Nigeria.

Another study was carried out by Amadi and Nwaubeta (2018) on “*The Use of Public Relations Strategies in Tackling Cases of Flood in Rivers State.*” The study was carried out specifically to review the causes and effects of flood and how best to utilize the techniques and strategies of the Public Relations to tackle its menace in Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Areas of Rivers State. Survey research design was adopted with the interview and questionnaire used as instruments for data collection.

Findings revealed that different Public Relations strategies were adopted to address flooding in the affected LGAs of the State. However, many factors, including paucity of funds, idiosyncrasies of the flood victims, and religious and cultural beliefs of the people challenged the efforts of the PR practitioners for a social re-engineering process towards a harmonious society. The study, therefore, recommended that the government should come up with legislation to fight flooding as well as provide financial and material support to flood victims.

Although the organisation and phenomenon investigated in the reviewed study is different from the ones the current study is concerned with, the former study is relevant to the current one in the sense that it has established the fact that public relations is used in flood intervention, by which the current study can be guided in closing the gap in knowledge concerning how public relations is relevant in the implementation of the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS by NACA in North Central Nigeria.

Okudo (2014) carried out a study on “*Impact of Public Relations on a Corporate Organisation: A Study of First Bank of Nigeria Plc Enugu Zonal Headquarters.*” The study specifically examined the impact of public relations in First Bank of Nigeria PLC Enugu Zonal Headquarters. The survey research design was used in the study while the population was composed of the internal and external publics of First Bank of Nigeria PLC, Enugu Zonal Headquarters.

The instrument of the data collection was the questionnaire, which was administered on the respondents in the study area. Findings revealed that public relations helped in uplifting the image of First Bank of Nigeria PLC, Enugu Zonal Headquarters. The study recommended that First Bank of Nigeria PLC, Enugu Zonal Headquarters, should consult a public relations practitioner in dissemination of information to its publics.

This study is relevant to the current study even though the organisation and the phenomenon studied are not the same with the ones for the current study, because it shows the impact of Public Relations on the First Bank Nigeria Plc., which can help the current study investigate whether such impact is applicable in NACA in the implementation of the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS in North Central Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Health Belief Model (HBM)

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is a cognitive model which posits that behaviour is determined by a number of beliefs about threats to an individual's well-being and the effectiveness and outcomes of particular actions or behaviours (Hochbaum, 1958; Rosenstock, 1966; Becker, 1974; Sharma and Romas, 2012). Some constructions of the model feature the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) alongside these beliefs about actions. These beliefs are further supplemented by additional stimuli referred to as 'cues to action', which trigger actual adoption of behaviour. Perceived threat is at the core of the HBM as it is linked to a person's 'readiness' to take action. It consists of two sets of beliefs about an individual's perceived susceptibility or vulnerability to a particular threat and the seriousness of the expected consequences that may result from it.

Developed by Becker (1974) from the work of Rosenstock (1966), Health Belief Model(HBM) can be used as a pattern to evaluate or influence individual behavioural change. It proposes that a person's behaviour can be predicted based on how vulnerable individuals consider themselves to be. "Vulnerability" is expressed in the HBM through risk (perceived susceptibility) and the seriousness of consequences (severity). These two vulnerability variables need to be considered before a decision can take place (Naidoo & Wills 2000; Mbiereagu & Etumnu, 2020).

This means a person has to weigh up the costs, pros and cons of performing behaviour. For example, this could include how "susceptible" he feels he has contracted an illness, for example mumps, and how "severe" the consequences of having mumps is, or how "susceptible" he is to an injury, for example falling off a bicycle without protective clothing, and how 'severe' the consequence will be. A person's decision to perform the health-promoting (or damaging) behaviour will be based on the outcome of this 'weighing up' process. Self-efficacy is also added to the HBM to enable prediction of behaviour. Self-efficacy is a person's perceived confidence of his ability to perform that behaviour (www.ukg).

According to Ijwo (2014, p. 11), "the model was developed and modified to explain preventive health related behaviour and the associated risks". The basic premise of the model is that an individual worker differs in the way he or she perceives the personal benefits or risks of the job of health care, most especially diseases that are contagious like HIV/AIDS. The Health Belief Model according to Schiavo (2007, p. 26) includes four factors that need to take place for a behaviour change to occur:

- i. The person needs to have an "incentive" to change their behaviour. For example, an 'incentive' for a person to refrain from having multiple sex partners could be the desire not to contract HIV/AIDS.
- ii. The person must feel there is a "risk" to continuing the current behaviour. For example, by not taking preventive measures, such as total abstinence from sex or compliance in the use of condoms in a high HIV predominated area, a person would feel that he would be putting himself at "risk" of contracting HIV/AIDS.
- iii. The person must believe change will have "benefits" and these need to outweigh the "barriers." For example, a person may believe that the benefits of using a condom means he is less likely to contract HIV/AIDS. He also identifies the barriers to using a condom like the personal aversion to the condoms. The "benefits" must outweigh the "barriers" in order for a change to be made.
- iv. The person must have the 'confidence' (self-efficacy) to make the change to their behaviour. For example: A woman must believe she has the ability to prevent her baby from being infected with HIV/AIDS and is "confident" about her abilities to do this. The HBM additionally suggests that there is a 'cue to action' to prompt the behaviour change process. This could be a conversation with a mentor mother or health personnel. Alternatively, it could be an external prompt, such as some

of the public strategies as used by NACA to prevent MTCT. The prompt, however, has to be appropriate to that person or, as Naidoo and Wills (2000, p. 225) suggest, this cue needs to be “salient or relevant”.

The Health Belief Model (HBM) is related to this study because it assesses peoples’ beliefs and behaviours and predicts how they will behave in relation to their health, and how they are persuaded and comply with health care messages.

By implication, PMTCT messages that portray the danger of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS through risk (perceived susceptibility) and the seriousness of consequences can provide an ‘incentive’ for women to change their behaviour. Thus, this initiates their confidence in their ability to perform and sustain the recommended behaviour with little or no help from others. This study will thus ascertain how the women’s positive attitudes or perceptions can be influenced by public relations’ strategies.

Methodology

In carrying out this research, the survey design was utilised with questionnaire for data collection. The population of study included all the people in Benue State. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the projected population of Benue State is 6,141, 300 (NBS, 2025).

A sample size of 384 was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan formula who in 1970 worked out the different sample sizes needed at 95 percent confidence level of the following populations.

| Population size | Sample size |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1,000,000 | 384 |
| 75,000 | 383 |
| 50,000 | 381 |
| 10,000 | 370 |
| 5,000 | 357 |
| 3,000 | 341 |
| 2,000 | 322 |
| 1,000 | 278 |

Source: Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Data Presentation

Data collected for this study are presented in the tables below;

Table 1: Public Relations strategies used by NACA in the prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State

| Options | Frequency | Percentage % |
|----------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Mass media & IEC campaigns | 119 | 31 |
| Advocacy Public Relations | 114 | 30 |
| Community engagement | 100 | 26 |
| Peer group meeting | 51 | 13 |
| Total | 384 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The data in Table 1 sought to determine the Public Relations strategies used by NACA in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. Evidently, respondents identified several Public Relations strategies used by NACA in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State and mass media and information education campaigns were the most dominant Public Relations strategy. This implies that mass media and information education campaigns were the most commonly used Public relations strategy by NACA in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State.

Table 2: Factors which necessitate the use of Public Relations strategies by NACA in the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS in Benue State

| Options | Frequency | Percentage % |
|--|------------|--------------|
| High HIV prevalence in Benue State | 117 | 30 |
| Low awareness about HIV in Benue State | 112 | 29 |
| Stigma and Discrimination | 82 | 21 |
| Need for Behavioural change | 73 | 19 |
| Total | 384 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Data contained in Table 2 above sought to ascertain the factors which necessitate the use of Public Relations strategies by NACA in the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. It was found that high prevalence is the most dominant factor that necessitated the use of Public Relations strategies by NACA in the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. This implies that the high burden of HIV in the state creates an urgent need for sustained and effective Public Relations strategies to ensure that prevention messages reach as many pregnant women and families as possible.

Table 3: How NACA utilises its Public Relations strategies in the implementation of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS programme in Benue State.

| Options | Frequency | Percentage % |
|---|------------------|---------------------|
| Mass media campaigns | 116 | 30 |
| Community Mobilization and Advocacy | 113 | 29 |
| Faith-Based and Stakeholder Engagement | 85 | 22 |
| Information, Education, and Counseling Material | 70 | 18 |
| Total | 384 | 100 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 sought to establish how NACA utilizes its Public Relations strategies in the implementation of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS programme in Benue State. From the table, it was revealed that NACA deploys several Public Relations strategies in the implementation of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS programme in Benue State, and mass media campaigns is the most dominant Public Relations strategy. This implies that wide-reaching communication is considered the most effective tool for addressing the state's high HIV prevalence.

Discussion of Findings

Findings showed that several Public Relations strategies such as mass media & IEC campaigns, advocacy Public Relations, community engagement and peer group meeting were used by NACA in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. The above finding implies that mass media and information education campaigns were the most commonly used Public relations strategy by NACA in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS in Benue State.

NACA (2017) corroborated this finding when they noted that community participation is active involvement of the people in planning, implementing and monitoring health related programmes for their well-being. Community mobilisation is the process of bringing together or empowering members of a community from various sectors to raise awareness about, and, demand for a particular development programme. Musa (2016) also supported this finding when he noted that notice board, library newsletter, handbook, news bulletin, and posters were the popular types of communication media used for communication with the customers in the selected University Libraries within the study areas.

Findings also depicted that high prevalence is the most dominant factor that necessitated the use of Public Relations strategies by NACA in the PMTCT of HIV/AIDS in Benue State. This implies that NACA relies heavily on the mass media (especially radio, which is popular in Benue) to create awareness, educate large populations quickly, and normalize HIV testing and treatment during pregnancy.

Gourlay, Bird thistle and Mburu, (2013) supported this view when they posited that women living with HIV also continue to report that stigma and discrimination, especially in health care settings, continue to be a barrier to accessing adequate information and services. In various studies, PLHIV have reported negative staff attitudes, and this has been cited as a barrier to returning to facilities for care.

Findings also showed that NACA deploys several Public Relations strategies in the implementation of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS programme in Benue State, and mass media campaigns is the most dominant Public Relations strategy.

This implies that wide-reaching communication is considered the most effective tool for addressing the state's high HIV prevalence. NACA (2017) agreed with this finding when they affirmed that through advocacy visits, the community could be sensitised and mobilised to use existing structures in their communities to raise awareness among their members to access services including that of HIV/AIDS. Community leaders can serve as champions for change in their various communities.

Conclusion

The study revealed that NACA employs a range of Public Relations strategies in the implementation of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) of HIV/AIDS programme in Benue State, with mass media campaigns emerging as the most dominant strategy. This reflects the critical role of communication in addressing the high HIV prevalence in the state, raising awareness, and encouraging the uptake of PMTCT services among pregnant women. While mass media ensures wide coverage and rapid dissemination of information, the findings also suggest that combining it with community-based and interpersonal approaches would further strengthen impact by addressing stigma, cultural barriers, and individual concerns.

Recommendations

From the findings, the following recommendations were made;

1. **Strengthen Community-Based Communication:** NACA should complement mass media with more grassroots mobilisation through traditional leaders, women groups, and peer educators. Religious leaders should be further integrated into PMTCT campaigns to leverage their influence in encouraging HIV testing and treatment among pregnant women.
2. **Intensify PR-driven Communication Campaigns in High-Prevalence Areas:** Since the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS was identified as the most dominant factor necessitating the use of Public Relations (PR) strategies by NACA in the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) programme,
3. **Continuous Usage of The Most Dominant PR Strategies:** For NACA to remain effective in its mandate of combating HIV/AIDS and other related public health issues in Nigeria, it is important to continuously utilize the most dominant and impactful public relations (PR) strategies.

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