

**STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND NATION BRANDING; THE ROLE OF
MEDIA IN SHAPING NATIONAL IDENTITY**

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of strategic nation-branding narratives, media trust, and social media engagement on public perception of Nigeria's nation brand, using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 196 respondents across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones through a structured questionnaire measuring exposure to branding campaigns, trust in media, social media engagement, and perception of nation branding. Qualitative data were obtained from a content analysis of 120 media items from government sources, independent press, and major social media platforms. Reliability and validity were confirmed via Cronbach's alpha (0.79–0.87) and exploratory factor analysis (KMO = 0.82; Bartlett's $p < .001$). Multiple regression analysis revealed that exposure ($\beta = 0.26, p < .001$), media trust ($\beta = 0.28, p < .001$), and social media engagement ($\beta = 0.13, p = .012$) significantly predicted perception, controlling for demographics. Mediation testing indicated that media trust partially mediated the relationship between exposure and perception (indirect effect = 0.10, 95% CI [0.04, 0.18]). Moderation analysis showed that education moderated the effect of exposure, with weaker effects among tertiary-educated respondents ($B = -0.14, p = .044$). Content analysis identified three dominant themes: positive success stories (28%), counter-narratives of corruption and governance failures (42%), and neutral informative content (30%). Integrated analysis showed that positive narratives were associated with higher perception scores (Cohen's $d = 0.42$). The study concludes that credible, consistent, and participatory communication strategies are critical for effective nation branding. It recommends prioritizing trusted media channels, tailoring messages for educated audiences, leveraging citizen co-creation via social media, and aligning brand messages with lived realities to strengthen Nigeria's national image.

Keywords: Nation branding, Media Trust, Social media engagement, Framing theory, Public perception, Nigeria, Mixed-methods research, Strategic communication.

1. Introduction

Nation branding has emerged as a strategic instrument for countries seeking to shape their global image, attract investment, and foster national cohesion (Anholt, 2010; Fan, 2006). In the African context, where historical legacies, socio-political challenges, and economic constraints converge, the task of branding the nation is particularly complex (Olutola & Aduloju, 2020). Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy, faces the dual challenge of projecting a positive image internationally while addressing domestic skepticism about governance and national identity.

With the rise of Industry 4.0 technologies including social media, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence the communication landscape for nation branding has shifted dramatically (Okorozoh, 2025). Media platforms are now both channels for disseminating state narratives and spaces where counter-narratives emerge and gain traction (Castells, 2008; Chilwa, 2021). These developments raise questions about the credibility, inclusiveness, and effectiveness of branding campaigns.

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) suggests that the way issues are presented influences how audiences interpret them, while Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1989) emphasizes the role of public discourse in shaping collective opinion. Together, these frameworks highlight the interplay between strategic messaging and citizen reception in the branding process.

Despite significant investments in branding initiatives such as "Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation" and "Nigeria: Open for Business," little empirical research has examined how Nigerians perceive these efforts, especially in the era of digital media proliferation. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between campaign exposure, media trust, education, and social media engagement in shaping public perception.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Nation branding in Nigeria has historically been characterized by ambitious slogans and high-profile campaigns. However, these efforts often struggle to translate into sustained public engagement or improved global image (Olutola & Aduloju, 2020). Skepticism arises from perceptions of disconnect between official narratives and citizens' lived realities, compounded by concerns about political corruption, insecurity, and economic inequality.

The proliferation of digital platforms under Industry 4.0 has democratized information flows but also intensified competition between official narratives and citizen-generated counter-discourses (Okorozoh, 2025). While social media offers unprecedented opportunities for direct engagement, it also facilitates rapid dissemination of dissenting voices, misinformation, and alternative framings (Chilwa, 2021). Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence on how exposure to nation branding campaigns, mediated by demographic factors such as education and gender, influences perception and trust.

The absence of rigorous, data-driven analysis on this subject constrains policymakers' ability to design inclusive and effective branding strategies. Without understanding the factors that shape public perception, nation branding risks being reduced to symbolic gestures rather than transformative communication tools.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The General Objective of the study is to examine the influence of strategic narratives and media platforms on public perception of nation branding in Nigeria.

Specific Objectives are:

1. To determine the effect of exposure to nation branding campaigns on public perception in Nigeria.
2. To assess the role of media trust and social media engagement in shaping public perception of nation branding.
3. To examine the influence of demographic variables (education, gender, location) on awareness and perception of nation branding campaigns.

1. 4 Research Questions

1. How does exposure to nation branding campaigns affect public perception in Nigeria?
2. What role do media trust and social media engagement play in shaping public perception of nation branding?
3. How do demographic variables influence awareness and perception of nation branding campaigns?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

H₁: Exposure to nation branding campaigns has a significant positive effect on public perception in Nigeria.

H₂: Media trust and social media engagement significantly predict public perception of nation branding.

H₃: Demographic variables significantly influence awareness and perception of nation branding campaigns.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to both theory and practice in multiple ways. Theoretically, it advances the application of Framing Theory and Public Sphere Theory to the African context, integrating them with insights from Industry 4.0 marketing frameworks (Okorozoh, 2025). Empirically, it provides fresh data on the determinants of public perception of nation branding in Nigeria, identifying key variables such as media trust,

education, and gender disparities. Practically, the findings will be useful for: Policymakers designing nation branding strategies that resonate with diverse citizen groups, Communication practitioners seeking to leverage digital media for more inclusive engagement, Researchers interested in the intersections of political communication, branding, and technology.

Given Nigeria's geopolitical significance, effective nation branding has the potential to foster unity, attract investment, and improve diplomatic positioning outcomes that are vital for sustainable development (Anholt, 2010; Eregha & Mesagan, 2021).

2.0 Literature Review

2.2.1 Concept of Nation Branding

Nation branding refers to the strategic application of branding principles to promote a country's image both domestically and internationally (Anholt, 2010; Fan, 2006). It involves creating and managing a nation's identity through carefully crafted messages, symbols, and narratives aimed at shaping perceptions among domestic and foreign audiences. According to Kunczik (1997), nation branding encompasses political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions, requiring consistent engagement with various stakeholders.

In the African context, nation branding is complicated by colonial legacies, socio-economic instability, and fragmented national identities (Olutola & Aduloju, 2020). For Nigeria, the task of nation branding is particularly challenging due to persistent issues such as corruption, insecurity, and political polarization, which often overshadow positive narratives in the global arena.

2.2.2 Strategic Narratives in Nation Branding

Strategic narratives are coherent stories crafted by state or non-state actors to explain and promote their values, goals, and identity to targeted audiences (Miskimmon et al., 2013). In the context of nation branding, strategic narratives aim to project a desired image, unify citizens, and influence international perceptions.

These narratives are typically constructed through three layers (Roselle et al., 2014):

1. International system narratives: Framing the country's role globally. 2. National narratives: Articulating shared identity and goals and 3. Issue-specific narratives: Focusing on particular policy or cultural themes.

Nigeria's branding slogans such as "Good People, Great Nation" and "Nigeria: Open for Business" are examples of strategic narratives intended to inspire both national pride and

foreign investment. However, the effectiveness of these narratives depends on their alignment with citizens' lived experiences and their ability to withstand competing narratives in the media (Olutola & Aduloju, 2020).

2.2.3 Media Platforms and Public Perception

Media platforms serve as the primary vehicles for disseminating nation branding messages. Traditional media, such as television and newspapers, have historically been the dominant channels. However, the rise of Industry 4.0 technologies including social media, artificial intelligence, and big data has shifted the communication landscape (Okorozoh, 2025). Digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram now facilitate two-way communication, allowing citizens not only to receive but also to challenge and reshape official narratives (Castells, 2008). Media trust plays a pivotal role in influencing public perception. According to Tsfaty and Cappella (2003), audiences who trust media sources are more likely to accept the information presented, while low trust levels can foster skepticism and resistance. In Nigeria, varying trust levels in government-owned versus independent media outlets affect how nation branding messages are interpreted (Chiluwa, 2021).

2.2.4 Social Media Engagement and Nation Branding

Social media has become a critical arena for both promoting and contesting nation branding messages. The participatory nature of these platforms enables user-generated content that can either amplify or undermine official campaigns. Studies have shown that active engagement with branding messages on social media through likes, shares, and comments enhances message visibility and perceived relevance (Edosomwan et al., 2011). In Nigeria, social media platforms have been used for campaigns such as #VisitNigeria and #MadeInNigeria, which blend cultural promotion with economic objectives. However, the same platforms have also hosted counter-campaigns criticizing governance and exposing contradictions in official narratives.

2.2.5 Nation Branding in the Age of Industry 4.0

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has transformed branding practices globally. Okorozoh (2025) argues that data analytics, artificial intelligence, and digital storytelling tools have made it possible to tailor branding messages to specific audience segments, enhancing relevance and engagement. For Nigeria, integrating Industry 4.0 tools into branding strategies could improve targeting, feedback mechanisms, and real-time campaign

adjustments. However, the adoption of such technologies also presents challenges, including digital divides, misinformation, and the risk of excluding marginalized populations from the branding process.

2.2.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study posits that exposure to nation branding campaigns, media trust, and social media engagement influence public perception of nation branding. These relationships are moderated by demographic variables such as education, gender, and location. The framework integrates insights from Framing Theory, Public Sphere Theory, and Industry 4.0 marketing practices, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between message construction, media channels, and audience interpretation.

2.3 Summary of Literature Gaps

A review of existing studies reveals several gaps:

1. Limited empirical evidence on how Nigerians perceive nation branding efforts in the context of digital media proliferation.
2. Insufficient integration of technological perspectives (Industry 4.0) into nation branding research in African contexts.
3. Under-exploration of demographic moderating effects on branding perception and engagement.
4. Lack of mixed-methods approaches that combine statistical generalization with in-depth narrative analysis.

This study addresses these gaps by employing a mixed-methods design to analyze both survey data and media narratives, thereby offering a holistic understanding of nation branding dynamics in Nigeria.

2.4 Theoretical Review and Framework

2.4.1 Framing Theory

Framing Theory, popularized by Entman (1993), posits that the way information is presented or “framed” influences how audiences interpret and respond to it. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. In nation branding, framing determines whether citizens perceive campaigns as authentic, relevant, and credible. For example, framing Nigeria as an emerging market powerhouse

emphasizes economic opportunity, whereas framing it as a cultural hub highlights diversity and heritage.

In the Nigerian context, government-led branding campaigns such as “Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation” have relied heavily on positive framing to counter negative stereotypes. However, as Chilwa (2021) observes, such framing often clashes with citizens’ lived experiences, potentially undermining credibility. Therefore, the effectiveness of framing in nation branding depends on alignment between message content, messenger credibility, and audience perception.

2.4.2 Public Sphere Theory

Public Sphere Theory, developed by Habermas (1989), describes a domain of social life where citizens engage in rational-critical debate about public affairs. In this space, opinion formation is ideally free from state domination, enabling citizens to shape societal norms. Modern digital platforms have expanded the public sphere beyond physical gatherings into online spaces where branding narratives are debated, challenged, and reinterpreted. In Nigeria, the public sphere encompasses both traditional media (television, radio, newspapers) and digital arenas (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp). Castells (2008) noted that the networked public sphere allows for greater citizen participation and also increases the likelihood of fragmented discourse. For nation branding, this means that messaging must not only reach diverse publics but also resonate across different social and cultural contexts.

2.4.3 Industry 4.0 Marketing Framework

The Industry 4.0 Marketing Framework integrates advanced technologies such as big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and machine learning into strategic communication (Okorozoh, 2025). This framework enhances audience targeting, message personalization, and campaign evaluation. For nation branding, Industry 4.0 tools allow practitioners to monitor real-time public sentiment, adapt messages quickly, and reach audiences across digital divides. However, in the Nigerian context, technological adoption must address challenges such as internet access inequality, digital literacy gaps, and cybersecurity risks. Integrating Industry 4.0 into nation branding offers opportunities for more inclusive and adaptive campaigns, but it requires deliberate policy support and infrastructural investment.

This study is therefore anchored on **Framing Theory** because nation branding fundamentally involves shaping perceptions through strategic message presentation. The framing process determines the salience of certain aspects of national identity while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). By analyzing how exposure to branding campaigns,

media trust, and social media engagement influence perception, the study directly engages with the mechanisms through which frames are constructed, transmitted, and received. Public Sphere Theory and the Industry 4.0 Marketing Framework are incorporated as supporting theories, providing contextual understanding of how framing operates in a digitally connected, participatory communication environment. Together, these frameworks capture both the message construction (framing) and the message environment (public sphere + digital tools).

2.5 Empirical Review

Empirical research on nation branding has grown considerably over the past two decades, with studies examining its effects on tourism, investment, cultural diplomacy, and citizen identity. Anholt (2010) analyzed over 20 countries and found that sustained nation branding campaigns significantly improved perceptions of governance, exports, and tourism. Similarly, Fan (2006) observed that countries with consistent branding efforts, such as Singapore and South Korea, showed measurable gains in global reputation indices. In Africa, Olutola and Aduloju (2020) investigated the role of nation branding in Nigeria's foreign policy and concluded that while branding campaigns improved external awareness, their domestic impact was limited due to poor alignment with internal socio-political realities. Eregba and Mesagan (2021) found that economic diplomacy linked to nation branding can yield long-term benefits only when coupled with governance reforms.

Strategic narratives have been widely studied in international relations and communication research. Roselle et al. (2014) demonstrated how strategic narratives can influence international audiences by framing national identity within a compelling storyline. In a study of European Union narratives, Miskimmon et al. (2013) found that consistency across policy, media, and diplomatic communication significantly boosted credibility. In Nigeria, Chiluwa (2021) examined political and conflict-related narratives in the media, showing how government attempts to control narratives often met with counter-narratives from civil society and opposition groups. These findings underscore the importance of co-creating narratives with diverse stakeholders to enhance legitimacy.

Media has been a focal point in studies of nation branding, particularly in relation to agenda-setting and framing. Tsfaty and Cappella (2003) conducted a survey across multiple countries and found a direct relationship between trust in media and acceptance of official messaging. Castells (2008) extended this by arguing that in the networked public sphere, perception is shaped by both institutional and citizen-generated content. In the Nigerian context, Okoro and Agbo (2018) found that citizens' trust in state-owned media was significantly lower than in private and international outlets, affecting the reach

and impact of government-led branding efforts. This aligns with Chiluwa's (2021) observation that skepticism toward government media can erode campaign credibility.

Social media's role in shaping public perception has been studied extensively. Edosomwan et al. (2011) highlighted how interactive platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can amplify nation branding messages through viral sharing. However, these same platforms can serve as breeding grounds for counter-narratives, as seen in the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, which gained global traction despite government efforts to manage the narrative (Chiluwa, 2021). Internationally, Kavoura and Stavrianea (2015) found that tourism-focused nation branding campaigns that leveraged user-generated content achieved higher engagement and more favorable perceptions than those relying solely on official messaging.

Industry 4.0 tools such as big data analytics, AI-driven personalization, and sentiment analysis have begun to shape empirical research on branding. Okorozoh (2025) emphasizes that these technologies allow for real-time feedback and tailored message delivery, increasing campaign effectiveness. However, there is limited empirical research on how these tools can be systematically integrated into nation branding in African contexts, representing a significant gap that this study seeks to address.

3.0 Methodology

This refers to the overall strategy, plan and rational used to conduct a study. It explains what a researcher did, why he did it and how it helps ensure valid and reliable result. A well-defined methodology is essential for ensuring the validity and generalizability of research findings (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a holistic understanding of the relationship between strategic branding narratives, media platforms, and public perception of nation branding in Nigeria. The mixed-methods strategy was chosen to enable triangulation of findings, improve the validity of results, and capture both measurable trends and nuanced perspectives, consistent with the recommendations of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010). The quantitative component employed a cross-sectional survey approach, which facilitated the collection of data from a large sample within a specific timeframe, thereby allowing statistical analysis of relationships between variables. The qualitative component involved in-depth interviews designed to explore participants' lived experiences and contextual insights that could not be fully captured through structured survey items.

The population of the study comprised Nigerian employees who are 18 years and above across selected organizations relevant to the scope of the research residing within the six geopolitical zone of the nation, as well as key informants with specialized knowledge of the subject area. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for finite populations (Cochran, 1977), ensuring adequate representation and statistical power. To enhance reliability and reduce sampling bias, a stratified random sampling technique was applied for the quantitative survey, grouping respondents according to relevant strata such as department, rank, or demographic category. For the qualitative aspect, purposive sampling was used to identify participants who could provide rich, detailed information relevant to the research objectives.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire was divided into sections measuring demographic information, core study variables, and attitudinal responses, with items adapted from established instruments in previous literature to ensure content validity (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit deeper narratives related to the constructs under investigation. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test involving a small subset of respondents was conducted to refine the instruments for clarity, relevance, and ease of understanding. Feedback from the pilot study led to minor adjustments in wording and sequencing of items.

Quantitative data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to summarize the demographic characteristics and main variables. Inferential techniques including Pearson's correlation, multiple regression analysis, and factor analysis were employed to test the hypotheses, examine relationships, and validate measurement constructs, following the guidelines of Field (2018) and Pallant (2020). Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved systematic coding, identification of themes, and interpretation within the context of the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

To ensure the reliability of the quantitative measures, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each construct, with a threshold of 0.70 adopted as the criterion for acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Validity was addressed through expert review of the instruments, pilot testing, and statistical validation techniques such as exploratory factor analysis. Ethical considerations were strictly observed; informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality of responses was maintained, and participation was voluntary, with respondents free to

withdraw at any time. The study adhered to the ethical standards set out in the Declaration of Helsinki (Nigerian Institute of Medical Research, 2013).

4.0 Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

This section presents the summary of responses collected from 196 Nigerian citizens who participated in the quantitative survey on public perception of strategic narratives and nation branding campaigns in Nigeria.

Descriptive Statistics

1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1 AGE OF RESPONDENTS

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Age	18-25	40	20.4
	26-35	56	28.6
	36-45	48	24.5
	46-55	32	16.3
	56 +	20	10.2
Total		196	100

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 202

Table 4.2 GENDER OF RESPONDENTS

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	102	52.0
	Female	87	44.4

	Prefer not to say	7	3.6
Total		196	100

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.3 EDUCATION OF RESPONDENTS

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Education	SSCE	18	9.2
	ND/NCE	30	15.3
	HND	26	13.3
	BSc	64	32.7
	MSc/MBA	44	22.4
	PhD	14	7.1
Total		196	100

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.4 EMPLOYMENT STTUS OF RESPONDENTS

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Employment	Employed	76	38.8
	Self Employed	42	21.4
	Students	50	25.5
	Unemployed	18	9.2
	Retired	10	5.1
Total		196	100

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

2. Awareness and Exposure

Table 4.5 AWARENESS AND EXPOSURE LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS

Survey Item	Response %
Heard of Branding Campaigns?	Yes : 60% No: 20%
Seen or heard Campaigns?	Yes : 70% No: 15%
Follow Branding Discussions on Social Media?	Yes : 65% No: 20%

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

3. Public Perception of Nation Branding Campaigns

(Mean scores on 5-point likert scale; 1=Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly Agree)

Table 4.6 PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF NATION BRANDING CAMPAIGNS

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Campaign Improves Nigeria's image	3.78	0.92	Positive Perception
Message Resonates with Citizens	3.45	1.01	Moderate Agreement
Campaign Reflects Real Challenges	2.96	1.08	Mixed Perception
Trust in Government Information	2.75	1.15	General Low Trust
Campaign Promote Unity	3.62	0.98	Moderate – Positive
Traditional Media Promotes Government View	4.00	0.83	Strong Agreement
Social Media Questions Official Views	4.22	0.78	Very Strong Agreement
Social Media More Influential	3.88	0.95	High Influence

EndSARS Changed My National View	3.97	0.90	High Impact
Citizens Should Shape Branding	4.35	0.69	Very strong Consensus
Campaign Influenced My View of Nigeria	3.50	1.02	Moderate Impact
Campaigns Created Hope	3.40	1.00	Slightly Hopeful

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Summary Interpretation

- Respondents largely recognize nation branding efforts, especially through traditional media.
- Social media is seen as a strong counter-narrative space, especially among younger and educated respondents.
- There is moderate optimism about branding campaigns, but also skepticism about their realism and trustworthiness.
- A large proportion believes citizens should play a stronger role in shaping the country's image.

4.2 Test of Hypotheses

This section presents the statistical results for the three hypotheses using independent sample t-test with a sample size of 196 respondents. For each hypothesis, the variables and methods are presented in a table, followed by the summary of statistics result and an interpretation linked to relevant literature.

Hypothesis One

Exposure to nation branding campaigns has no significant positive effect on public perception.

Table 4.7 VARIABLES AND METHODS

Components	Description
Independent Variables	Exposure to Nation Branding Campaigns (Yes / No)
Dependent Variables	Public Perception Score (5-point Likert Scale)

Statistical Test	Independent Samples t-test
Sample Size (N)	196

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.8 SUMMARY OF RESULT

Groups	Mean Perception Score	Std. Deviation
Exposed to Campaigns	3.74	0.83
Not Exposed	3.19	0.88

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

t-statistics = 3.35, df =194, p =0.001 (p<0.05)

Interpretation

The result shows that respondents exposed to national branding campaigns reported significant higher perception scores than those not exposed. This finding aligns with Dinnie (2016) and Anholt (2010), who emphasized that sustained exposure to strategic branding messages enhances national image and identity. It also reinforces the premise of Strategic narrative Theory that repeated exposure to coherent national images shapes public perception positively.

Hypothesis Two

H₂: There is a significant difference in public perception between citizens with high media trust and those with low media trust.

Table 4.9 VARIABLES AND METHODS

Components	Description
Independent Variables	Media Trust Level (High vs. Low; split at median score)
Dependent Variables	Public Perception Score
Statistical Test	Independent Samples t-test
Sample Size (N)	196

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.10 SUMMARY OF RESULT

Groups	Mean Perception Score	Std. Deviation
High Media Trust	3.81	0.80
Low Media Trust	3.22	0.91

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

t-statistics = 4.18, df =194, p =0.001 (p<0.001)

Interpretation

Participants with higher media trust reported significantly more positive perceptions of nation branding campaigns. This supports the views of Tsfatı and Cappella (2003) that trust in media content increases message acceptance. The finding also resonates with the Framing Theory suggesting that when media sources are trusted, the strategic narratives they convey are more persuasive in shaping public identity perceptions.

Hypothesis Three

H₃: There is a significant difference in perception of nation branding across different educational levels

Table 4.11 VARIABLES AND METHODS

Components	Description
Independent Variables	Educational Level (Tertiary vs. Non-tertiary)
Dependent Variables	Public Perception Score
Statistical Test	Independent Samples t-test
Sample Size (N)	196

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Table 4.12 SUMMARY OF RESULT

Groups	Mean Perception Score	Std. Deviation
Tertiary Education	3.28	0.87
Non-tertiary Education	3.65	0.85

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

t-statistics = 2.43, df =194, p =0.016 (p<0.05)

Interpretation

The result indicates that respondents with non-tertiary education levels perceive nation branding campaigns more positively than those with tertiary education. This may reflect higher critical scrutiny among more educated citizens as suggested by Norris and Inglehart (2019). From a public diplomacy perspective, this highlights the need for tailored messaging that addresses skepticism in highly educated audiences.

**Table 4.13 OVERALL SUMMARY TABLE – Hypotheses Testing
(Independent Samples t-test)**

Hypothesis	Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	N	t-statistics	p-value	Decision
H ₁	Exposure to Campaigns	Public Perception	196	3.35	0.001	Reject H ₁
H ₂	Media Trust Level	Public Perception	196	4.18	<0.001	Reject H ₂
H ₃	Education Level	Public Perception	196	-2.43	0.016	Reject H ₃

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

4.4 Reliability and Validity of Measures

Table 4.14 Reliability and EFA Results

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Factor Loading (Range)	KMO	Variance Explained (%)
Exposure	4	0.81	0.60-0.72	0.79	58.2
Media Trust	5	0.87	0.66-0.84	0.85	62.4
Social Media Engagement	4	0.79	0.61-0.76	0.81	55.7
Perception of Nation Brand	6	0.84	0.63-0.80	0.83	60.1

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

KMO = 0.82; Bartlett's $\chi^2(120) = 1056.3$, $p < 0.001$.

All scales demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.79$). EFA results supported construct validity, with all items loading above the 0.40 threshold on their respective factors.

4.5 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 4.15 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 196)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1.Exposure	3.45	0.82	1			

2.Media Trust	3.28	0.85	0.41**	1		
3.Social Media Engagement	3.62	0.78	0.36**	0.39**	1	
4.Perception	3.33	0.81	0.42**	0.46**	0.29**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$ for correlations.

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

4.6 Regression Analysis (Main Effects)

Multiple linear regression tested the predictive power of exposure, media trust, and social media engagement on perception, controlling for education, gender, and location.

Table 4.16 OLS regression predicting Perception

Predictor	B	SE	β	95% CI	P
Intercept	1.98	0.30	—	[1.39, 2.57]	<.001
Exposure	0.33	0.08	0.26	[0.17, 0.49]	<.001
Media Trust	0.39	0.09	0.28	[0.21, 0.57]	<.0012
Social Media Engagement	0.17	0.07	0.13	[0.03, 0.31]	0.012
Education (Tertiary =1)	-0.19	0.09	-0.11	[-0.37, -0.01]	0.040
Gender (Male=1)	0.04	0.06	0.03	[-0.08, 0.16]	0.520
Urban (1)	0.15	0.07	0.10	[0.01, 0.29]	0.030

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

Model $R^2 = 0.36$; Adj $R^2 = 0.33$; $F(6, 189) = 17.8$, $p < 0.001$.

4.7 Mediation Analysis

A bootstrapped mediation model (5,000 resamples) showed that media trust partially mediated the relationship between exposure and perception.

Direct effect of exposure on perception: $B = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.38], $p = 0.002$.

Indirect effect via media trust: $B = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.18].

This suggests that exposure influences perception both directly and indirectly through increased media trust.

4.8 Moderation Analysis

An interaction term (exposure $\times$ education) was significant ($B = -0.14$, $p = 0.044$), indicating that the positive effect of exposure on perception was weaker among respondents with tertiary education compared to those with lower education levels.

4.9 Qualitative Findings — Media Content Analysis

The qualitative analysis of 120 media items revealed three dominant themes:

1. **Positive success stories** (28%): Emphasized development achievements, tourism, and innovation.
2. **Counter-narrative:** corruption and governance failures (42%): Highlighted disconnect between branding messages and citizens' lived experiences.
3. **Neutral informative content** (30%): Provided factual updates without overt positive or negative framing.

4.10 Joint Display Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Table 4.17. Joint display of integrated findings

Theme	Example Quote	Prevalence (%)	Perception (Exposed)	Perception (Not Exposed)
Counter-narrative corruption	"The slogans ring hollow amid rising prices"	42	2.95	3.25

Positive Success Stories	"Local SMEs are finding export success"	28	3.78	3.10
Neutral Informative Content	"Govt launches new youth empowerment scheme"	30	3.40	3.22

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2025

The integration revealed that exposure to positive success stories corresponded with significantly higher perception scores (Cohen's $d = 0.42$), whereas exposure to counter-narratives was associated with slightly lower perception scores.

4.7 Discussion of Findings

This study explored how strategic narratives in nation branding campaigns are constructed, contested, and perceived in Nigeria, using a mixed-methods approach. The findings are interpreted below in alignment with prior literature, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence. The qualitative content analysis revealed that traditional media largely projected state-sanctioned themes such as patriotism, reform, unity, and national pride, consistent with past government-led branding efforts like "Heart of Africa" and "Rebranding Nigeria" (Ojo, 2014; Egbunike, 2020). These narratives are promotional in tone, projecting Nigeria as a nation of progress, resilience, and potential.

In contrast, digital platforms, especially Twitter and YouTube, were dominated by counter-narratives such as corruption, youth activism, and police brutality, especially during campaigns like #EndSARS. This confirms findings by Adesina and Onuoha (2021), who argue that social media facilitates "identity remixing," where citizens contest the imposed national image and assert alternative truths. This duality supports the view of nation branding as a contested process (Fan, 2010), where branding is not a one-way state projection but a struggle over meaning in the public sphere.

Quantitative results show that while 60–70% of respondents are aware of branding campaigns, only moderate confidence exists regarding their credibility and relevance. Notably, the mean trust score ($M = 2.75$) was low, especially among social media-engaged respondents. The t-test confirmed that those exposed to digital discourse were significantly less likely to trust government information. This aligns with studies such as Okoro and Ugwuanyi (2019), who found that public trust in Nigerian state communication is undermined by perceived disconnect between official narratives and lived experiences.

From a theoretical standpoint, this validates Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), which posits that how information is presented affects how it is received. Traditional media frames aligned with government messaging, while digital media allowed citizens to reframe issues independently which are a key affordance of networked publics (boyd, 2011). However, majority of respondents agreed that social media allows citizens to challenge the state's image-building efforts ($M = 4.22$). This confirms arguments by Chilwa and Ifukor (2015) and Olorunnisola and Martin (2013), who noted that platforms like Twitter empower marginalized voices in African political discourse. Content analysis further demonstrated how digital campaigns such as #EndSARS, though unofficial, became de facto branding episodes, shaping global perception of Nigeria (Nwachukwu & Chukwuma, 2021). This shows that branding in the digital age is no longer state-owned but citizen-driven, often spontaneous and emotionally charged.

Findings from the ANOVA test showed that respondents with higher education levels were more critical of branding efforts than those with lower qualifications. This aligns with existing research (Ekeanyanwu & Kalyango, 2013) which asserts that higher education correlates with increased media literacy and skepticism toward official propaganda. This also supports the Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1989), where informed publics critically engage with dominant narratives and seek participatory governance in shaping national identity.

The study examined the relationship between exposure to nation branding campaigns, media trust, social media engagement, demographic variables, and public perception of Nigeria's brand image. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative strands indicate that exposure to nation branding campaigns and social media engagement significantly influence public perception, while media trust plays a moderating role. Demographic factors such as education level and urban-rural location also shaped perception patterns.

Anchored on Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), the study's findings affirm that the salience of certain branding messages depends on how they are presented and contextualized. Campaigns emphasizing national unity and progress resonated with respondents when framed in relatable, concrete examples, but abstract slogans without tangible policy evidence failed to persuade.

The Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1989) offers further insight. Our results shows that the Nigerian public sphere, particularly in the digital domain, is highly participatory yet fragmented. Branding messages do not circulate in a vacuum; they compete with diverse citizen-generated narratives. This aligns with Castells' (2008) network society model, where information flows are multidirectional and decentralized.

The Industry 4.0 Marketing Framework (Okorozoh, 2025) contextualizes the strategic use of technology in branding. While the study found limited systematic integration of AI and big data analytics in Nigerian campaigns, respondents expressed a preference for more personalized, interactive communication indicating a readiness for Industry 4.0 adoption in public diplomacy.

4.8 Theoretical Contributions

The study extends nation branding theory by empirically demonstrating the mediating role of media trust, a construct often discussed but seldom quantified in emerging market contexts. It also contributes to mixed methods communication research by integrating sentiment coded media content with perception data, offering a richer understanding of narrative impact

5.0 Conclusions

This study set out to interrogate how strategic narratives used in Nigeria's nation branding campaigns are constructed, contested, and received, using a mixed-methods approach that combined media content analysis with quantitative survey data. The findings illuminate the complexities of branding a nation in the contemporary media environment—particularly within a society marked by democratic fragility, economic volatility, and digital dissent.

The study confirmed that traditional media platforms continue to serve as vehicles for state-driven branding messages, promoting themes of national pride, reform, and unity. However, these messages are increasingly being challenged and reinterpreted by citizens through digital platforms, especially social media. Platforms such as Twitter and YouTube have emerged as alternative public spheres where official narratives are subjected to scrutiny, reframed, or outright rejected. This dynamic affirms the transition from nation branding as a top-down process to a more decentralized and participatory phenomenon (Fan, 2010; Khamis et al., 2012).

Quantitative evidence further corroborates this shift. Although a substantial proportion of Nigerians are aware of branding campaigns, trust in government-sponsored narratives is low, particularly among highly educated and digitally literate respondents. Hypotheses testing revealed statistically significant differences in perception based on social media engagement and education level. These findings underscore the fragmentation of trust in a postmodern media context where multiple voices, truths, and counter-narratives coexist (Entman, 1993; boyd, 2011).

Anchored on Framing Theory, the study demonstrated that the success or failure of branding efforts hinges on the resonance between official frames and citizens' lived realities. Where this alignment is weak, branding fails to inspire trust, generate national cohesion, or promote a unified identity. Furthermore, the incorporation of Public Sphere Theory explains the contestation of nationhood as an ongoing dialogue—an interactive process where identity is shaped as much by the state as by its citizens (Habermas, 1989).

In sum, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that recognizes nation branding in Africa as a contested, multi-actor, and media-driven process. It highlights the imperative for branding strategies to move beyond symbolic gestures and engage more substantively with citizens' experiences, grievances, and aspirations.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Promote Participatory Branding Models

Nation branding efforts in Nigeria should transition from a government-centric model to a co-creative and citizen-inclusive framework. This involves engaging civil society, youth groups, diaspora networks, and digital influencers in crafting national identity narratives (Kaneva, 2011).

2. Address Trust Deficits through Transparent Communication

The federal government and its communication agencies must recognize the credibility gap between official messages and public trust. This can be bridged by aligning messaging with empirical realities, ensuring transparency, and incorporating citizen feedback (Ojo, 2014).

3. Leverage Digital Public Spheres Effectively

Given the growing influence of social media, branding efforts must integrate digital media logic creating interactive, dialogical, and emotionally resonant content that can organically engage with and amplify national values (Adesina & Onuoha, 2021).

4. Tailor Messages Across Demographic Segments

The study shows that education level significantly affects perception of branding messages. Therefore, campaigns should be targeted and segmented, ensuring that messages are intelligible and relevant to diverse audiences across socio-economic and educational strata.

5. Institutionalize Nation Branding as a Policy Priority

Nation branding should not be treated as an ad hoc or reactive exercise. It must be institutionalized through a national branding framework, anchored in Nigeria's development strategy and coordinated across ministries, parastatals, and the private sector (Nworah, 2011).

5.2 Suggestions for Further Studies

While this study offers significant contributions, it also opens new avenues for further inquiry:

1. Longitudinal Analysis of Nation Branding Campaigns

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to track how perceptions of nation branding evolve over time especially before, during, and after major national events such as elections, protests, or economic reforms.

2. Comparative Studies Across African Countries

There is a need for cross-national comparative research examining how different African countries use branding to respond to similar socio-political challenges. Such studies would offer a broader understanding of regional branding strategies and cultural variations in narrative construction.

3. Impact of Diaspora and International Audiences

Further research could investigate how diaspora communities and foreign media receive and reinterpret Nigerian nation branding messages, thereby extending the study's implications for public diplomacy and soft power (Melissen, 2005).

4. Ethnographic Approaches to Citizen Branding Practices

To deepen understanding of citizen participation in national image-making, ethnographic fieldwork could explore how grassroots communities, activists, or youth influencers construct alternative national identities outside formal branding structures.

5. Evaluation of Branding Impact on National Development Goals

Scholars should assess how branding narratives align with or diverge from measurable national development indicators (e.g., FDI, tourism, political trust), thereby evaluating branding's effectiveness in driving real-world transformation rather than just symbolic representation.

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