

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of ZESCO Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District



Ginah Mudenda¹, Chrine, C. Hapompwe²

^{1,2}Graduate School of Business, University of Zambia
10101 Great East Road Campus, Lusaka, Zambia.

ABSTRACT: This research investigates the efficacy of public relations (PR) in shaping an organisation's corporate image, focusing on Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation Limited (ZESCO), a critical public power utility company in Zambia. Despite ZESCO's pivotal role in generating, transmitting, distributing, and supplying electricity, it faces significant challenges in meeting demand, managing loads, and addressing stakeholder concerns, resulting in a PR crisis threatening its brand reputation. The study objective is to assess public perception of ZESCO and its impact on corporate image, evaluate how ZESCO employs PR to build its image, critically analyse the effectiveness of PR activities, and propose a sustainable PR model for enhancing corporate image. Adopting a positivist paradigm, the research viewed reality as objective and measurable through empirical methods, while the interpretivist paradigm was also incorporated to ensure a balanced view of findings. The positivist approach was supported using quantitative data and systematic analysis to evaluate PR effectiveness at ZESCO. The study targeted about 380 employees from ZESCO's headquarters in Lusaka, with 195 as the ultimate sample size, using Taro Yamane's formulae. Random and purposive sampling techniques were used. Data collection combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, providing a comprehensive view of PR performance.

Public perception of ZESCO's PR efforts was slightly above average, with 46.7% of respondents agreeing that PR was good, but 40% expressed disagreement, highlighting room for improvement. Respondents largely felt that ZESCO's PR activities were good (60%), although 13.3% rated them as poor, and 20% considered them very good. Despite the positive views, 80% agreed that the PR activities were professional, though improvements in resources, training, and technology were necessary to achieve an ideal standard. The study revealed that while 80% of respondents felt the PR activities were well-implemented, 13.3% believed the efforts were poor, indicating that stakeholder expectations were not fully met. Stakeholder engagement was rated "good" by 66.7% of respondents, suggesting that although efforts were in place, there was significant room for improvement in engaging stakeholders effectively. A large portion (93.3%) of respondents recognised that ZESCO's PR efforts faced challenges, including frequent power outages, misinformation, infrastructure issues, and communication barriers during crises such as load shedding. The study concluded that ZESCO's PR environment was not conducive to optimal performance, underscoring the need for improved PR structures and management support. There was strong support for improving ZESCO's PR, with 73.3% of respondents agreeing that PR efforts needed significant enhancement. This highlights the need for a more robust and adaptable PR model to address existing gaps.

Furthermore, 93.3% of respondents acknowledged the potential to enhance ZESCO's image through strategic PR, indicating that such a model could significantly improve its corporate image. These results indicated that while PR was perceived as slightly above average, substantial room for improvement existed. The findings further indicated the ineffectiveness of PR activities. The study concluded that ZESCO's PR environment was not conducive to optimal performance, highlighting the need for improved PR structures and management support. Recommendations include enhancing PR support through increased resources and training, separating PR from Marketing and Corporate Affairs to reduce conflicts, and advocating for professional reforms. Policy implications stress the importance of investing in PR to address stakeholder concerns and improve overall service quality. By implementing these recommendations, ZESCO could significantly enhance its PR effectiveness, bolster its corporate image, and better manage operational challenges. This research underscores the critical role of a robust PR strategy in shaping corporate image and stakeholder relations, offering actionable insights for ZESCO to improve its PR practices and organisational outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Effectiveness, Public Relations Profession, Building Corporate Image, ZESCO, Lusaka.

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) involves managing how information about an organisation is communicated to the public and other stakeholders, including the media. Its primary objectives are to disseminate key company news, maintain a positive brand image, and manage the fallout from adverse events (Hayes & Anderson, 2023). Unlike advertising and marketing, which focus on promoting products to drive sales, PR fosters a positive relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders (Morehouse, 2021). Effective PR strategies are crucial in today's business environment. They help organisations manage reputations, mitigate crises, and build a strong brand identity, which is essential for maintaining a competitive edge (Ilone, 2022). PR enables an organisation to control its image, respond to media inquiries, and address stakeholder concerns during favourable and unfavourable news events. By doing so, companies can reduce public or investor backlash and reinforce their brand's credibility (London et al., 2021).

However, poorly executed PR can exacerbate problems, harming relationships with stakeholders such as investors, employees, the government, and customers. Examples of bad PR include error-laden press releases, exaggerated claims, and insincere marketing spins. For instance, the #DeleteUber campaign in 2017 exemplified how misjudged PR moves can lead to widespread backlash (Zelenovskaya, 2023). Similarly, Dolce and Gabbana faced significant fallout in China due to a controversial ad, highlighting the critical need for culturally sensitive and well-planned PR strategies (AE et al., 2023). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the challenges of unreliable electricity distribution have underscored the importance of effective PR for utility companies like Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation Limited (ZESCO). Poor PR management can undermine an organisation's reputation, as seen in ZESCO's struggle to meet electricity demand, which led to a public relations crisis (Lengalenga, 2020; Kibaki, 2009). The role of PR in building and sustaining a corporate image is paramount. Research indicates that many public organisations in Zambia have undervalued PR, often treating it as a one-way communication channel (Lombe, 2016; Mbewe, 2021). Modern PR practices advocate for two-way communication, emphasising the importance of feedback in shaping public perceptions (Grunig, 1992).

In conclusion, public relations are critical in shaping an organisation's image and reputation. It is about managing information and engaging with stakeholders meaningfully to build trust and loyalty. Organisations must recognise and invest in PR as a strategic tool to navigate the complex landscape of public perception and maintain their competitive advantage.

1.1. Problem Statement

ZESCO Limited, established in 1970 by an act of the Zambian Parliament, is a pivotal entity in the energy sector, owning and operating several hydropower stations with a combined capacity exceeding 2,900 Megawatts. The company manages a vast transmission network of over 11,100 kilometres of high-voltage lines. It is interconnected with the Southern African Power Pool, facilitating electricity distribution within and beyond Zambia's borders (SMART Zambia Institute, 2022). Despite its infrastructure and regional significance, ZESCO faces several challenges. A 2022 SWOT analysis revealed issues in meeting customer expectations, primarily due to limited customer interaction, leading to dissatisfaction and negatively impacting its reputation and profitability (Mbewe, 2020). Common customer complaints include load shedding, staff attitudes, delays in new connections, outdated customer management systems, absence of a service charter, and slow fault resolution. These issues have highlighted the critical role of effective public relations (PR) in managing corporate image. Studies have demonstrated a link between customer satisfaction, repurchase intentions, and loyalty (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Magi & Julander, 1996). However, research on ZESCO has largely focused on customer service and power generation, with little emphasis on management and PR. This study investigates PR's effectiveness in managing and sustaining ZESCO's corporate image to address its negative public perception and improve stakeholder relationships.

1.2. Specific Objectives

- i. To evaluate the current public perception of ZESCO's customer service and public relations efforts, analysing their impact on the company's corporate image.
- ii. To assess the effectiveness of ZESCO's existing public relations activities in building and sustaining its corporate image.
- iii. To develop a strategic public relations model that sustainably enhances ZESCO's corporate image.

2.2. RELATED LITERATURE

The related literature emphasises the critical role of Public Relations (PR) in managing corporate image and customer satisfaction. Key studies highlight how effective PR helps organisations like ZESCO communicate with stakeholders, manage crises, and foster trust, particularly during service disruptions. Challenges such as limited resources and the need for specialised PR skills are noted, impacting the effectiveness of strategies. The importance of internal PR in aligning employees with company values and engaging in community-focused Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives is also underscored. Overall, strategic PR is essential for

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

improving ZESCO's customer service, rebuilding trust, and enhancing its corporate image in the Lusaka District. The related literature underscores the critical role of Public Relations (PR) in managing corporate image, customer satisfaction, and crisis management. Effective PR helps organisations like ZESCO communicate with stakeholders, manage reputational risks, and foster trust, especially during service disruptions. It enables organisations to respond to public concerns and align their messages with stakeholder expectations, reinforcing credibility and strengthening relationships (Gregory & Willis, 2023). However, challenges such as limited resources and a lack of specialised PR skills hinder the full potential of these strategies, as noted by Olayinka (2023) and Jacqueline Siwale et al. (2023).

In the context of customer satisfaction, ZESCO faces significant challenges, including load shedding and delayed fault resolution, which negatively impact its reputation. Mbewe (2020) highlights the vital link between customer service and corporate image, suggesting that operational inefficiencies can erode trust. By addressing customer concerns and improving service delivery, ZESCO could mitigate reputational damage and enhance relationships with stakeholders. This aligns with the broader understanding that consistent, efficient customer service is fundamental to maintaining a positive corporate image and fostering customer loyalty. Crisis management, too, plays a pivotal role in reputation preservation. The example of Richard Branson's empathetic response to the Virgin Galactic crash, as discussed by Brown (2015), shows that effective PR during crises can sustain public trust. Similarly, ZESCO could strengthen its crisis management strategies through improved PR practices to maintain a positive corporate image during service disruptions.

The literature also emphasises the importance of community engagement and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Initiatives like IKEA's #StayHome campaign and the Faroe Islands' PR campaign illustrate how CSR efforts can enhance a company's public perception (Le, 2022; Zen Media, 2023). For ZESCO, embracing such community-focused initiatives could be instrumental in improving its image.

Additionally, internal PR plays a crucial role in aligning employees with organisational values, making them advocates for the company. Marshall Communications (2022) emphasises the importance of internal communication in enhancing customer service and overall corporate image, suggesting that ZESCO could benefit from a more engaged workforce.

Finally, the strategic role of PR in corporate success is highlighted by Bailey (2018) and Prince et al. University (2021), who emphasise PR's role in reputation management, trust-building, and customer loyalty. These insights suggest that transparent, consistent communication is vital for ZESCO to rebuild customer trust and improve its long-term reputation.

In conclusion, the literature provides a comprehensive foundation for evaluating ZESCO's PR strategies and their impact on customer service and corporate image. The findings point to significant room for improvement in ZESCO's PR efforts, particularly in crisis management, internal communication, and community engagement. By adopting a more strategic, transparent approach to PR, ZESCO can enhance its corporate image, rebuild trust, and strengthen relationships with stakeholders in the Lusaka District.

2.1.1 Public PR Perception and Organisation's Corporate Image

Evaluating the current public perception of ZESCO's customer service and public relations efforts, is essential to examine the interplay between customer satisfaction and corporate image, as highlighted by Mbewe (2020). Mbewe's study identifies how load shedding and delayed fault resolution have adversely affected ZESCO's reputation, emphasising the direct correlation between customer service quality and public perception. Furthermore, Gregory and Willis (2023) underscore the importance of effective PR in a digitally connected world, where managing stakeholder communication is crucial for maintaining a positive corporate image. As discussed by Brown (2015), the role of PR in crisis management further illustrates that strategic and empathetic responses to service disruptions can sustain trust and confidence among stakeholders. This literature collectively suggests that ZESCO's customer service and PR efforts significantly influence its corporate image, making it imperative to assess how current strategies impact public perception and identify areas for improvement.

2.1.2 Effectiveness of PR Activities in Building Corporate Image

Assessing the effectiveness of ZESCO's existing public relations activities in building and sustaining its corporate image is essential to consider the role of internal and external PR strategies. Marshall Communications (2022) emphasises the value of internal PR in aligning employees with organisational values, suggesting that ZESCO can enhance its corporate image by fostering employee engagement and advocacy. Additionally, examples from the Faroe Islands and IKEA's #StayHome campaign (Le, 2022; Zen Media, 2023) highlight how effective PR and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives can positively influence public perception. These campaigns demonstrate that community engagement and responsible corporate practices enhance corporate image. Moreover, Prince et al. University (2021) highlights the strategic role of PR in monitoring public attitudes and strengthening communication channels, reinforcing the idea that ZESCO's PR efforts must be well-aligned with stakeholder expectations to ensure long-term success. The literature suggests that while ZESCO's current PR activities offer some positive impacts, there is potential for further refinement in their strategies to improve the company's overall corporate image.

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

2.1.3 PR Model for Corporate Image Building

It is essential to incorporate the best practices from successful PR campaigns to develop a strategic public relations model that can sustainably enhance ZESCO's corporate image. Gregory and Willis (2023) stress the importance of effective communication with stakeholders in a digitally connected world where transparency and consistent messaging are key. Additionally, the internal PR strategies discussed by Marshall Communications (2022) highlight the role of aligning employees with organisational values, turning them into advocates. Combining these elements with community engagement and CSR efforts, as seen in the Faroe Islands and IKEA's initiatives (Le, 2022; Zen Media, 2023), offers a comprehensive approach. Such a model would ensure that ZESCO's PR strategies are reactive to crises and proactive in building long-term trust and fostering positive relationships with internal and external stakeholders.

2.2 Gap in Literature

The literature on public relations (PR) reveals several gaps that hinder a comprehensive understanding of its impact on corporate performance, customer satisfaction, corporate image, and customer experience. Notably, many studies focus on specific sectors or geographic regions, limiting the generalizability of their findings. For example, research like Bassey (2016) examines PR's impact on corporate performance within the Nigerian banking industry, which restricts broader applicability. Additionally, PR strategies discussed in works such as Bhattacharya (2023) lack industry-specific case studies that could provide more targeted guidance. Moreover, much of the literature emphasises theoretical benefits of PR without empirical data or quantitative metrics to validate these claims, as seen in studies on corporate image (Ikwaugwu, 2019) and customer experience (Martin, 2022). Another gap is the narrow focus of some research, like Kayombo and Parhik (2023) on ZESCO's social media impact within specific regions, which limits the scope for broader customer insights. Furthermore, challenges like resource limitations within PR teams (PR Moment, 2024) are often highlighted but lack actionable solutions. Additionally, there is a need for greater integration of digital tools and social relevance in PR strategies to remain competitive in the digital age. As organisations increasingly rely on digital platforms for stakeholder engagement, PR methods must evolve to include social media, influencer collaborations, and real-time communication strategies. Finally, the education of PR professionals must adapt to incorporate emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML), enabling practitioners to better predict trends and refine communication strategies. Closing these gaps will enhance the strategic role of PR and its effectiveness in building a positive corporate image.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws on several key communication theories to explore the role of media in shaping public perception and its impact on corporate image in Zambia. The primary theoretical framework is the agenda-setting theory (AST), which underscores the influence of the media in shaping public awareness and prioritising specific issues (Temoney, 2008). PR strategies leverage this media power to enhance understanding and generate interest, recognising the media as a central stakeholder. AST also highlights the importance of issue framing, where the media's portrayal of issues—through attention and prominence—shapes public perception. Lengalenga (2022) extends AST's application to corporate reputation and government policy, emphasising its role in guiding public opinion by selecting and framing issues. This study anticipates that AST will improve the public's view of companies through strategic PR.

In addition, the study incorporates the Framing Theory, which explains how media not only directs attention to certain issues but also influences how these issues are interpreted. According to recent research, media framing significantly impacts how individuals perceive issues and understand their broader context (Valkenburg et al., 2020). In PR, framing can influence public perception by highlighting specific aspects of an issue to shape its interpretation. The study also incorporates the Two-Step Flow Theory, which remains pertinent, particularly in the digital age, where social media influencers act as key opinion leaders. Recent studies reaffirm that media influence flows through intermediaries who interpret and disseminate messages within their communities (Liu et al., 2020), underlining the importance of engaging influencers in PR to amplify messages and impact larger audiences.

Furthermore, the Uses and Gratifications Theory is relevant, particularly with the rise of digital media. This theory, incorporated into the study, suggests that audiences actively choose media content to satisfy needs such as social connection, entertainment, or information (Ruggiero, 2021). In PR, understanding these motivations is crucial for targeting audiences and shaping messages that resonate with specific groups. Finally, the study applies Grunig's Excellence Theory, which provides a framework for understanding public relations as an organisation's strategic function. Recent studies emphasise how PR fosters two-way symmetrical communication, leading to more effective stakeholder relationships and improved organisational reputation (Smith, 2020). This aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory's principles by highlighting PR's proactive role in shaping media narratives and influencing public opinion.

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Framework illustrates what one expects to find through research, including how the variables being considered might relate to each other (Mtuli, 2005). The problems faced by stakeholders and the failure of the company to address them were primary reasons efforts to enhance a company's corporate image could be inadequate. If these factors were not discussed, a poor company public image would inevitably result. Therefore, stakeholders' problems are independent variables as they are constant and do not depend on other things changing. However, how the organisation's PR department addresses the problems is a dependent variable as it depends on whether the workplace is supportive of PR work.

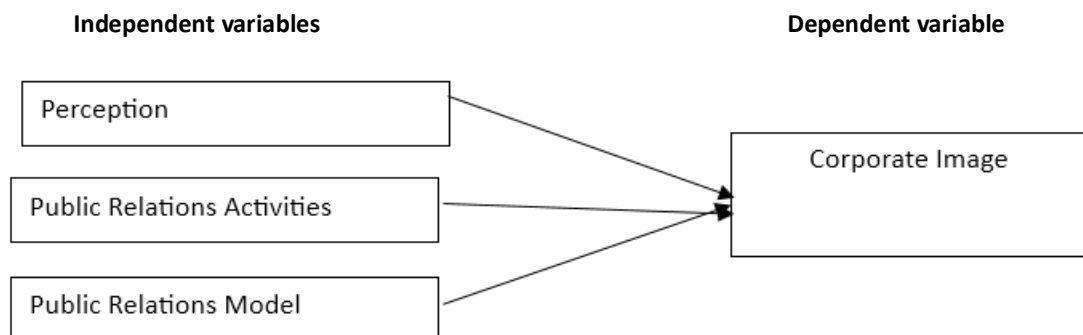


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
 Source: Researcher’s Construction (2024)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the effectiveness of ZESCO's public relations (PR) in shaping its corporate image. The quantitative component involved analysing numerical data to identify patterns and correlations, while the qualitative component, through open-ended interviews, provided more profound insights into stakeholder perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). An exploratory research design was used to uncover key themes and patterns in the data (Saunders et al., 2019). Adopting a positivist paradigm, the study focused on observable and measurable data, ensuring objectivity and empirical verification (Guba & Lincoln, 2018). Secondary data from textbooks, journals, and case studies complemented the primary data, offering a comprehensive understanding of ZESCO's PR strategies.

In this study, the Taro-Yamane statistical sampling method was chosen to represent all public categories accurately. This method was adopted to enhance the precision and reliability of the study's findings across diverse population segments. It is denoted thus: $n = N$

$$1+N(e)^2$$

Where

n = The sample size

N = The study population

E = Level of significance or (limit of tolerable error) i.e. 0.05

1 = Unity (a constant)

The focus of our study is ZESCO, which has 2,478 employees across its branches nationwide (Datanyze, 2023; Matomola, 2021). The study population encompassed male and female ZESCO staff, specifically the 380 employees stationed at the headquarters in Lusaka. These were from the PR, engineering, customer service, corporate affairs, human resources, and administration departments.

N (population size) = 380

E = Level of significance or (limit of tolerable error) i.e. 0.05

$$n = \frac{380}{1 + 380x(0.5)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{380}{1 + 380x(0.0025)}$$

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

$$n = \frac{380}{1.95}$$
$$n = 194.87$$

Rounding up to the nearest whole number, the estimated sample size (n) was approximately 195. Therefore, according to the Yamane formula, the researcher needed a sample size of about 195 respondents for the study, considering the population of 380 ZESCO employees at the headquarters in Lusaka.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1.1 Whether PR at ZESCO is Excellent

There were 13 (6.7%) respondents who Strongly Disagreed with this view, 78 (40.0%) who Disagreed, 39 (20.0%) who were Neutral, 91 (46.7%) who indicated Agreed, and 39 (20%) who Strongly Agreed. Thus, PR at ZESCO was slightly above average in terms of excellence. It should also be noted that close to 50% (91) of the respondents held a contrary view, pointing to the need for improvement.

On the other hand, 26 (13.3%) of the respondents indicated that ZESCO PR was not Good, 13 (6.7%) was Neutral and 117 (60.0%) indicated it was Good and 39 (20.0%) indicated Very Good. And 78 (40.0%) of the respondents Disagreed with the notion that ZESCO PR was on Average, 98 (50.3%) indicated Average. This showed that PR at ZESCO was good, though there was a felt need for improvement as indicated by a third of the respondents.

4.1.2 Whether PR activities at ZESCO are professional

There were 13 (6.7%) of the respondents who disagreed with the view that PR practitioners at ZESCO were professional, while 91 (46.7%) Agreed and 65 (37.3%) Strongly Agreed. This showed that PR officers at ZESCO were professional. However, the majority view (80.0%) also indicated that the corporation had not yet reached ideal situation, which could be due to limited institutional capacity such as further training, access to modern equipment and technology, transport, among needs of the officers.

4.1.3 Whether PR activities at ZESCO are well organized

There were 13 (6.7%) of the respondents who Disagreed with the view that activities were organized, 52 (26.7%) were Neutral, 91 (46.7%) Agreed and 39 (20%) Strongly Agreed. This showed that the PR department was trying to do its best, but there appeared some limitations in its work.

4.1.4 Whether PR Department at ZESCO engaged other sections in planning

There were 52 (26.7%) who Disagreed with the view that the PR department cooperated with other departments in planning its activities, while 104 (53.3%) Agreed and 39 (20%) Strongly Agreed. This showed that the level of engagement was not at the optimum as PR left some departments out of its planning process.

4.1.5 Whether Stakeholders are happy with ZESCO's PR

A total of 39 (20.0%) strongly Disagreed with this notion, 13 (6.7%) Disagreed, 52 (26.7%) were Neutral, 65 (33.3%) Agreed and 26 (13.3%) Strongly Agreed. This showed that stakeholder engagement was below average at 46.6% and called for more efforts to address the challenge.

4.1.6 Whether PR at ZESCO Faced challenges

Only 13 (6.7%) Strongly Disagreed with this notion while 182 (93.3%) Agreed. It was clear PR at ZESCO experienced challenges. And 13 (6.7%) of the respondents indicated that management did not take measures to address challenges faced by the PR department, while 182 (93.3%) Agreed that steps had been taken to tackle the problems. This was an indication that management had been trying to help the PR department overcome challenges it was facing in its work. But there could have been some limitations such as budget cuts and downsizing of PR activities.

The Director Corporate Affairs (DCA) and Public Relations Manager (PRM) indicated in an interview that there were a number of PR activities undertaken at the corporation. Below were their responses:

- i. **Development and Implementation of PR Strategy:** *The primary responsibility is to develop and implement the ZESCO's PR strategy to gain understanding and support for the corporation's vision and growth strategies.*
- i. **Brand Reputation Management:** *to ensures that ZESCO projects a positive image through consistent and responsible behaviour in its service delivery, interactions with customers, and corporate activities. Emphasis in on ensuring ZESCO's reputation is built on its legacy, customer feedback, and overall conduct.*
- ii. **Corporate Social Investment (CSI):** *ZESCO invests in communities by building schools, supporting sports, and running academies to develop local talent. These efforts help the company gain a social license to operate in these communities.*

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

- iii. **Media Relationship Management:** *Company engages with media gatekeepers like editors to ensure accurate reporting. The PR team organizes field tours and training for journalists to improve their understanding of the electricity sector.*
- iv. **Efficient Query Management:** *The PR team manages media queries efficiently to ensure that the correct and verified information is disseminated.*
- v. **Internal and External Communication:** *Stresses the importance of internal communication within ZESCO to keep employees informed and prevent damaging leaks. The company uses platforms like email bulletins and a monthly newsletter to communicate with employees.*

The DCA and PRM also acknowledged that the company faced many communication challenges with stakeholders. For instance, during crises such as load shedding due to water shortages in reservoirs, maintenance on old power lines and disruption of infrastructure due to bad rainy weather, the company was under pressure to communicate to the public to understand.

The PRM said in an interview:

Frequent power outages or load shedding, often due to insufficient power generation capacity or infrastructure issues, lead to public frustration. The PR unit must manage the backlash from consumers and stakeholders while providing timely and accurate information.

ZESCO had to deal with vandalism on its infrastructure, which hindered its customers' regular supply of quality, reliable, and safe electricity. The respondents indicated that there were close to 200 cases of vandalism every month and an average net loss of about K5 million kwacha. Thus, it has continued to raise awareness of the need to protect power infrastructure by engaging in a number of Arts Associations. It was also indicated that ZESCO's reputation was at stake following complaints about billing, infrastructure failures, and perceived inefficiency.

Then, there was the problem of fake news and misinformation, which the PR team had to deal with to ensure that the company's side of the story was accurately represented to internal and external audiences in a timely manner. Internal staff also served as brand ambassadors for the company and required complete information to do that effectively. ZESCO also respected its social license to operate and the approval and acceptance of company behaviour by local communities and the public. Failure to secure this can lead to significant operational challenges, as seen in the example of First Quantum Minerals in Panama, where failure to comply with local demands led to the closure of operations.

On meeting its statutory obligations, the Director CA and PRM admitted pressure from the government and the Energy Regulation Board (ERB): As a state-owned enterprise, ZESCO was under constant scrutiny from government entities and regulators. Balancing government directives with public expectations proved challenging for the PR unit. This partly pointed to regular SMS updates on mobile phones whenever new tariffs were proposed. For instance, a recent ZESCO alert on proposed new tariffs emphasises that households consuming less than 200 watts in a month, schools, hospitals and similar service public and private facilities will not be affected by the new tariffs when implemented. The company and ERB were also open to providing the public with further information on the proposed tariffs. In the past, blanket statements were shared, and there was no room for direct engagement between ZESCO and the public.

It was also found that the digitisation of PR at ZESCO needed to be improved. Citing the use of social media for quick communication, it was reported that the PR unit needed to manage a 24/7 news cycle and respond promptly to public queries and complaints, unlike what was obtained now. Following the change of government in August 2021, policy changes also affected ZESCO's PR in carefully communicating new developments to the public. The PR unit must simplify complex information to gain public understanding and trust.

4.1.7 Whether PR at ZESCO Needed Improvement

A total of 52 (26.7%) of the respondents Disagreed with this view, while 143 (73.3%) Agreed. It was clear the PR department needed to improve its operations. PR was a dynamic profession and needed to keep abreast with changing times and stakeholder needs and expectations.

On stakeholder engagement, 65 (33.3%) of the respondents indicated it was Poor and 130 (66.7%) indicated Good. This showed that the company had more work to do to improve its image. Besides, there were 52 (26.7%) respondents who also indicated that management support to PR activities at ZESCO was Poor, 78 (40%) held a Neutral view, 65 (33.3%) indicated Good. This showed that support was on average and there was need for improvement.

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

4.3. Whether it was possible for ZESCO to design an Effective PR Model that can be used to earn a Better and Sustainable Corporate Image

A total of 169 (86.7%) responded in the affirmative to the question and 26 (13.3%) held a contrary view. This was an indication that there was a strongly felt need for a new model to help the company improve its corporate image.

Table 1: Whether working environment at ZESCO was friendly for PR

Respondents' views	Number of Respondents by Gender		Total (f)
	F	M	
YES	41	37	78 (40%)
NEUTRAL	17	22	39 (20%)
NO	20	58	78 (40%)
Total	78	117	195 (100%)

Source: Field Data (2024)

Public Perception and Customer Service Management: ZESCO faced significant challenges in managing customer relations, mainly due to external factors such as load shedding and maintenance issues. The PR department struggled to manage negative media coverage and misinformation, highlighting the need for better communication strategies. Bhattacharya (2023) emphasised the importance of clear communication in addressing customer concerns, but ZESCO's limited resources hindered the effectiveness of these efforts.

Use of PR to Build Corporate Image: ZESCO's PR efforts, particularly in digital media, were found to be lacking. Despite the importance of an interactive social media presence, ZESCO failed to keep up with the 24/7 news cycle, and resource constraints further limited its PR capacity. The company also faced challenges with regulatory compliance and could not address stakeholder concerns transparently, as seen in the rejection of tariff adjustments by the ERB. Furthermore, the lack of modern digital tools, such as AI for data analysis and campaign management, contributed to inefficiencies in PR activities.

PR Activities to Sustain Corporate Image: ZESCO engaged in various PR activities, including media engagement and direct interaction with stakeholders. However, a lack of proactive support from senior management, especially during crises, affected the company's ability to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders. The working environment at ZESCO was also found to be inadequate for supporting effective PR activities, with insufficient support for the PR team from top management.

Effective PR Model for Sustainable Corporate Image: The study found that ZESCO relied on one-way communication, which is less effective than the two-way symmetrical model. This model emphasises open dialogue and mutual understanding between an organisation and its stakeholders. Adopting this model, with more interactive and responsive communication, would enhance ZESCO's PR efforts and contribute to a more sustainable corporate image.

In conclusion, ZESCO's PR activities face several challenges, including resource limitations, inadequate use of digital tools, and a lack of proactive engagement from management. Adopting a two-way communication model could significantly improve stakeholder relations and help the company build a more sustainable and positive corporate image.

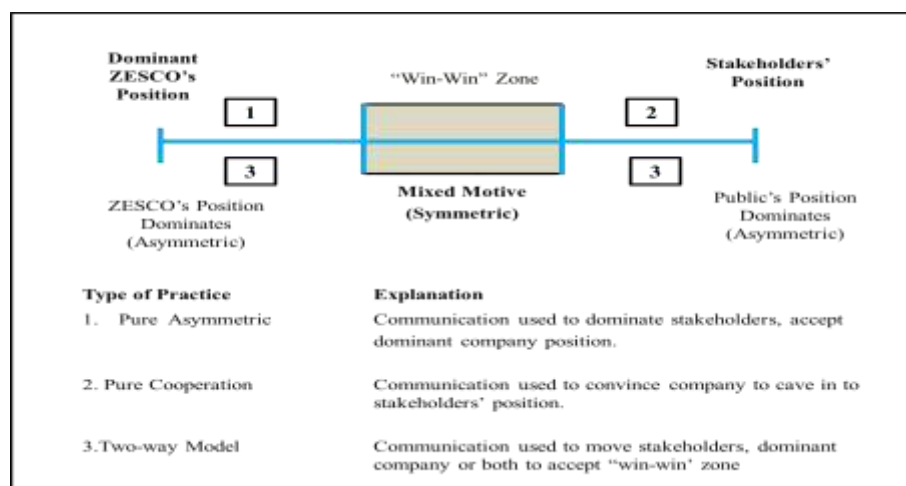


Figure 2 Two-Way Asymmetric Model

Source: Bassey (2016).

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

ZESCO's Public Relations (PR) activities have been evaluated across several key categories to gauge their effectiveness and areas for improvement. Findings revealed varied perceptions of ZESCO's PR effectiveness: 6.7% strongly disagreed, 40% disagreed, 20% were neutral, 46.7% agreed, and 20% strongly agreed with the view of PR excellence.

5.1 Public's PR Perception and Organisation's Corporate Image

The study of ZESCO's Public Relations (PR) image revealed mixed public perceptions. While some respondents rated the company's PR positively, others pointed out issues like frequent power outages and misinformation that hurt ZESCO's corporate image. Stakeholder engagement was identified as an area for improvement, with many respondents calling for better interaction to satisfy customers. The role of PR in the current competitive business environment is crucial, as organisations must effectively engage with stakeholders and strengthen their corporate image (Gregory & Willis, 2023). PR helps manage online presence, build credibility, and address customer concerns, especially through social media. Transparency and ethical communication are vital in fostering trust, particularly during crises when reputation management is critical.

PR also plays a crucial role internally by engaging employees, aligning them with organisational values, and positioning them as advocates. The research underscores PR's importance in crisis response and employee engagement, which enhances organisational legitimacy (Marshall Communications, 2022). Crafting resonant narratives and leveraging third-party endorsements reinforce corporate credibility and image. Consistent communication during crises and community engagement are key to building trust. Additionally, PR involves publicity and establishing mutually beneficial relationships, brand loyalty, and reputation management (Bailey, 2018). Despite challenges like limited budgets, structured PR efforts are necessary for fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty (Olayinka, 2023; Siwale et al., 2023).

Mweemba et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of consistent branding for maintaining recognition and impact. In conclusion, as Prince et al. (2021) noted, effective PR requires ongoing, strategic efforts to monitor public attitudes, build relationships, and enhance communication channels. PR is indispensable in maintaining credibility and sustaining success in today's business landscape, as shown in the ZESCO case study.

5.2 Effectiveness of PR Activities in Building Corporate Image

ZESCO's public relations (PR) efforts were assessed for effectiveness, particularly in brand reputation management and media relations. The study found that while respondents recognised the professionalism and organisation of ZESCO's PR activities, many suggested areas for improvement. Key challenges, such as regulatory pressures and vandalism, were seen as obstacles to maintaining a positive corporate image, pointing to the need for a more proactive approach to PR. A similar situation occurred in the UK in 2015 when British dairy farmers protested the income they received from Morrison's supermarkets, leading to viral videos and public dissatisfaction. In response, Morrison introduced a 'Milk for Farmers' range, with a 23p price increase to support farmers, which gained positive public relations and prompted other supermarkets to follow suit, securing Morrison's first-mover advantage (Brown, 2015; Scully, 2015).

In the United States, Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic faced a significant setback in 2013 when a test flight resulted in the death of a pilot. Branson's empathetic response, including a visit to the crash site and heartfelt statements on social media, positively shaped public perception and helped sustain confidence in the company (Brown, 2015). In Zambia, Nsokolo (2020) identified areas for improvement in the hospitality industry's PR, citing limited resources, a lack of specialized PR skills, and challenges adapting strategies to the local context. Strengthening PR practices in this sector, including investing in PR training and tailored strategies, could enhance the industry's public image and overall success. Research by Emmanuel et al. (2021) highlighted challenges in implementing effective PR strategies, particularly for smaller organisations with limited resources. The study emphasised the need for skilled PR professionals and improved internet connectivity, crucial for successful PR activities, especially in rural areas where media outreach and digital adoption are often limited. Lombe (2016) uncovered negative media coverage in Zambia's healthcare sector, including legal cases against hospitals for patient mistreatment and negligence. These reports highlighted significant challenges in Zambia's healthcare PR landscape, illustrating the importance of effective communication to manage public perception in times of crisis.

5.3 PR Model for Corporate Image Building

The study advocates adopting a two-way symmetrical communication model for ZESCO, emphasising open dialogue and mutual understanding between the company and its stakeholders. This model addresses the limitations of the current one-way communication approach by promoting interactive platforms like social media and timely responses to stakeholder concerns. By fostering transparent and balanced communication, it aims to build stronger stakeholder relations and sustainably improve ZESCO's

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

corporate image. Corporate identity is central to distinguishing an organisation from competitors and extends beyond visual elements such as logos, colours, and graphics. It encompasses the company's vision, mission, core values, culture, governance, and business goals (Ikwuagwu, 2019). A consistent and coherent corporate identity is vital for maintaining trust and confidence among stakeholders. Aligning corporate identity with corporate image is essential, as corporate image reflects public perception, which must be managed effectively to shape how the company is viewed by the public (ibid).

A company's success depends heavily on its corporate image, influencing customer loyalty. Loyalty is built through consistent positive experiences, including excellent customer service, alignment with brand values, and product quality. Even negative experiences can be overcome if the company addresses them effectively, reinforcing customer trust (Ikwuagwu, 2019; Qualtrics, 2023). Customer loyalty is cost-effective, as retaining customers is significantly cheaper than acquiring new ones, making it a particularly advantageous strategy during economic challenges (Peek, 2023). A positive corporate image is essential for organisational survival in today's competitive market. It helps cultivate a strong market presence, attracting customers, employees, and other stakeholders. Effective public relations strategies are crucial in shaping this image, creating positive brand impressions, and enhancing profitability (Ikwuagwu, 2019; Qualtrics, 2023).

6.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study on ZESCO's public relations (PR) effectiveness reveals a company at a pivotal juncture, with ample room for improvement in public perception, PR activities, and strategic communication practices. Public perception of ZESCO's PR efforts is mixed, with nearly half of respondents expressing dissatisfaction, primarily due to ongoing issues such as power outages and misinformation. While 46.7% of respondents view ZESCO's PR as slightly above average, the remaining 40% signal a need for substantial improvement, pointing to a disconnect between ZESCO's corporate intentions and public perception. To address this, ZESCO must evolve its approach to build a more trusted and reliable image.

Regarding the effectiveness of ZESCO's PR activities, the study highlights both strengths and significant gaps. While 80% of respondents recognised the professionalism of ZESCO's PR efforts, many felt stakeholder engagement and communication during crises still fell short. The study identifies critical challenges, such as power outages, infrastructure issues, and the inability to manage misinformation, contributing to a less-than-ideal public image effectively. These issues underscore the necessity of a more interactive and adaptive PR strategy that responds swiftly to customer concerns and aligns more closely with stakeholder expectations.

The study advocates for the adoption of a two-way symmetrical communication model to address these shortcomings. This model, which emphasises open dialogue, transparency, and mutual understanding, will provide ZESCO with the tools to engage stakeholders more effectively and foster stronger, more trusting relationships. By improving internal communication, enhancing crisis response strategies, and embracing digital communication platforms, ZESCO can reshape its image, ensuring that its corporate identity aligns more closely with public perception.

Ultimately, ZESCO's PR efforts hold immense potential to transform its corporate image and public relations activities. By committing to adopting a more proactive, transparent, and strategic approach to PR, ZESCO can rebuild trust, create stronger stakeholder relationships, and position itself for long-term success. The time for change is now, and the opportunity to turn these challenges into a competitive advantage is within ZESCO's reach.

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Enhancing ZESCO's Public Image:** To improve its public image, ZESCO should allocate adequate resources to the PR department. This includes investing in specialised training programs for PR staff to enhance their skills and knowledge and acquiring modern equipment and technology to streamline PR strategies and improve overall effectiveness. Such investments will enable the PR department to implement more targeted and impactful initiatives, fostering a more positive corporate image.
- 2. Streamlining PR Activities:** ZESCO should consider establishing an independent PR department separate from Marketing and Corporate Affairs. This separation would help streamline PR activities, reduce role overlap, and eliminate barriers to effective communication. An autonomous PR department would focus solely on managing the company's public image and stakeholder relationships, leading to more cohesive and effective PR efforts.
- 3. Adopting a Symmetrical Communication Model:** ZESCO should adopt a two-way symmetrical communication model to foster better stakeholder engagement. This involves developing a platform with real-time communication tools, surveys, and polls to engage stakeholders actively. By encouraging transparent dialogue and incorporating stakeholder feedback into decision-making processes, ZESCO can sustainably build trust and improve its corporate image. This model ensures stakeholders feel heard and valued, strengthening relationships and enhancing their reputation.

Evaluating the Impact of Public Relations on Corporate Image: A Case Study of Zesco Limited's Customer Service and Image-Building Strategies in Lusaka District.

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