

Assessment of the Adherence to Public Relations Code of Ethics by Practitioners in Lagos State

Chuddy Christian Oduenyi¹, Etumnu Emeka Williams²

¹School of Media and Communication, Pan Atlantic University, Lagos

²Department of Mass Communication, Imo State University, Owerri

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated practitioners' adherence to Lagos State, Nigeria's public relations code of ethics. The study was anchored on the two-way symmetrical model of PR and absolutist ethical theory. The investigation adopted an in-depth interview research method. The researchers reached out to 10 PR practitioners in Lagos. The researchers utilized the purposive sampling technique, and the interview guide was used as the data collection instrument. It was revealed that PR practitioners are vastly knowledgeable about the existing code of ethics governing PR practices in Lagos state and, by extension, Nigeria. Also, the result indicated that there is a low level of adherence to the code of ethics. It was recommended that strict regulatory principles and actions be enforced on erring PR practitioners in Lagos state to deter others from breaking or twisting the code of ethics of PR practices and serve their agenda.

Keywords: *public relations, ethical practices, PR practitioners, professional ethics, code of conduct.*

INTRODUCTION

Adherence to ethical codes of practice is essential for maintaining the reputation and credibility of PR practitioners and the organizations they represent (Milovan et al, 2023). By upholding ethical standards, PR professionals are committed to honesty, transparency, and fairness in their communication practices (Boyton, 2025). This enhances the credibility of their messages and strengthens their relationships with stakeholders, leading to more effective communication outcomes and better organizational outcomes (Hou & Johnston, 2024).

Public relations practitioners must adhere to ethical principles that guide their interactions with clients, media, and the public (Wachid, et al., 2024). These principles include truthfulness, transparency, professional integrity, professional competence, loyalty and social responsibility (Stanić, 2020). However, there have been instances where practitioners have been found to engage in unethical practices such as misleading information, paid endorsements, and biased media coverage (Igbekele, 2012). For

example, suppose an organization has a reputation damage issue. In that case, a public relations officer must be honest and transparent in handling such an issue.

As a public relations officer, one is expected to exhibit high competence and professionalism as expected by the code of professional ethics, but are they living up to the expectation? This raises questions about how much practitioners adhere to the ethical code of practice in their day-to-day activities.

Research studies have been conducted to assess the ethical behavior of public relations practitioners, with mixed results (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008). While some studies have found high levels of adherence to ethical standards, others have reported instances of ethical lapses (Bowen & Stacks, 2013). This indicates a need for more comprehensive research to evaluate the ethical practices of practitioners across different sectors and regions (Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015).

In Nigeria, public relations has seen significant growth and development in recent years, with many organizations recognizing the importance of effective communication and reputation management. The Public Relations Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN) is the umbrella body for PR consultancy firms in the country (Idid & Arandas, 2016). It has been instrumental in promoting ethical standards and professional conduct among its members. PRCAN has a code of ethics that outlines the expected behavior and practices of PR practitioners in Nigeria, including guidelines on transparency, honesty, and respect for stakeholders (Nnolim et al., 2014).

With the rise of social media and online news platforms, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between accurate information and false narratives (Bilodeau & Khalid, 2024). This poses a significant threat to the reputation of individuals and organizations, making it crucial for professionals to verify and fact-check information before disseminating it to the public (Oladokun, et al., 2024).

Nigeria is a diverse country with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its customs, traditions, and values. Public relations professionals must be mindful of these cultural nuances when developing communication strategies and campaigns to ensure they resonate with the target audience and do not cause offense or misunderstanding (Joseph, 2023).

Ethical considerations also play a vital role in Nigeria's public relations practice. Practitioners are expected to adhere to codes of conduct and ethical guidelines set forth by professional organizations such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). These standards require practitioners to act with honesty, integrity, and accountability in their communication efforts and avoid engaging in deceptive or unethical practices that could harm the reputation of their clients or the profession (Efendi, et al., 2024).

Despite the challenges and ethical considerations in public relations practice in Nigeria, there are also significant opportunities for growth and development in the field. As the country continues to grow and evolve, there is an increasing demand for skilled and experienced public relations professionals to help individuals and organizations navigate the complex media landscape and build positive relationships with their stakeholders (Jackson & Moloney, 2019). With the rise of online platforms and digital

technologies, there is a greater need for professionals adept at leveraging these tools to reach and engage with target audiences meaningfully (Pascucci, et al., 2023). By developing strong digital communication skills and staying abreast of the latest trends and technologies, public relations professionals can position themselves for success in this evolving field (Amin, 2024).

As in any country, public relations professionals in Nigeria are responsible for accurately communicating information to the public and stakeholders (Akintola, et al., 2023). However, issues such as misinformation, biased reporting, and unethical practices can undermine the credibility of organizations and damage their reputation (Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024). Trust is a fundamental component of effective communication, as stakeholders are likelier to engage with organizations they trust and believe to be honest and transparent (Adeyeye et al., 2020). Public relations professionals in Nigeria must understand the cultural, social, and political dynamics of the country to build trust with diverse stakeholders; communication professionals can learn how to navigate complex communication challenges, engage with stakeholders effectively, and build long-term relationships built on trust (Keghku, et al., 2023).

Additionally, Nigeria is a diverse and complex society with multiple ethnic, cultural, and social groups, making effective communication a significant challenge for organizations (Pepper, et al., 2024). Public relations professionals must navigate language barriers, cultural differences, and political sensitivities to communicate effectively with diverse stakeholders (Mandela, 2024). Communication professionals gain insights into how to tailor communication strategies to different audiences, address cultural nuances, and avoid potential pitfalls that can harm an organization's reputation (Sahadevan & Sumangala, 2021).

Moreover, public relations professionals in Nigeria adhere to a strict code of ethics that governs their interactions with stakeholders, the media, and the public and can promote professional conduct and integrity. This knowledge can help communication professionals navigate ethical dilemmas, uphold ethical standards, and maintain the trust and credibility of the profession (Wachid, et al., 2024).

Specific objectives guided this study in exploring key aspects of PR practices in Lagos State. The study sought to examine the level of knowledge among PR practitioners regarding the code of ethics governing their profession, assess the extent to which they adhere to these ethical standards, and identify the factors that drive some practitioners to engage in unethical practices. These objectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding ethical compliance and challenges within the PR industry in Lagos State.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Public Relations and Ethical Practices

Public relations in Nigeria can be traced back to the pre-colonial era when traditional rulers and community leaders used various forms of communication to maintain and enhance their relationships with their subjects (Amujo & Melewar, 2011). With the

advent of colonialism and modernization, public relations evolved to include a broad range of activities, such as media relations, crisis management, and stakeholder engagement (Constantin & Irwansyah, 2024). Today, public relations is a thriving industry in Nigeria, with many organizations employing PR professionals to manage their communication and reputation.

One of the key ethical principles that public relations practitioners in Nigeria must adhere to is honesty and transparency. These professionals must provide accurate and truthful information to the public, clients, and stakeholders (Novchi et al., 2023). Public relations practitioners can build credibility and trust with their audiences by being honest and transparent in their communications.

However, in a country like Nigeria, where corruption and misinformation are prevalent, public relations practitioners may face challenges in upholding this ethical principle (Nyitze & Inja, 2023). Clients or superiors may pressure them to disseminate false or misleading information to protect the organization's interests (Ethics Code). In such situations, public relations practitioners must have the courage and integrity to resist these pressures and maintain their commitment to honesty and transparency (Neill, 2020).

In a country as diverse and multicultural as Nigeria, it is essential for public relations practitioners to be sensitive to the beliefs and values of different communities and to avoid promoting messages that are offensive or discriminatory. By respecting the diversity of viewpoints and opinions, public relations practitioners can build positive relationships with various stakeholders and create a more inclusive and socially responsible communication strategy (Mundy & Bardhan, 2023). However, navigating the complex cultural landscape of Nigeria can be challenging for public relations practitioners, especially when working with clients who may have different cultural backgrounds and values. In such situations, public relations practitioners need to take the time to understand their audiences' cultural sensitivities and tailor their communication strategies accordingly (Mandela, 2024).

In addition to honesty, transparency, and respect for diversity, public relations practitioners in Nigeria must also uphold the principles of confidentiality and privacy (NWIPR, 2023). It is crucial for these professionals to protect the confidential information of their clients and stakeholders and to ensure that the privacy rights of individuals are respected in all communications (Zoppi, 2023). However, in a digital age where information can be easily shared and disseminated, public relations practitioners may face challenges in maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of sensitive information. They must be vigilant in safeguarding confidential data and adhere to strict data protection regulations to protect individuals' rights and privacy (Weippl & Schrittwieser, 2023).

Public relations practitioners in Today's Business World: Challenges facing Public Relations Practitioners in Nigeria

Public relations (PR) practitioners play a critical role in shaping public perceptions and managing the reputations of organizations and individuals. However, PR practice in Nigeria has significant challenges, particularly in ethics (Mu'azu & Gapsiso, 2024). Ethical considerations in public relations are essential for maintaining trust and credibility.

Practitioners must act with honesty, integrity, and transparency in all dealings, including truthful communication, client confidentiality, and addressing conflicts of interest. When these ethical principles are adhered to, they foster stronger relationships with stakeholders and enhance the reputation of organizations (Suhairi et al., 2023).

One of the main ethical challenges facing PR professionals in Nigeria is the prevalence of unethical practices, including bribery, manipulation of media narratives, and dissemination of false information. According to Idid and Arandas (2016), ethics in PR involves adherence to values and norms that prioritize public and client interests. However, some Nigerian practitioners deviate from these principles, engaging in practices that compromise public trust. Such misconduct tarnishes the individuals' reputations and undermines the entire profession's credibility (Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008; Lee, 2020). Addressing these issues requires a collective commitment to professional integrity and ethical reform.

Another pressing issue is Nigeria's PR industry's lack of regulation and oversight. Unlike in other countries where PR is regulated, Nigeria lacks formal structures to enforce standards. This regulatory gap allows unqualified individuals to practice PR, leading to widespread unethical practices and diminishing the profession's credibility (Olaoluwa, 2021). A robust regulatory framework would help address these issues by ensuring that only trained and certified practitioners can operate. Such measures could also introduce accountability mechanisms to promote adherence to ethical guidelines.

Balancing clients' interests with ethical considerations is another challenge for PR practitioners in Nigeria. In a competitive business environment, practitioners often face pressure to employ manipulative or deceptive tactics to achieve desired outcomes for their clients (Theaker, 2001). However, such actions can backfire, leading to reputational damage for both the practitioner and the organization they represent. Upholding ethical principles is a professional responsibility and a strategic imperative for maintaining long-term credibility and trust.

The broader socio-political environment in Nigeria also complicates ethical PR practices. Corruption remains pervasive across many sectors, forcing PR professionals to navigate complex moral dilemmas. For instance, during the #EndSARS protests, social media emerged as a powerful tool for exposing injustices and influencing public discourse. PR professionals were instrumental in shaping narratives and managing reputational risks for organizations implicated in the crisis (Alper, 2024). These developments underscore the need for PR practitioners to adopt ethical approaches, even in challenging environments.

Continuous professional development is crucial to fostering ethical excellence in PR. Regular training programs and workshops can help practitioners stay updated on global best practices and emerging trends. Industry associations like the Public Relations

Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN) can provide educational resources and facilitate peer-to-peer learning opportunities (Fullerton & McKinnon, 2015). Such initiatives enhance practitioners' professional competence and promote a culture of ethical accountability within the industry.

Addressing the systemic challenges facing PR practice in Nigeria requires a multi-faceted approach. Establishing regulatory frameworks, promoting ethical standards, and prioritizing professional development are key steps toward enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of the profession. By fostering a culture of moral excellence, PR practitioners in Nigeria can build stronger stakeholder relationships, contribute to national development, and align with global best practices in the field. The onus is on practitioners, industry associations, and policymakers to work collaboratively toward these goals.

Two-way Symmetrical Model of Communication

This study adopts the two-way symmetrical model of communication, introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and recognized as one of the most popular public relations communication models (Girsang & Kartikawangi, 2021). The model emphasizes open, honest communication and mutual understanding between organizations and stakeholders, prioritizing dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and conflict resolution through consensus (Sanjaya, 2020). By aligning organizational goals with stakeholder needs, it promotes ethical and socially responsible practices.

Public relations professionals are guided by moral codes, such as the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) Code of Ethics, which underscore values like honesty, transparency, and integrity to build trust and credibility. These principles highlight the importance of ethical behavior and mutual benefit in public relations practice (Jori White PR, 2024).

Additionally, the study incorporates the absolutist ethical theory, developed by Immanuel Kant (1785), which posits that certain moral principles are universal, objective, and unchanging (Manik, et al., 2023). As noted by Merrill in 1974, this theory asserts that an eternal moral code applies to all, regardless of changing conditions (Odionyenma et al., 2024). In this context, PR professionals are expected to uphold universally accepted ethical principles, such as honesty and professionalism, which serve as guidelines for their conduct (Walton, 2024). Together, these frameworks emphasize the importance of ethical behavior and mutual benefit in public relations practice.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research method and applied in-depth interview research strategies using the interview guide to gather data for the study (Soleha, et al., 2023). The population consisted of 547 registered members of NIPR in Lagos State, Southwest Nigeria, representing both private and non-commercial organizations in the state. This number represents all the registered public relations professionals in the NIPR Lagos State branch.

The researchers used ten (10) key informants for the sample size. This is based on the fact that in qualitative studies, the sample size is usually tiny to avoid redundancy. Sandelowski (1996), as cited in Vasileiou et al. (2018), observes that qualitative research samples are mainly small to support the depth of case-oriented analysis fundamental to the mode of inquiry. Also, Rutledge & C. Hogg (2020) assert that an in-depth interview session is an in-depth discussion in which a small number of people from the target population discuss topics important to the study.

Table 1: Informants Profile

Informant Code	Gender	Years of Membership	PR Specialization
A1	M	12	Corporate Communication
A2	M	10	Internal Communication
A3	F	10	Investor Relations
A4	M	14	Public Affairs and Government Relations
A5	M	13	Community Relations
A6	F	10	Media Relations
A7	F	10	Media Relations
A8	F	11	Crisis Communication
A9	M	13	Crisis Communication
A10	M	14	Corporate Communication

Source: Data Collected by Author (2024)

The criterion for including the sample size was been an active member for 10 years or more. The researchers used a purposive sampling technique to reach out to the participants. Here, the researchers contacted the key informants who met the selection criterion on purpose. Regarding ethics, the researchers obtained the consent of the participants, and they were assured that their identity would be confidential.

Thematic analysis strategies for analyzing qualitative data were employed. The in-depth interview session was conducted through mobile phone calls, as it was more time-friendly and convenient for both the researcher and the participants, who had busy schedules.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: Level of knowledge of PR practitioners in Lagos state on the code of ethics of PR practices

This theme analyses the participants' knowledge of the different PR practitioners in Lagos state on the code of ethics of PR practices. The interviewees said thus;

“Code of ethics of PR practices is the very first lesson provided for an aspiring PR practitioner across the country so virtually all PR personnel are quite informed about the existence and practicalities of the code of ethics of PR practices.”

“Well, just like every profession has its code of ethics that governs the overall existence of the practice which the personnel must conform to, so do PR have established code of ethics that guide PR practices which all must know”

“I am quite vast in the knowledge of the code of ethics of PR practices, having been in the profession for over two decades.”

“As a PR practitioner, the code of ethics of PR practices is the fundamentals of the practice to which every PR practitioner is exposed. So I am quite aware of it.”

“In as much as you are in the field of PR practices, the code of ethics of PR practices is the primal lesson to be disseminated, so I am quite knowledgeable.”

From the data analysis, it is clear that the interviewed PR practitioners are knowledgeable about the different codes of ethics governing the operations of PR practices in Lagos State and, by extension, Nigeria. After years of practice in the PR field, it is clear that a code of ethics is fundamental and essential to the overall PR practices to maximize productivity amongst practitioners.

Research Question 2: Degree to which PR practitioners in Lagos state adhere to the code of ethics of PR practices

This theme analyses the level of PR practitioners in Lagos state who adhere to the code of ethics of PR practices. The interviewees said thus;

“Just like every profession, PR practices and conducts by practitioners have flaunted the different codes and ethics of the practices over the years with little or no repercussions.”

“I am quite certain that PR practitioners in Lagos state adhere to the code of ethics of PR practices, which is not quite encouraging because many codes are broken and regulatory bodies turn blind eyes to it.”

“The level to which PR practitioners in Lagos state adhere to the code of ethics of PR practices is quite low to compare what should be obtainable based on the years of practice.”

“I believe that PR practitioners in Lagos state adhere to the code of ethics of PR practices, which is quite low as many practitioners are not registered members but independent practitioners who are governed by profit maximization.”

“PR practitioners in Lagos state hardly adhere to the code of ethics of PR practices, which leaves little to the imagination as many practitioners work as freelance operators.”

From the responses' analysis, it is quite obvious that practitioners in Lagos State adhere to the code of ethics of PR practices at a low level. Perhaps this could be based on the low level of sanction, and maybe there are few organized workshops where members are oriented on some of the ethical codes of the profession.

Research Question 3: Factors influencing Lagos state PR practitioners to engage in unethical practices.

This theme analyzed various contributing factors that may negatively influence PR practitioners in Lagos state to engage in unethical practices. The interviewees said thus;

“Balancing the interests of clients or organizations with the ethical considerations outlined in various theories and codes of practice can pose a challenge.”

“The alignment of organizational goals with the needs and expectations of stakeholders can stand as a challenge.”

“The lack of technical knowledge and innovations have made PR practice a gamble for all.”

“The laissez-faire attitude of the regulatory bodies more interested in the funds rather than the quality of services makes it challenging for PR practitioners.”

“There is no profession that doesn't have challenges. In public relations practice, economic pressure could also be attributed to one of the reasons practitioners engage in certain unethical practices to meet up.”

“When training or workshops are occasionally organized, the level at which members are reoriented concerning the ethical codes will be low, and such low level can only encourage non-adherence.”

“The quest for top recognition and patronage have made PR practitioners cut many corners in their practices.”

The interviewees believe many factors contribute to PR practitioners' engagement in unethical practices in Lagos State. Some of such factors, as seen in their responses, include conflicting interests of clients and stakeholders, the laissez-faire attitude of the regulatory bodies in tackling the issue to the barest minimum, unhealthy competition amongst practitioners in the quest for fame and recognition, and so on. Over the years, these factors have allegedly eaten into the fabric of PR practices.

Discussion

Research results indicated that participants are knowledgeable regarding the existing code of ethics governing the operations of PR practices in Lagos State and, by extension, Nigeria. This level of knowledge could result from practitioners wanting to know the codes guiding their practice so that they can be properly guided when specific actions are contrary to the laid-down ethical codes.

Based on the key informants' responses, the knowledge level is high. It will be pretty disturbing to know that public relations professionals have a low level of knowledge concerning the ethical codes guiding their practice. Though one cannot deny that some PR professionals may not be too knowledgeable about moral codes, knowing the ethical code that guides your profession in accordance with the extant rules is right. The code of ethics is fundamental and essential to the overall PR practices to maximize productivity amongst practitioners and ensure checks and balances are maintained in their operations in Lagos State.

This result is consistent with the study of Ubwa (2014), who claimed that PR values require practitioners to consider and maintain impartiality at work. As such, every PR practitioner is informed about the codes of ethics governing the profession's operations. Public relations practitioners who uphold the absolutist ethical theory would want to behave in a universally acceptable manner. Therefore, it will be appropriate to encourage practitioners engaging in unethical practices to understand and internalize the suggestions of the absolutist ethical theory and start doing right.

Further results showed that the participants interviewed indicated a low adherence to the code of ethics. Research has revealed that this low level of adherence to the ethical codes could be attributed to the alleged lack of guidance and training from regulatory bodies that prioritize numbers over the quality of services provided by these PR professionals. As a result, the basic principles and codes that guide PR practices are undermined, which contradicts PR professionals' primary duties and roles in organizations and society.

The result aligns with the study of Chimeremeze (2023), who found that media practitioners engage in unethical behavior contrary to their ethical codes. Similarly, Patricia (2024) revealed in their study that media practitioners engaged in numerous unethical practices. In most cases, they hardly adhered to their code of practice, which has adversely affected their level of credibility in the eyes of the public. This finding implies that people will quickly lose faith in public relations practitioners, and the worst is that it will affect the credibility of the regulatory bodies controlling the profession. The truth is that the issue of professionals' non-adherence to the public relations ethical code is alarming.

Also in line with this finding, Haque and Ahmad (2017) noted in their study that applying the responsible advocacy theory can help practitioners establish universal principles and moral values, prioritizing human dignity over material gains and benefits. If used as Haque and Ahmad suggested, this theory means PR practitioners need to weigh their actions in terms of the benefit or harm they will cause before taking such

action, as well as respecting people involved in certain situations, which is even one of the ethical codes of the profession, and then ensuring proper distribution of justice. Any practitioner who upholds this theory, the two-way symmetric model, and the absolutist ethical theory will be guided appropriately when taking action.

Findings revealed numerous factors that influenced the engagement of PR practitioners in Lagos State in indulging in unethical practices, which is highly unacceptable. There is a demand for complete adherence to laid-down ethical practices to boost the profession's credibility. Still, some noticeable factors contributing to ensuring compliance with these moral precepts have been minimal over the years. Some of such factors, as noted in participants' responses, include economic pressure, occasional training and workshops for PR professionals, conflicting interests of clients and stakeholders, the laissez-faire attitude of the regulatory bodies in tackling unethical issues to the lowest level, unhealthy competitions amongst practitioners in the quest for fame and recognition and so on. Over the years, these factors have allegedly eaten into the fabric of PR practices.

These findings are in tandem with those of Amujo and Melewar (2011), who revealed that one of the contemporary challenges impacting the practice of public relations in Nigeria is the presence of quacks who know nothing about the profession and hence disparage the profession's name. Also in agreement with this finding is the study of Olaoluwa (2021), who revealed that public relations is not without unethical practices.

The finding further showed that PR practitioners are more preoccupied with the desire to fulfill the interest of their employers, their clients, and most importantly, their self-interest rather than doing what their profession prescribed. This finding implies that the issue of non-adherence to ethical codes due to these factors will continue except for drastic measures taken to save the profession's image. In doing so, there is a need to apply the theoretical models this study underpinned to enlighten practitioners on the need to adhere to professional, ethical codes to paint the profession in a positive light.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results, it can therefore be concluded that public relations practitioners in Lagos are knowledgeable about the ethical code of their profession, though despite their knowledge, the level of adherence to the ethical code is abysmally low, as the result indicated. This was attributed to economic pressures, occasional training by the regulatory body, conflicting interests, and other bottlenecks. It is important to stress that adherence to ethical codes of practice by public relations practitioners is crucial for maintaining trust, credibility, and transparency in their interactions with stakeholders. By upholding ethical standards, practitioners can build and sustain positive relationships with stakeholders, enhance their organization's reputation, and contribute to the overall ethical conduct of the industry. Studying practitioners' adherence to ethical codes of practice is essential for identifying the factors influencing ethical decision-making in

public relations and developing strategies to promote ethical behavior among practitioners.

By examining the ethical challenges practitioners face in the digital age, vast contributions to advancing ethical communication practices in public relations are encouraged. The study's recommendations include: 1. Constant and routine information-filled training sessions, workshops, and seminars should be organized by regulatory bodies to expose new members and registered members to the core ethical values and principles governing the profession to avoid misdemeanors and mishaps amongst practitioners. 2. Strict regulatory principles and actions should be enforced on erring PR practitioners in Lagos state to deter others from breaking or twisting the code of ethics of PR practices. 3. The strict monitoring of PR practitioners in Lagos State practices should be encouraged to ensure strict adherence to the code of ethics governing the practices.

BIODATA

Chuddy C. Oduenyi is a journalist, historian, and public relations consultant. He is the managing director and chief executive officer of Compact Communication Limited, a leading public relations consultancy based in Lagos, Nigeria. He is also an adjunct member of the faculty at Pan Atlantic University in Lagos, where he lectures at the School of Media and Communication. He is also a facilitator at the Lagos Business School.

Etumnu Emeka Williams is a doctoral student at Imo State University, Owerri. He was among UNESCO's top three research prize winners across the non-Sahel West African region in 2020. He has published articles in reputable journals. He is also a reviewer for reputable journals indexed in Scopus. Email: etumnuemeka@gmail.com

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