

Government Reforms and Public Perception: A Marketing Approach to Policy Implementation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Policy reforms do not fail for lack of ambition. They fail because governments failed to explain them appropriately. This study examines how government marketing communication strategies shape policy acceptance among civil servants and policymakers in Nigeria, focusing on two fiscal interventions that tested the limits of official communication: the 2023 fuel subsidy removal and the Finance Act tax reforms. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design combined a survey of 320 federal civil servants with 15 purposive in-depth interviews. Pearson correlations and multiple linear regression processed the quantitative data; abductive thematic analysis using NVivo 12 structured the qualitative strand. Marketing communication quality (beta = .312, $p < .001$), government trust (beta = .287, $p < .001$), perceived fairness (beta = .241, $p < .001$), and reform awareness (beta = .198, $p = .001$) together accounted for 48.7% of the variance in policy acceptance (R -squared = .487). Five qualitative themes emerged: communication deficit and information asymmetry, trust erosion and institutional credibility, economic hardship framing versus reform necessity, demand for participatory policymaking, and social media as a double-edged sword. Social Marketing Communication Theory provides the primary theoretical lens, with Policy Framing Theory and Public Sector Brand Equity Theory serving as explanatory mechanisms. The study's central novel finding is a communication-trust nexus: communication quality does not merely predict acceptance on its own but generates institutional trust capital, which then independently amplifies that acceptance. These findings extend public sector marketing theory well beyond its Western empirical base and carry targeted, actionable implications for reform communication practice in Nigeria and comparable developing country settings.

Keywords: government reform, policy acceptance, public marketing, social marketing communication and institutional trust

Introduction

Policy reform fails on the streets before it fails in Parliament. When Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu announced the removal of the fuel subsidy in May 2023, the decision was economically defensible. The subsidy had cost the federal government an estimated 4.4 trillion naira in 2022 alone, a fiscal drain that diverted public resources from health, education, and infrastructure investment (Esiri et al., 2024). Yet the public response was immediate, sustained, and largely hostile. Transport prices spiked within hours. Civil servants and labour unions threatened industrial action. Social media filled with outrage that official channels could neither match in speed nor credibly rebut. The reform itself was not the problem. The communication of it was.

Scholarship on the gap between policy quality and public reception has expanded across multiple disciplines. Walsh (1994) argued that marketing management principles apply directly to public sector governance. Santos et al. (2024) synthesized six decades of subsequent inquiry into six core practice domains, of which policy communication is among the most consequential. Andrews et al.

(2021) identified a persistent scholarly blind spot: researchers have mapped what marketing can do in government settings without adequately explaining how it produces policy acceptance. Almost none of this body of work has been tested in a low-trust, high-scepticism African governance environment, where informal communication networks compete with official channels and where institutional credibility deficits accumulate across decades of policy reversal. Nigeria is precisely that environment.

Two conceptual distinctions are essential before the study proceeds. Policy framing and marketing communication quality are related but analytically separate. Policy framing refers to the strategic construction of narratives that position a reform within a particular interpretive context; it concerns what is communicated, the meaning assigned to the reform (Dikaios, 2024). Marketing communication quality concerns how that meaning is conveyed: the clarity, consistency, channel appropriateness, accessibility, and timeliness of the messages themselves (Santos et al., 2024). A government can possess a technically sound reform narrative and still communicate it poorly. The inverse holds as well. This study focuses on the quality of communication execution while treating framing as a contextual boundary condition that shapes the environment within which that execution occurs.

The second distinction concerns the scope of social marketing in this study. Kotler and Andreasen (1975) developed social marketing as a tool for changing individual behaviour in health and environmental domains. That formulation addresses general citizen populations as subjects of behaviour-change campaigns. Civil servants and policymakers are a different kind of audience: they are institutional actors whose acceptance of reform logic shapes implementation quality and, by extension, shapes how ordinary citizens experience the reform. Applying social marketing principles to this group requires treating social marketing not as a behaviour-change technology but as a communication strategy paradigm, an audience-centred, exchange-theoretic framework for designing government communication. Isiekwu (2025) proposed and tested this reframing in the context of institutional policy resistance, and the present study builds directly on that conceptual foundation.

The study's central theoretical proposition is that marketing communication quality operates as more than an independent predictor of policy acceptance. Each government communication event either deposits credibility into or withdraws it from the institutional trust account that determines whether citizens and civil servants are willing to accept difficult reforms. The study terms this the communication-trust nexus. Four research questions guide the inquiry:

RQ1: How do civil servants and policymakers perceive the quality of government marketing communication during the implementation of Nigeria's fuel subsidy removal and Finance Act tax reforms?

RQ2: To what extent do marketing communication quality, government trust, perceived fairness, and reform awareness predict policy acceptance among civil servants and policymakers in Nigeria?

RQ3: What qualitative themes characterize the relationship between government marketing communication strategies and policy acceptance among Nigerian civil servants and policymakers?

RQ4: How can a strategic social marketing communication framework improve the reception and implementation of economic reform policies in Nigeria's public sector?

Literature Review

2.1 Public Sector Marketing: From Peripheral Concept to Policy Instrument

Walsh (1994) opened what has since become a productive disciplinary argument: marketing is not a private sector monopoly. Public organisations, he contended, must adopt citizen-oriented approaches to service delivery and policy communication or risk systematic disconnection from the populations they serve. De Matos et al. (2020), reviewing nearly nine decades of published scholarship in a bibliometric study running from 1931 to 2020, traced the field's development from a contested idea to an established interdisciplinary discipline. Santos et al. (2024) brought that trajectory into sharper focus through a systematic literature review that organised the field into six practice domains: citizen engagement, political marketing, public branding, social marketing, service marketing, and policy communication. The present study operates primarily within the policy communication domain while drawing on social marketing and public branding as theoretical resources.

Two features of this literature warrant particular attention. First, communication quality has consistently been identified as the foundation of public sector brand equity. Governments that communicate clearly, consistently, and with credibility build institutional resources that outlast any single policy cycle (Zavattaro et al., 2021). Second, the practical application of these marketing tools to developing economy governance contexts remains thin in the empirical record. Orellana Bueno and Perez Jara (2024) surveyed marketing applications across diverse institutional environments. Zhengyang (2024, 2025) documented public administration marketing practice in transition economies. Nigeria-specific evidence is almost entirely absent from both bodies of work. The present study addresses that absence directly. Its central implication from reviewing this field is that government marketing communication quality is a strategic management variable, not a logistical one. The degree to which civil servants and policymakers internalise and act on reform rationale depends on how that rationale is constructed and conveyed, not merely on whether it is technically correct.

2.2 Government Economic Reforms and Public Perception: What the Evidence Shows

Perceived distributive fairness, procedural justice, government credibility, and the quality of pre-reform communication are the four most consistently identified determinants of policy acceptability in the quantitative literature (Maestre-Andres et al., 2019). The systematic review by Maestre-Andres et al. (2019) of carbon pricing acceptability across 17 countries confirmed fairness perceptions as the single most durable cross-national predictor. That finding has particular force in Nigeria's case. The fuel subsidy removal imposed its heaviest immediate costs on low-income urban households, who depended on subsidised petrol for generators, motorcycles, and informal transport. When the burden distribution is perceived as unequal, no amount of technically accurate communication about fiscal sustainability produces acceptance.

Within Nigeria specifically, Eluyemi et al. (2025) demonstrated how trust deficits, perceived exclusion from decision-making, and inadequate government communication amplify resistance to state-led infrastructure initiatives in Southwest Nigeria. Esiri et al. (2024), studying energy transition policy, found that regulatory communication gaps undermine the credibility of technically sound policies before those policies even reach citizens. These two Nigerian studies converge on the same diagnosis: policy resistance in this institutional environment is not primarily a function of the economic content of reform. It is a function of the communicative and relational failures that accompany it. That diagnosis is the empirical foundation for the present study's focus on marketing communication quality as a decisive reform variable.

Comparative evidence from other contexts adds useful texture. Wester (2023) showed in an urban environmental governance study that community trust in institutional stewardship predicts policy compliance more reliably than either policy content or economic self-interest. Huo et al. (2023), analysing China's COVID-19 policy corpus, showed how governments that iteratively adapt their communication strategies in response to public sentiment shifts achieve more stable policy acceptance than those issuing static, one-way announcements. Van Steenburg et al. (2022) documented how systemic economic shocks disrupt established patterns of citizen engagement, creating windows for institutional repositioning through communication if governments are equipped to act quickly. Each of these studies identifies a different mechanism through which the Nigerian case can be analytically situated.

2.3 Social Marketing as a Communication Strategy Paradigm

Classical social marketing applies commercial marketing exchange theory to individual behavioural change in socially beneficial domains (Kotler and Andreasen, 1975; Pinto and Casais, 2023). The present study does not use social marketing in this way. Civil servants and policymakers are not target audiences for a health behaviour campaign. They are strategic stakeholders whose institutional acceptance of reform logic shapes both the quality of implementation and the downstream communication that citizens receive. Social marketing here is a communication strategy paradigm: a framework for designing government messages according to principles of audience segmentation, value exchange, channel strategy, and iterative feedback.

Within this reframing, four properties distinguish effective reform communication from mere information dissemination. It is audience-segmented, meaning it is tailored to the distinct information needs and trust profiles of specific stakeholder groups rather than broadcast uniformly. It is exchange-theoretic, articulating not only the government's fiscal rationale but the concrete value the reform delivers to the audience. It is channel-strategic, deploying communication resources across platforms calibrated to different audience segments. And it is iterative, incorporating real-time feedback mechanisms that allow message adaptation as audience responses evolve. Pegan and Lovec (2025), in their study of EU Cohesion Policy communication, found that reforms supported by structured communication planning achieve significantly higher stakeholder acceptance than those relying on ad hoc public information campaigns. The implication for Nigeria's fiscal reforms is direct. The absence of each of these four properties, confirmed by qualitative evidence in the present study, constitutes a measurable communication failure with quantifiable consequences for acceptance.

One structural feature of the Nigerian reform communication environment requires specific acknowledgement. The public is reached simultaneously through official government channels and through informal networks, community leaders, religious institutions, neighbourhood associations, and social media platforms, each carrying significant interpretive authority (Bany Mohammed et al., 2025). An effective social marketing communication strategy must account for both channels, deploying tailored messages through formal and informal routes with consistent narrative framing. Reliance on ministerial press briefings alone, the default mode of Nigerian fiscal reform communication, addresses only the narrowest slice of this dual ecosystem.

2.4 Policy Framing, Brand Equity and Institutional Trust: Three Interlocking Mechanisms

Three theoretical mechanisms explain how marketing communication quality produces policy acceptance. They are not alternative explanations but sequential links in a causal chain and treating them as such is what distinguishes the integrated framework proposed here from prior work in the field.

Policy framing operates as the proximate interpretive mechanism (Dikaios, 2024). When governments frame fiscal reforms in terms of long-term national gain and equitable burden-sharing, they activate fairness-based evaluation criteria in audiences that make acceptance more probable. When framing is absent, incoherent, or inconsistent across ministerial channels, audiences fall back on short-term loss calculations and existing distrust. Tsagkroni and Dikaios (2024) showed that governments maintaining coherent brand narratives across extended periods of institutional crisis retain credibility at rates significantly higher than those that shift their communicative frames under pressure. In Nigeria's 2023 reform context, the government had no coherent long-term narrative frame in place when the subsidy removal was announced. The consequences of that framing absence are evidenced in Theme 3 of the present study's qualitative data.

Public Sector Brand Equity Theory, applied to the African context by Adeola (2022) from Zavattaro et al.'s (2021) foundational work, provides the mechanism that links communication quality to institutional trust. Brand equity in the public sector is the accumulated store of institutional credibility built through sustained, transparent, and citizen-centred government communication. Adeola (2022) treats this equity as a dynamic resource that grows through consistent communicative performance and shrinks through policy inconsistency, accountability failures, and communication silence. The strong bivariate correlation between Marketing Communication Quality and Government Trust found in this study ($r = .614$) is directly interpretable through this framework. Each communication event is a trust transaction, and the quality of that transaction determines whether the institutional trust account goes up or down.

Institutional trust then functions as the moderating condition for the effectiveness of policy framing. In high-trust environments, governments can ask citizens to accept short-term sacrifice against the promise of long-term gain; the audience extends the benefit of the doubt. In low-trust environments, the same narrative is implausible. Daniore et al. (2025) confirmed that public acceptance of institutional actions is tightly conditional on perceived governance transparency. Affran et al. (2025) documented the same dynamic in the context of sustainability governance in developing countries. Stephenson (2025) identified senior policy intermediaries as trust bridges between institutional decision-makers and the public, a structural role systematically underutilised in Nigeria's fiscal reform communication. Each of these mechanisms is activated through the quality of government communication, which is why marketing communication quality emerges as the dominant predictor in the regression model presented in Section 4.

2.5 Digital Communication, social-media, and the Reform Reception Environment

Social media has changed the speed and structure of public discourse around government reforms in ways that most Nigerian government communication units are not yet equipped to manage. Bany Mohammed et al. (2025) found that digitally active citizens hold stronger and more persistent views on government policies than passive consumers of traditional media, and that digital activism can crystallise opposition to a reform within hours of announcement. The timing implication is direct: a government that waits for a post-announcement press cycle to begin its communication has already lost the first and most consequential round of the digital information contest.

Spatial variation in digital engagement matters too. Sharag-Eldin et al. (2019), studying social media activity during contested governance events, found that digital communication is place-specific: communities most proximate to the costs of a policy intervention generate disproportionate volumes of social media opposition, shaping national discourse regardless of their statistical representativeness in the broader population. For Nigeria's fuel subsidy removal, that dynamic played out in Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, cities where transport and generator fuel

costs are most visible and where social media penetration is highest. A national communication strategy that does not differentiate its messages by geographic exposure profile will consistently be outpaced by local counter-narratives. Chen et al. (2025) adds another dimension: emotionally resonant digital content outperforms purely informational content in generating engagement and shifting attitudes, which means that technically accurate government messages about fiscal sustainability will consistently lose attention to emotionally charged opposition content unless they are designed with affective as well as cognitive appeal.

2.6 Theoretical Framework: An Integrated Logic Model

Social Marketing Communication Theory, as adapted by Pinto and Casais (2023) and Isiekwu (2025) for institutional policy contexts, provides the primary normative standard in this study: audience-centred, exchange-theoretic, channel-strategic, and iterative government communication design. Against this standard, actual government communication practice is evaluated. The framework is supplemented by two explanatory mechanisms rather than two parallel theoretical lenses. Policy Framing Theory (Dikaios, 2024; Tsagkroni and Dikaios, 2024) explains the interpretive pathway through which communication quality shapes audience evaluation of reform legitimacy. Public Sector Brand Equity Theory (Zavattaro et al., 2021; Adeola, 2022) explains the accumulation dynamic: repeated quality communication events build trust capital; communication failures erode it.

The logical sequence runs as follows. Social Marketing Communication Theory defines what good reform communication looks like. Policy Framing Theory specifies the narrative mechanism through which communication quality activates or fails to activate fairness-based acceptance criteria in the audience. Public Sector Brand Equity Theory explains why the same policy can be accepted in one institutional moment and rejected in another: the trust capital accumulated through prior communication determines the interpretive frame the audience brings to the new message. Together, these three theoretical resources generate the integrated logic model shown in Figure 1.

The model proposes that Marketing Communication Quality, Government Trust, Perceived Fairness, and Reform Awareness predict Policy Acceptance, operating through a Strategic Social Marketing Communication Framework. Within the model, MCQ is hypothesised to exert both a direct effect on PA and an indirect effect via GT, constituting the communication-trust nexus. Two boundary conditions apply. Cairney (2025) establishes that perfect policy coherence across channels and time is structurally unachievable, which means the framework must be designed for adaptation rather than for optimal consistency. Miller and Ghaffarzagdegan (2025), drawing on a systematic review of dynamic capabilities in the public sector, argue that effective reform communication requires not just a strategy document but an organisational learning infrastructure: the capacity to sense shifts in public sentiment, seize communication openings, and reconfigure messaging assets as the reform implementation cycle evolves.

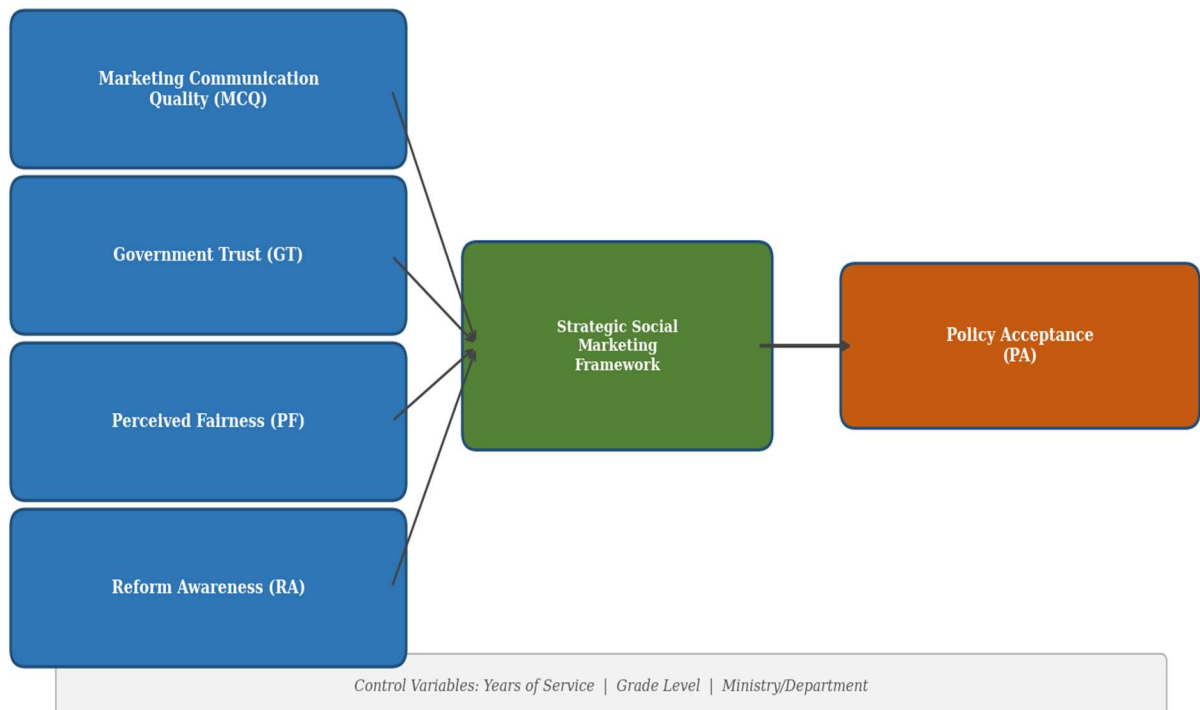


Figure 1
 Integrated Logic Model: Predictors of Policy Acceptance Through the Strategic Social Marketing Communication Framework.

Note. The dotted pathway from MCQ to GT represents the proposed communication-trust nexus, through which communication quality generates institutional trust capital that independently amplifies policy acceptance.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design integrated quantitative survey methodology with qualitative in-depth interviewing across a common eight-week data collection period. The two strands ran concurrently and independently; findings were merged at the interpretation stage to enable triangulation and mutual correction (Miller and Ghaffarzagdegan, 2025). The quantitative strand tested predictive relationships between marketing communication constructs and policy acceptance. The qualitative strand recovered the mechanisms, contextual conditions, and meaning-making processes that statistical coefficients alone cannot explain. This design is appropriate when the research question demands both measurable relational evidence and interpretive process data, and when neither source alone is sufficient (Pegan and Lovec, 2025).

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised civil servants and policymakers within Nigeria's Federal Civil Service, National Planning Commission, and selected state-level ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) with documented involvement in fiscal policy design or implementation. Purposive sampling ensured that respondents had substantive, direct experience with the reform

communication processes under investigation. For the quantitative component, 380 questionnaires were distributed across eight federal MDAs. Of those, 328 were returned and 320 were usable, yielding a response rate of 84.2%. This sample exceeds the minimum of 200 cases recommended for multiple regression with four predictors.

For the qualitative component, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected senior civil servants at Grade Level 12 and above, policy advisors, and government communication directors. Theoretical saturation was the criterion for sample adequacy: 13 interviews reached saturation, and two additional interviews confirmed thematic stability. An important sampling constraint must be acknowledged at the outset. The sample is professionally homogeneous: it reflects the perspectives of federal institutional insiders, not of general citizens, local government officials, private sector actors, or communities in states most exposed to reform costs. Claims about policy acceptance dynamics must be read with that boundary firmly in view. Future studies should extend the sampling frame to citizen and sub-national government populations.

3.3 Instrumentation

The quantitative instrument comprised five Likert-type scales, each rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Marketing Communication Quality (MCQ; 5 items) assessed the perceived clarity, consistency, channel appropriateness, accessibility, and timeliness of government reform communication, adapted from Pegan and Lovec (2025) and Cairney (2025). Government Trust (GT; 4 items) measured confidence in the reliability and integrity of government institutions, adapted from Zavattaro et al. (2021). Perceived Fairness (PF; 4 items) captured perceptions of equity and procedural justice in reform design and implementation, adapted from Maestre-Andres et al. (2019). Reform Awareness (RA; 3 items) assessed depth of understanding of the reforms' rationale and expected outcomes, adapted from Esiri et al. (2024). Policy Acceptance (PA; 4 items; criterion variable) measured professional willingness to support and promote the reforms, adapted from Isiekwu (2025). Cronbach's alpha values exceeded .70 for all five scales (Table 2), meeting the standard threshold for acceptable internal consistency in social science research.

A limitation of the instrument design warrants explicit acknowledgement: formal factor-analytic validation (exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis) was not conducted. The scales were adapted from sources with demonstrated construct validity in their original, predominantly Western and European institutional contexts. Whether their measurement properties transfer equivalently to Nigeria's federal civil service context has not been formally established. Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis and metric invariance testing should be a priority in future work that builds on these measures. A pilot study with 30 respondents, not included in the main analysis, confirmed internal consistency and content adequacy of the final instrument. The qualitative guide comprised 12 open-ended questions across four thematic domains: perceptions of government communication quality, personal experiences of the reforms, trust in government institutions and their narratives, and views on stakeholder participation and digital communication. Two subject matter experts in public administration reviewed the guide before use.

Results

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 320 survey respondents. The sample skewed male (61.9%; $n = 198$). Two thirds of respondents (66.6%) fell within the 35 to 54 age range, reflecting a sample concentrated in mid-career civil service. Mid-level officers at Grade Level 07 to 12 made up 43.1% of the sample; senior officers at Grade Level 13 to 17 contributed a

further 32.5%. Representation across ministries included the Ministry of Finance (28.1%), the National Planning Commission (19.4%), the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (23.1%), and a combined 29.4% from other MDAs. A majority of respondents (57.5%) reported between five and twenty years of federal service, providing a sample with sufficient experiential grounding to make meaningful assessments of reform communication quality and institutional credibility.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 320)

Characteristic	Category	n	%	Cumulative %
Gender	Male	198	61.9	61.9
	Female	122	38.1	100.0
Age Group	25–34 years	58	18.1	18.1
	35–44 years	109	34.1	52.2
	45–54 years	104	32.5	84.7
	55 years and above	49	15.3	100.0
Grade Level	Junior (GL 01–06)	78	24.4	24.4
	Mid-level (GL 07–12)	138	43.1	67.5
	Senior (GL 13–17)	104	32.5	100.0
Ministry/Department	Ministry of Finance	90	28.1	28.1
	National Planning Commission	62	19.4	47.5
	Office of the SGF/Admin.	74	23.1	70.6
	Other MDAs	94	29.4	100.0
Years of Service	Less than 5 years	45	14.1	14.1
	5–10 years	91	28.4	42.5
	11–20 years	123	38.4	80.9
	More than 20 years	61	19.1	100.0

Note. MDA = Ministry, Department, and Agency; GL = Grade Level in the Nigerian Federal Civil Service pay structure.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

Table 2 and Figure 2 address RQ1. Civil servants and policymakers viewed government reform communication in largely unfavourable terms. Government Trust registered the lowest mean of any construct (M = 2.64, SD = 0.91), followed by Perceived Fairness (M = 2.71, SD = 0.79), Policy Acceptance (M = 2.78, SD = 0.93), and Marketing Communication Quality (M = 2.89, SD = 0.87). Each of these four constructs fell below the scale midpoint of 3.0. Reform Awareness was the single exception (M = 3.12, SD = 0.84), sitting just above the midpoint. All five alpha coefficients exceeded .77, confirming acceptable to good internal consistency across the instrument.

The pattern in these means carries an interpretive signal that the regression model later confirms. Respondents knew about the reforms. Their awareness scores indicate that. What they did not have was trust in the institutions delivering those reforms, confidence that the burden distribution was fair, or acceptance of the reform logic itself. Awareness without trust, in other words, did not produce acceptance. That dissociation between knowledge and acceptance is among the study's central substantive findings and is taken up fully in Section 5.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency for Study Constructs (N = 320)

Construct (Items)	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	alpha
Marketing Communication Quality -- MCQ (5)	1.00	5.00	2.89	0.87	0.31	.81
Government Trust -- GT (4)	1.00	5.00	2.64	0.91	0.44	.83
Perceived Fairness -- PF (4)	1.00	5.00	2.71	0.79	0.28	.79
Reform Awareness -- RA (3)	1.00	5.00	3.12	0.84	-0.15	.77
Policy Acceptance -- PA (4)	1.00	5.00	2.78	0.93	0.37	.85

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; alpha = Cronbach's alpha coefficient. All alpha values exceed the .70 threshold recommended for social science instruments. Skewness values within the acceptable range of +/- 2.0 confirm approximate normality.

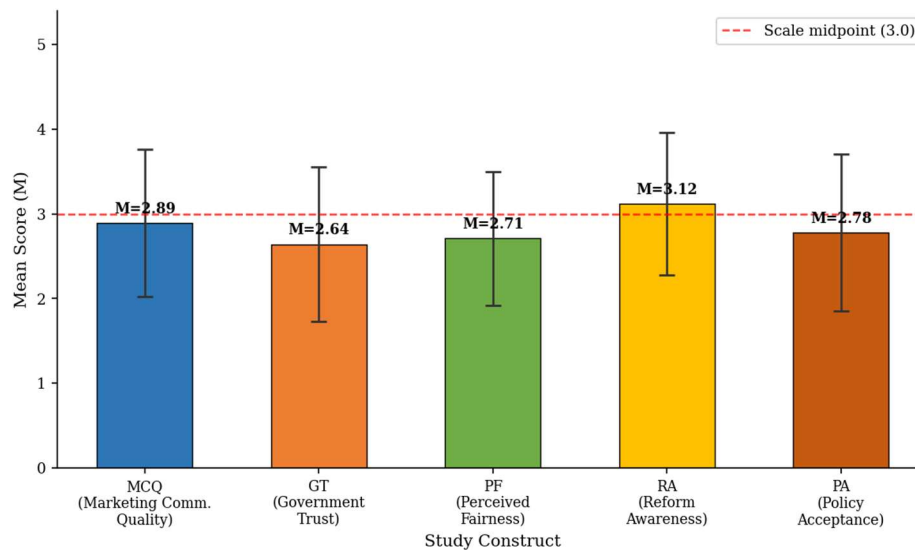


Figure 2

Mean Scores with Standard Deviation Error Bars Across Study Constructs (N = 320).

Note. The dashed red line denotes the scale midpoint (M = 3.0). All constructs except Reform Awareness fall below the midpoint, indicating predominantly unfavourable perceptions of government reform communication quality, institutional trust, perceived fairness, and policy acceptance.

4.3 Bivariate Correlations

Table 3 presents Pearson correlation coefficients for all five constructs. Every bivariate association was statistically significant at $p < .01$. MCQ showed the strongest association with PA ($r = .521$),

followed by GT ($r = .487$), PF ($r = .432$), and RA ($r = .389$). The association between MCQ and GT ($r = .614$, $p < .001$) was the strongest inter-predictor correlation in the entire matrix. Its magnitude warrants particular interpretive attention. A correlation of this size between communication quality and institutional trust is not consistent with treating the two variables as independent parallel inputs to a regression model. Instead, it is consistent with a causal sequence in which communication quality events generate, or erode, institutional trust over time. The term used in this study for that sequence is the communication-trust nexus, and the regression results in Section 4.4 provide further evidence of its operation.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix for Study Constructs (N = 320)

Variable	1. MCQ	2. GT	3. PF	4. RA	5. PA
1. MCQ	--				
2. GT	.614**	--			
3. PF	.531**	.498**	--		
4. RA	.344**	.312**	.287**	--	
5. PA	.521**	.487**	.432**	.389**	--

Note. MCQ = Marketing Communication Quality; GT = Government Trust; PF = Perceived Fairness; RA = Reform Awareness; PA = Policy Acceptance. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

4.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 4 and Figure 3 present the regression results. The full model was statistically significant, $F(4, 315) = 74.81$, $p < .001$, explaining 48.7% of the variance in policy acceptance (R-squared = .487; Adjusted R-squared = .479). All four predictors made independent, statistically significant contributions. The Breusch-Pagan test confirmed homoscedastic residuals (chi-squared (4) = 6.34, $p = .175$), and VIF values between 1.43 and 3.18 ruled out problematic multicollinearity.

Marketing Communication Quality was the strongest predictor (beta = .312, $p < .001$; $B = 0.351$). Translating that unstandardized coefficient into practical terms: each one-unit improvement on the five-point MCQ scale corresponded to a 0.35-point gain in policy acceptance. That increment represents 8.8% of the full-scale range. Against a sample mean acceptance score of 2.78, below the midpoint of 3.0, a realistic improvement in communication quality from poor to moderate would, on the regression model's estimates, shift the average respondent's acceptance score close to the neutral point. That is a practically meaningful shift, not merely a statistically significant one.

Government Trust was the second strongest predictor (beta = .287, $p < .001$; $B = 0.298$). A one-unit increase in trust perception corresponded to a 0.30-point gain in acceptance. That effect, taken alongside the strong MCQ-GT correlation ($r = .614$), has a specific theoretical implication. Improved communication quality does not merely affect acceptance directly; it builds trust, and that trust then independently amplifies acceptance through a second pathway. The total effect of a communication quality improvement is therefore larger than its direct regression coefficient alone reveals.

Perceived Fairness contributed a statistically significant independent effect (beta = .241, $p < .001$; $B = 0.289$). This finding confirms a boundary condition for the communication-trust nexus: improved communication quality and trust accumulation do not fully substitute for substantive policy fairness. Respondents who perceived the burden distribution of the reform as inequitable

were less likely to accept the reform regardless of how well it was communicated. Communication strategy cannot compensate for policy design that feels unjust to its recipients.

Reform Awareness had the smallest but still significant effect ($\beta = .198, p = .001; B = 0.234$). This result is the most theoretically provocative in the model and warrants interpretation as a finding in its own right rather than as a secondary result to be quickly noted. Civil servants who understood why the subsidy was removed, who could articulate the fiscal rationale, did not reliably accept the reform. Acceptance was governed more by whether they trusted the government implementing it and whether they perceived the cost distribution as fair. The implication is direct and uncomfortable for standard government communication practice: information provision campaigns, the most common official response to reform resistance, address the weakest predictor in the acceptance model.

Table 4: Multiple Linear Regression: Predictors of Policy Acceptance (N = 320)

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	beta	T	p
Constant	0.412	0.218		1.890	.060
Marketing Communication Quality (MCQ)	0.351	0.052	.312	6.750	< .001
Government Trust (GT)	0.298	0.048	.287	6.208	< .001
Perceived Fairness (PF)	0.289	0.055	.241	5.255	< .001
Reform Awareness (RA)	0.234	0.061	.198	3.836	.001

Note. R-squared = .487; Adjusted R-squared = .479; $F(4, 315) = 74.81, p < .001$. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; SE B = standard error of B; beta = standardised regression coefficient. Breusch-Pagan test for heteroscedasticity: chi-squared (4) = 6.34, $p = .175$, confirming homoscedastic residuals. VIF range: 1.43 to 3.18.

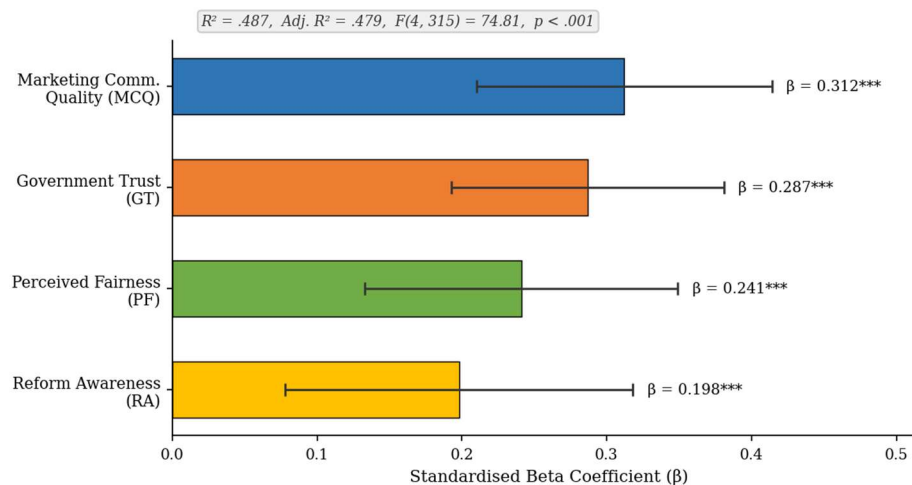


Figure 3

Standardized Regression Coefficients (beta) With 95% Confidence Intervals for Predictors of Policy Acceptance.

Note. All predictors are significant at $p < .001$. The wider confidence interval for Reform Awareness (RA) relative to the other predictors reflects its comparatively weaker and more variable predictive relationship with Policy Acceptance (PA).

4.5 Qualitative Findings: Abductive Thematic Analysis

The abductive thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews generated 147 initial codes before iterative dialogue with the theoretical framework shaped the final five-theme structure. The initial coding was strictly inductive: no theoretical categories were applied in the first pass. Themes were identified from patterns in the coded data and subsequently interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework. The result is a thematic structure that reflects genuine empirical patterns in participant discourse rather than predetermined conceptual categories. One theme in particular, Theme 5's ambivalence about social media as a communication channel, was not anticipated from the theoretical framework and adds interpretive complexity to the digital communication literature reviewed in Section 2.5. Table 5 summarizes the themes with frequencies and representative participant excerpts; Figure 4 shows the distribution of coded excerpts across themes.

Theme 1: Communication Deficit and Information Asymmetry.

Every one of the 15 participants described an acute information deficit during the reform implementation period. Government communication was characterized as reactive and scattered, issued in response to crisis rather than designed in advance of it. The most striking disclosure appeared repeatedly: senior civil servants, grade level 12 and above officers with direct policy implementation responsibilities, learned of the fuel subsidy removal through broadcast news rather than through any internal ministerial cascade or official briefing. This finding translates into a specific institutional diagnosis: at the moment of Nigeria's largest fiscal reform in decades, the government had no internal communication infrastructure in place to inform its own implementation workforce before informing the general public.

Theme 2: Trust Erosion and Institutional Credibility.

Fourteen of 15 participants identified depleted institutional trust as the primary structural barrier to reform acceptance. Participants did not describe trust as a temporary problem created by this particular reform. They traced the deficit to a long history of policy reversals, corruption, and perceived elite capture of reform benefits: the pattern they had watched across multiple administrations and multiple policy cycles. That historical framing matters for the communication-trust nexus proposed in this study. No single reform communication campaign, however expertly designed, can fully reverse a trust deficit that has accumulated over decades. The institutional trust account, as Adeola (2022) theorises it, cannot be refilled quickly.

Theme 3: Economic Hardship Framing Versus Reform Necessity.

Twelve participants accepted the broad macroeconomic case for removing the fuel subsidy. They understood the fiscal argument. What they described as absent was a coherent public narrative that gave citizens, and themselves, a temporal story: a roadmap showing how short-term hardship would give way to specific, verifiable improvements at specified points in time. One participant called it a "roadmap with milestones" (P3). The absence of that narrative architecture constitutes a policy framing failure that is analytically distinct from the communication quality failure measured by MCQ. The government had a technically defensible argument. It lacked the narrative framing to make that argument credible in a low-trust environment.

Theme 4: Demand for Participatory Policymaking.

Eleven participants identified the absence of pre-announcement stakeholder consultation as the most damaging single antecedent of reform resistance. The structural gaps they described were precise: no national stakeholder forum was convened before the subsidy announcement; civil society organisations were not engaged in the communication planning process; frontline public servants had no input into how the reform would be explained to the public they serve. This

evidence addresses RQ4 directly. Participatory co-design of reform communication is not merely a procedural fairness norm. It is a substantive mechanism for improving communication quality and for building the pre-acceptance trust that makes subsequent reform messages more likely to be received as credible.

Theme 5: Social-media as a Double-Edged Sword.

Nine participants raised social media. The tone was markedly ambivalent. They acknowledged that Twitter/X and WhatsApp were the fastest and most widely used channels for public discourse about the reforms. They also identified these platforms as the primary routes through which misinformation spread, and they reported that official government communication consistently lagged behind the social media cycle. Some participants noted that when government did attempt to use social media for reform communication, those messages were perceived as politically motivated rather than informational, reducing rather than increasing their credibility. That ambivalence complicates any straightforward recommendation to invest in digital government communication. The platform does not confer credibility. Credibility must pre-exist the platform use; otherwise, official social media communication becomes one more signal that audiences discount.

Table 5: Summary of Qualitative Themes: Frequency and Representative Excerpts From In-Depth Interviews (N = 15)

#	Theme	Frequency (n)	% of Interviews	Representative Excerpt
1	Communication Deficit and Information Asymmetry	15	100.0%	"We heard about the subsidy removal on the news, not through any structured briefing from our ministry." (P7)
2	Trust Erosion and Institutional Credibility	14	93.3%	"The government's credibility problem predates this reform. Citizens remember broken promises." (P2)
3	Economic Hardship Framing vs. Reform Necessity	12	80.0%	"The economics may be right, but the communication strategy was poor. Citizens needed a roadmap." (P3)
4	Demand for Participatory Policymaking	11	73.3%	"Had stakeholders been consulted before the announcement, resistance would have been far lower." (P11)
5	Social Media as a Double-Edged Sword	9	60.0%	"Twitter amplified misinformation faster than our official channels could respond." (P14)

Note. Frequency = number of interviews (out of 15) in which the theme was identified. Analysis followed an abductive protocol: initial codes generated inductively from 15 transcripts; themes refined in iterative dialogue with the study's theoretical framework. Inter-rater reliability: Cohen's kappa = .81, indicating strong agreement. Participant codes P1 to P15 are unique anonymising identifiers; direct quotations are verbatim.

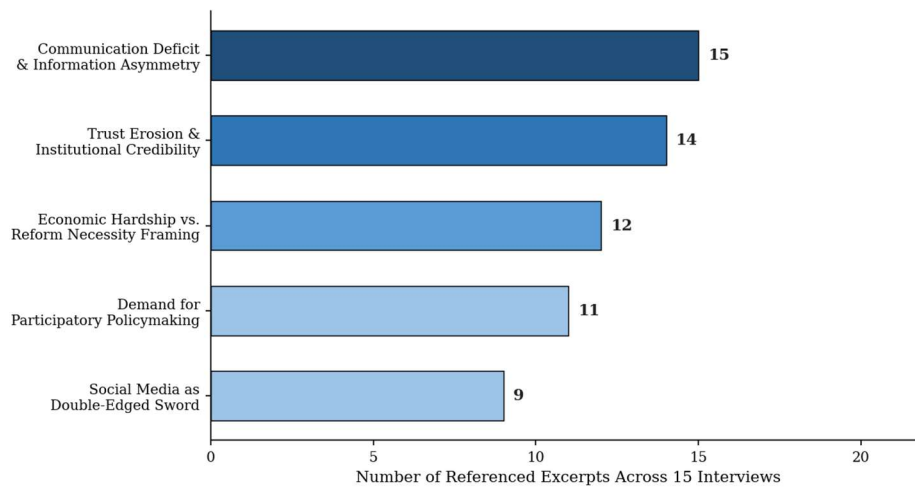


Figure 4

Coded Excerpt Frequency Across Qualitative Themes from In-Depth Interviews (N = 15).

Note. Theme 5 (Social-Media) shows the lowest frequency across the five themes, consistent with its status as a secondary driver of reform perception relative to communication quality failure and trust erosion.

Discussion

The study examined how government marketing communication strategies predict policy acceptance in the specific, historically specific conditions of Nigeria's 2023 fiscal reform program. The convergent quantitative and qualitative findings yield four substantive contributions. Each is addressed in turn.

5.1 The Communication-Trust Nexus as a New Mechanism in Public Sector Marketing Theory

Prior work in public sector marketing, from Walsh (1994) through to Zavattaro et al. (2021), has treated communication quality and institutional trust as related but distinct constructs, typically entering both as independent predictors in acceptance models. The present study challenges that treatment. Three converging pieces of evidence support the communication-trust nexus: the strong bivariate correlation between MCQ and GT ($r = .614$), the strongest inter-predictor association in the model and substantially stronger than any other pair; the independent direct effects of both MCQ ($\beta = .312$) and GT ($\beta = .287$) on PA in the regression; and the qualitative pattern in which participants described trust not as a pre-existing condition but as a perception that was actively constructed and reconstructed through their experiences of government communication.

These three strands together imply a causal sequence that the prior theoretical literature had posited but not empirically specified in a developing economy reform context. Adeola's (2022) public sector brand equity model predicted that communication quality would function as a generative mechanism for trust capital accumulation. Walsh's (1994) foundational framing suggested the same dynamic. Neither study, nor the broader literature they represent, had specified the direction, magnitude, and reform-specific character of this mechanism. The present study does. Communication quality in this context is not a slow-moving background variable; it is a dynamic, event-specific process in which each communication episode immediately affects institutional trust perceptions, which then carry forward to amplify or depress reform acceptance.

A boundary condition applies to the interpretation of this nexus. Cairney (2025) establishes that perfect communication coherence across channels and time is structurally unachievable. The implication is that the nexus is most consequential during the pre-reform announcement window, when trust is still malleable and communication can shape the interpretive frame through which the reform will be evaluated. After implementation, when citizens and civil servants are experiencing the costs directly, the communication-trust dynamic shifts; further communication can slow trust depletion but cannot reverse it at the speed at which it was lost. That timing dimension was not captured in the present cross-sectional design and represents a priority for future longitudinal work.

5.2 The Awareness-Acceptance Gap and the Failure of Information-Led Communication Strategy

Reform Awareness was the weakest predictor in the model ($\beta = .198$). That relative weakness is the study's most practically consequential finding. The standard government response to public resistance to economic reform is an information campaign: more press briefings, more ministerial appearances, more official explanations of the policy rationale. The data show that civil servants who understood the fuel subsidy removal's fiscal logic did not automatically accept it. Their acceptance was governed by whether they trusted the implementing institutions and whether they perceived the cost distribution as fair, neither of which information provision alone addresses.

Maestre-Andres et al. (2019) reached the same conclusion from a different empirical base: in their systematic review of carbon pricing acceptability, policy knowledge was consistently outperformed by procedural and distributive fairness perceptions as a predictor of public support. The qualitative evidence in Theme 3 confirms the same dissociation in Nigeria's reform context. Participants explicitly stated that they understood why the subsidy had to go. Their resistance was not epistemic. It was relational: they did not trust the government to use the fiscal savings wisely, and they did not believe the burden of adjustment would be shared fairly. Information campaigns are incapable of addressing either concern. The higher-leverage levers, supported by both the quantitative model and the qualitative themes, are fairness-signalling policy design and trust-building institutional practice.

5.3 Policy Framing Failure and Communication Quality Failure as Distinct Problems

The qualitative data, particularly Themes 1 and 3, identify a distinction that the quantitative regression model cannot fully capture but that carries practical weight. The government's reform communication exhibited two analytically separate failure modes operating simultaneously.

The communication quality failure is captured by the low MCQ scores. Messages were unclear, inconsistent across ministerial sources, and not cascaded internally before public disclosure. Senior civil servants discovered a major fiscal reform on the news. That is a communication quality failure: a structural absence of the basic processes through which government communicates decisions to its own workforce before announcing them to the public.

The policy framing failure is evidenced in Theme 3. The government had a technically valid economic argument. What it did not have was a narrative frame capable of making that argument credible and emotionally legible to a public already primed to distrust it. The two failure modes require different solutions. Communication quality failures yield to process improvements: structured communication planning, pre-announcement internal briefing protocols, multi-channel deployment calendars. Framing failures require something deeper: narrative architecture that connects short-term sacrifice to credible, time-bounded, verifiable long-term improvement, delivered through trusted non-governmental intermediaries who carry credibility that official

government channels in this context do not. Tsagkroni and Dikaios (2024) and Stephenson (2025) both identify such intermediaries as trust bridges, institutional communication resources that the Nigerian government has systematically failed to deploy in its reform communication.

5.4 Contextual Contributions and the Boundaries of Theoretical Generalization

The study's contextual contribution should be understood as substantive, not merely illustrative. Prior empirical tests of communication quality and trust effects on policy acceptance have been conducted almost entirely in Western democratic settings with strong baseline institutional trust, principally Western Europe and North America (Maestre-Andres et al., 2019; Wester, 2023). Applying and testing the communication-trust nexus in a low-trust, post-colonial, developmentally constrained governance environment produces a finding that cannot be read as a simple replication of Western results in a new setting.

The R-squared of .487 in this study deserves specific comment. It indicates that nearly half the variance in policy acceptance is explained by four communication and trust variables in an environment characterized by chronically low institutional credibility, negative mean scores on every governance-relevant construct, and decades of accumulated distrust. That predictive strength in an adverse context implies that communication investment has potentially high returns precisely because baseline communication quality is so poor. The marginal gain in acceptance per unit improvement in communication quality is large when the starting point is near the floor.

Generalisability constraints must be stated with equal precision. The professionally homogeneous federal civil servant sample limits inference to citizen-level, local government-level, and private sector acceptance dynamics. Cross-sectional data preclude causal inference about the direction of effects between MCQ and GT. The absence of confirmatory factor analysis means that the measurement properties of the five scales in Nigeria's public sector context remain formally unverified. These are not boilerplate limitations: they mark the specific boundaries within which the theoretical claims of this study can be sustained and define the investment agenda for the research programme that should follow it.

Conclusion

Three novel contributions emerge from this study. First, the communication-trust nexus mechanism: marketing communication quality is not merely an independent predictor of policy acceptance but a generative input into institutional trust capital, whose independent effect then amplifies acceptance through a second pathway. That two-pathway mechanism distinguishes the proposed framework from prior additive models of communication and trust in the public sector. Second, the awareness-acceptance gap: reform knowledge, measured directly, does not generate reform acceptance when trust and perceived fairness are low. That finding directly challenges the information deficit assumption that drives most government reform communication strategy. Third, the separation of policy framing failure from communication quality failure as analytically distinct modes of reform communication breakdown, each requiring different institutional solutions.

Five targeted recommendations follow directly from the empirical findings. The first addresses Theme 1 and the low MCQ scores. Every major fiscal reform announcement should be preceded by a structured Internal Communication Cascade, a ministerial briefing protocol that ensures Grade Level 12 and above officers are equipped with key messages, question-and-answer briefings, and implementation guidance at least two weeks before public disclosure. Civil servants should not learn about government reforms from news broadcasts. The second addresses the PF predictor and the framing failure in Theme 3. A Reform Fairness Communication Package should accompany every major fiscal reform, foregrounding distributional impact data, specific benefit redistribution

mechanisms with named delivery timelines, and verifiable milestones that convert the reform from an open-ended sacrifice into a bounded transaction. The third addresses Theme 4 and the participatory demand identified across eleven interviews. A National Reform Communication Forum should be institutionalized as a pre-announcement mechanism, convening civil society organisations, professional bodies, frontline civil servants, and community representatives to co-design the communication strategy before any public announcement. The fourth addresses Theme 5 and the digital communication evidence from Bany Mohammed et al. (2025). A Digital Narrative Management Unit should be established within the Federal Ministry of Information, with the specific mandate and technical capacity to monitor social media reform discourse in near real-time and to route counter-narratives through trusted non-governmental intermediaries rather than through official government accounts, whose credibility in the social media environment is already compromised. The fifth addresses the dynamic capabilities argument of Miller and Ghaffarzadegan (2025). Government communication units should invest in what this study terms Dynamic Communication Capability: the organizational infrastructure for sensing public sentiment shifts, reconfiguring messaging assets, and redeploying communication resources as reform phases evolve from announcement through implementation to outcome reporting.

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