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SYSTEMIC REVIEW OF BRANDS AND BRAND MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA'S COVID-19 SCENARIO

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Abstract

Globally Businesses are faced with numerous challenges they contend with on a daily basis in terms of input and output indices depending on the demand of each business and location, but coping with pandemic aside the normal challenges associated with businesses could be more disastrous as it was evident during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of communication in actively engaging customers to make a brand survive despite stiff market/industry competition and the best communication channels needed to achieve this, most especially during a pandemic outbreak such as COVID-19. This article deployed a systematic literature review in gathering data from relevant scientific and accredited published researches collected from Elsevier, Google Scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate, and ScienceDirect using appropriate keywords relevant to the topic using the principle of the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA). This paper reveals that social media presents a positive, engaging and sharing platform in preparing, gathering, responding, and educating people about products and services, most especially during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

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Introduction

Creating product identity and brand equity is a goal that any business that worth its salt must strive to attain considering the stiff competition in the current globalised business environment. In a critical study, branding has limitations because it is confined to corporate organizations that have an iota of national and global outlook in terms of processes, production, packaging and positioning whether in product/service for enhanced optimal performance and delivery to the end-users who could either be customers or consumers (Kotler, 2015). Brand or Branding is undoubtedly one concept that resonates in 21st Century marketing communications, as it can give a distinct identity to products, organizations, firms, services, corporate entities and none corporate associations that values its underpinnings (Sung & Park, 2011). However, the brand has overtime received little attention in terms of literature and scholarship despite its usage in a highly competitive globalised business environment among organizations with one form of product or services (Sylvie & Schmitz, 2012). This to some scholars is caused by the unavailability of systematic research with theoretical dispositions, like those available lack coherence to address contemporary business concerns not to consider pandemics such as Covid-19 (Van den Bulck, Tambuyzer & Ackx, 2011). Although, some Brand Managers see brands as a mere buzzword to drive their media campaigns, rather than a deliberate and strategic tool to scoop customer's loyalty to an organization's product or services, as this has continued to affect the way brands are managed over time. These challenges notwithstanding, businesses or products are positioned and activated to meet specified needs of the customers and to also accrued profit to such organizations that have put them in place (Voorveld, Bronner, Neijens & Smit, 2013).

Above all, brands represent products and services but their management is much more significant because of the dynamic nature of the business environment globally. For emphasis, businesses are set up for profit maximization but they must contend with the dynamics of unavoidable stiff competition because brands that must stand a test of time must be positioned to withstand pressures that

may arise from any competition (Kapferer, 2012). Under normal circumstance, brands have numerous challenges to contend with aside stiff competition, which may arise from getting raw materials for products or meeting the expectations of their customers to government regulatory frameworks or distribution chains of command that might not be business-friendly etc. (De Chernatony, McDonald & Wallace, 2011). Brands that have stood a test of time, whether in product line or services would attest to encumbrances associated with maintaining brand equity among customers but have focused more on sustainability despite all challenges (Geelhoed, Samhoud, & Hamurcu, 2013; Picard, 2011).

Historically the Coronavirus was first found in Wuhan, in Hubei Province of China sometimes in December 2019. by early March 2020, more than 100 000 infections have been confirmed worldwide (Garfin, Silver & Holman, 2020; Giwa, Desai & Jagoda, 2020; Sun & Guan, 2020). Precisely 11th March 2020, World Health Organization's Director-General declared the virus as a pandemic because of its faster spread to over 114 countries with thousands of fatalities recorded (WHO, 2020). The pandemic currently ravaging the globe has made the challenges associated with brands more severe, therefore the need for effective and efficient brand management to mitigate its severity. If a stiff business competition has been a major factor brand to contend with aside other factors, pandemics are much more in many regards because they represent emergency public health situations that threaten the existence of the human race and her livelihood. The logical debate is not that brands are not positioned to compete favourably with their contemporaries but the question is, how would they do this favourably in pandemics such as Covid-19 that comes with the guideline of social distancing? Does it mean that businesses/brands that provide direct services to customers would be wiped out with the adverse effect of such guideline? If no, what are the best or appreciable methods brands could adopt to better communicate with their clients and stay alive in times such as this? These are the thrust of this paper while providing insight into a further pragmatic approach to better brand management in future pandemics.

Methodology

This article deployed a systematic literature review in gathering data from relevant scientific and accredited published researches collected from Elsevier, Google Scholar, PubMed, Research Gate, and Science Direct using appropriate keywords relevant to the topic such as brads, brand management, management, pandemics, Covid-19, Coronavirus, businesses, social media using the principle of the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA)(Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Ali & Kurasawa, 2020; Brindha,

Jayaseelan & Kadeswara, 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Depoux et al., 2020; Rufai & Bunce, 2020; Sahni & Sharma, 2020; Sharma, Seo, Meng, Rambhatla, Dua & Liu, 2020; Tasnim et al., 2020). In general term, PRISMA comprises of a four-phase procedure of minimum "evidence-based" analysis and reporting which involves existing published literature via "systematic reviews and meta-analysis", this study, it is primarily a process of evaluating published literature that focuses on the subject matter of this paper Moher, Shamseer, Clarke, Ghersi, Liberati, Petticrew & Stewart, 2015).

The eligibility of articles selected for the study is premised on the fact that it must cover brands, and brand management in a pandemic as well as Covid-19. Furthermore, the eligible literature selected criteria were (1) original (2) empirical studies (3) peer-reviewed (Tang et al., 2019), (4) published and must have covered information regarding brands, brand management, pandemics, Covid-19, management and social media (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Ali & Kurasawa, 2020; Brindha, Jayaseelan & Kadeswara, 2020; Rufai & Bunce, 2020; Obi-Ani et al. (2020); Sahni & Sharma, 2020). The selection criteria for the materials selected were guided by PRISMA guidelines (Katurura, 2018; Wang et al., 2019. The process was terminated when saturation was reached, having covered the paper's study area.

Brands and Brand Management: The Connections

Brands are generally considered to be an entity, firm, organization, groups, association, business or products and services with a distinct identity (Sindik & Graybeal, 2011). Typically, brands are used to distinguish one product from another, with the target of attaining brand equity among customers/consumers of a product or service (Stipp, 2012;Strube, 2010). Apart from serving as a distinct identity for product and services, brands can be an extension of an organization's future opportunities full of promise that they can grow into to further launch new products and services, as forces of demand and supply play their part. For instance, a product targeted at servicing the need of children that has successfully built a strong reputation through brand management along this line could see itself metamorphosing to meeting the needs of these children when they become adults and parents (Sullivan, & Mersey, 2010).

Typically, strong brands with brand identity are viable assets that can determine the success of a business, product or service any day. The best way this could be achieved is through continuous improvement in creating awareness for a product or service in available media, pandemics notwithstanding. Also purchasing power, government policies, introduction of new brand that meets the needs assisted in this process. Customers can only buy products they are fully aware of, once the communication line is made open between the

organization and its customers, this would create an avenue for effective customer relations which in the long run would result in brand equity (Chan-Olmsted, 2011).

Secondly, brand or branding is all about identity, i.e., distinctive characteristics that give outward expression to a product or service. Some scholars refer to this sometimes as brand personality, attribute and promise. With this, they meant that a brand is the distinctive advantage and benefits that a product and services naturally confer on its customers with a more complex desire to come back for more once such brand meets their expectations (Coffey & Cleary, 2011). A brand is all about impression and expression as put forward by an organization through its product or service. Although, other scholars like McDowell argue that brands are all about concrete visual characteristics in terms of name, logo, colour packaging and size which helps to promote and improve on existing product or services (McDowell, 2011). These scholars from their point of view based their argument only on the aesthetic value of branding and branding are much more than this. Branding does not only serve as a mechanism for distinguishing an organization's products or services but serves as a tool for decision making to improve whatever product or service an organization presents to the market (Lowe, 2011).

Central to brand is the unique selling point (USP) of a product or service. A product or service might be able to do many things but it is made for just one unique thing (Oyedeji & Hou, 2010). For instance, aside from the fact that an Android phone can be used to make a call, send text messages, record sounds, videos, email, browse the internet, engage in numerous social media platforms, serves as television, radio, clock, alarm, scheduler, diary, wallet, game, calculator, calendar, contacts, documents, banking, books, meeting, applications, escape etc. it is a mobile phone after all. In other words, no matter how multitasking a product or service might be, organizations must thrive to identify and keep in touch with their USP reality, as this would help them in the effective management of their brands in and out of pandemics (Mierzejewska, 2011).

The process that sees to it that a brand meets the expectations of both an organization and its customers is regarded as brand management. The connection between brand and brand management is seeing to the fact that brands succeed through strategic positioning of a product despite stiff competition in the market place through product differentiation. With brand management, an organization engages in strategic practice to seeking positive attitudes of customers towards their product or services, thereby increasing their patronage, consumption, loyalty through cutting edge of strong brand differentiation amongst its equals (Nienstedt, Huber & Seelmann, 2012).

Covid-19 Pandemic as an Emergency Business Situation

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic came with an adverse effect on businesses globally and Nigeria is no exemption. Considering the nation's large population, poor healthcare facilities, widespread poverty, illiteracy and lack of infrastructural facilities to support compliance with preventive measures was challenging (Nwozor, Okorie, Okidu & Oshewolo 2020). Historically, Nigeria in the past has had its share of an emergency health crisis with the outbreaks of infectious diseases such as Lassa fever yellow fever, monkeypox, cholera to Ebola just to mention a few. Despite the adverse effects of this disease, none of them caused the level of economic, psychology and sociological hardship Covid-19 brought on brands globally. Adom (2020), maintained that the Covid-19 pandemic brought the global health system to tumbling on its knees, while others regarded it as one of the 'most' mortal threat humanity has seen in history. (Tasnim, Hossain & Mazumder, 2020; Chan et al., 2020)

Since the index case was recorded on 27 February 2020, businesses and organizations have continued to face untoward economic hardship in terms of keeping their brands above board, aside from striving to pay their workers' wages. Covid-19 brought to fore how some brands depend largely on the financial institutions for support to survive and when many could not sell their product to breakeven due to the government's decision to restrict movements by imposing lockdown on the nation, some brands had to go into extinction. In emergencies, blames are not traded but everyone is on the go to see to the survival of whoever the victim is, such was the scenario that Covid-19 presents and brands have to live with this reality and strategize on how to live above this at all cost. A brand is about the survival of product and services to maximise profit insight by an organization/business entity, and sound health is needed to continuously drive this in a competitive business arena, so the need to observe Covid-19 guidelines as stipulated by the World Health Organization and as reiterated by the Federal Government when the disease first broke out in Nigeria.

Covid-19 presents emergency health and business situations, as both depend largely on each other. It is only a healthy workforce that can sustain the brand of an organization and only healthy customers or the public that would patronise the product or services of an organization. This scenario is catastrophic because safety cannot be guaranteed during emergencies and this leads to continuous panic among individuals in a social context, a situation that does not help businesses' situation in any way.

Brand Management in Pandemics

Management is the hallmark of any meaningful business endeavour because it accords those involved in the day-to-day running of an organization/business entity the opportunity to improve on the process for effective customer's satisfaction and service delivery. If there is any time, effective management is highly required, it is this season of Covid-19 pandemic where brands/organizations and businesses are battling the grave danger that the pandemic presents with copious survival strategies to wade through the season.

Brand management cannot be extensively discoursed without looking at what management entails. Discourse in management was started by an American, an Engineer by profession, Frederick Taylor who masterminded techniques for studying the operations that are used to set standards for daily work. These techniques became strongholds in business and organizational management as experts applied them to a wide range of problems relating to businesses globally.

Regardless of the organization or business entity, management is a generic term used for describing the methods, the expertise of the resourceful organization, planning, directing and control of such organization's day-to-day business operations. Three other functions added by Albarran (2010), are facilitating, communicating and negotiating. A critical consideration of these functions shows that communicating applies directly to the Covid-19 scenario and social media present manifold opportunities for information to spread like wide fire more than the virus without much managerial effort despite its inherent negative attributes of fake news and misinformation (Ali & Kurasawa, 2020; Tasnim et al., 2020).

In times of pandemic where journalists/media practitioners are even confused about keeping safe on their primary assignments which entails providing information to the public, social media covers the gaps and fills it with a much-desired avenue to communicate directly with employees, customers and other partners in the same line of business without the danger the Covid-19 pandemic presents. To González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco (2020), social media provide positive and negative roles in disseminating Covid-19 pandemic information which breaks national boundaries. In today's world, social media has become the central point for information outsourcing for millions and billions of users worldwide, most especially on health and business-related issues.

The uniqueness of the social media platform is that it allows users to create a personal account, varied content for different purposes, which include business contents, and he/she is at liberty without compromising the law of the land to share widely with others within or

outside his/her geographical location without limitations (Hossain, Kam, Kong, Wigand & Bossomaier, 2016).

Notably, users the world over use various hashtags# on social media in sharing Covid-19 pandemic related news/information. Prevalent hashtags# such as #StayHome, #StaySafe, #StayTogether, #StayHomeHomeSafe,#Coronavirus,#COVID-19,#QuarantineandChill #Quarantine#COVID19,#LockDownNow,#Covidiots#SocialDistancin, #LockDown, #FlattenTheCurve, #TogetherAtHome, #NewNormal amongst others were used in disseminating Covid-19 related information. This served during the lockdown as a platform to keep the public abreast with the latest information on the pandemic and for business to communicate directly with their clients to keep in touch and also assure them of valuable service delivery despite the pandemic. Social media platforms are used globally because of ease of access and low cost in operating them. For instance, countries like China, the United Kingdom, United States, Nigeria and other countries increased Covid-19 awareness, get the latest information to reduce self and general isolation and stress-related issues relating to businesses and other endeavours (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020; Mourad, Srour, Harmanani, Jenainati & Arafeh, 2020).

The social media platforms provide a swift communication network, cum increased engagement between an organization and with her public, as this creates an avenue for them to respond to the real-time needs of their customers (Yasri & Wiwanitkit, 2018). No doubt, social media platforms have a substantial impact on organizations, individual users, and other stakeholders who pride themselves as active users based on convenience and ease of use. There are unquantifiable data available on social media platforms that has a direct impact on decision-making on brand management, product marketing and organizational policy implementation at all managerial levels in alignment with business sustainability. In times of an outbreak such as the coronavirus pandemic, millions of people both at individual and organization levels rely heavily on the information from social media to make informed decisions and this is a plus for brands globally, as they kept engaging their clients and customers via their social media handles due to the social distancing regulations (Tasnim et al., 2020). Copious data are available through "social media analytics" to attest to this claim (Hossain et al., 2016), which in the long run had an impact on the informed decision-making of loyal customers due to continuous engagement by the organization via the social media platforms during the pandemic.

Above all, social media platforms' role during the Covid-19 pandemic is quite significant, as evidence shows how the platforms provide public awareness thereby giving an advantage to brands to keep up with managing their products and services, despite the emergency

health crisis that the Covid-19 pandemic presents. With access to the empirical literature, this paper concludes that social media enables communication and information sharing among organisations, clients, customers, consumers, relevant practitioners in the same line of business, government agencies, health workers service providers and the general public who either wants to make a business transaction or wants to market their products or services to those concerned, most especially during the coronavirus pandemic.

Limitations and Implications

This paper has argued that social media platforms present a viable opportunity for brands to effectively manage their products or services despite the social distancing guidelines that are associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. No doubt, this study has substantially made a valid argument but this argument is limited because there is a need for an extensive study in terms of scope for this argument to be generalizable via testing validated hypothesis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Globally, creating product identity and brand equity is a goal that any business that worth its salt must strive to attain considering the stiff competition in the current globalised business environment of which Covid-19 is one of it. Brand managers must strive to make their products and services customers' choice pandemics notwithstanding. Brand or Branding is undoubtedly one concept that resonates in 21st Century marketing communications, as it can give a distinct identity to products, organizations, firms, services, corporate entities and none corporate associations that values its underpinnings, as Covid-19 pandemics despite social distancing does not limit communication most especially when business switch to the social media platforms in emergency health and business situations such as Covid-19 pandemic. As core brand management enterprises, organizations must endeavour to engage in the following during pandemics as recommended thus:

Facilitating

Aside from selling, Brand Managers must motivate employees who are finding it hard to cope with the new normal and other social realities accompanying pandemics. The major instrument for facilitating, however, is not limited to rewards but making available required resources that would Fastrack the achievement of organizational objectives. Brand Managers, as key facilitators, must encourage top management to empower the employees with requisite resources that would facilitate continuous interaction between them and their clients i.e., making seamless social media accounts highly active.

Communicating

During emergencies, confusion sets in and lack of communication creates more of such communication, most especially in pandemics. Communication is the core of brand management function that permeates all areas of meaningful business activity between an organization and its clients. Brand Managers, in particular, have the responsibility to communicate with employees and other collaborators who need and expect them to keep them abreast of the latest information as it regards satisfying the customers of the organization. In times of pandemics, formal lines of communication such as newsletters, memos, and performance reviews may be temporarily suspended due to the social distancing guidelines that are associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. It is however recommended that emphasis should be laid more on informal lines of communication which comprises social media at such times as this. Brand Managers must not isolate themselves from the reality associated with pandemics but they must establish a participatory climate that is beneficial to their organization and their customers in terms of keeping all lines of communication open at all times. At such times like this, they must encourage communication from employees by granting access in diverse ways, through voice and email, regular online meetings in which ideas and concerns are shared, and an open-door innovative policy which gives room for experience transfer, as opposed to having know-it-all attitude.

Negotiating

The role of Brand Managers in organizations globally is that they are to serve as negotiators in many situations. Their negotiation skills must cover that of employees, this may involve salaries and welfare packages, maximum client satisfaction, bargaining with partners, competitors, government agencies, guilds, union etc, as well as making requests from low and mid-level managers to find out how the organization is faring in terms of achieving her objectives considering the emergency business situation Covid-19 presents. For instance, acquisition, the fee for copyrighted materials, licence fees, news services, local productions and other forms of negotiation that may involve owners, regulators, community leaders, business organizations and members of the public are all negotiable. Whatever type of negotiation Brand Managers should always endeavour to seek the best possible solution to keep their organization's operations and social media presents a viable platform to negotiate directly with whoever they desire and pandemics notwithstanding.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Contribution

All the authors participated equally in the entire process of preparing the manuscript.

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