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NAVIGATING THE SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING STRATEGIES DURING THE COVID-19 ERA IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

COVID-19 is the worst pandemic in human history in on the scale and extent of global spread, casualties, economic impact, and negative impact on public health. The COVID-19 crisis has also had an impact integrated marketing communication implementation method (IMC) and related costs in the enterprise. Digital Marketing, as part of IMC, has received more attention and investment during this crisis. Most of Customers have moved online and are spending more time on the internet. Customers are at the heart of all marketing activities. digital marketing strategies adopted by organizations to connect with customers also changed during this pandemic. This study focuses on digital marketing practices in the post-COVID-19 period. The study analyzed digital marketing strategies, growth drivers, changing approaches, challenges and strategies, Social Media Trends during COVID-19.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Digital Marketing, social media, Social Media Marketing Strategies

Introduction

In light of the COVID-19 outbreak, businesses worldwide have encountered unprecedented difficulties in upholding their marketing strategies. Social media marketing has become a vital instrument in Nigeria for connecting with customers and ensuring the smooth flow of business operations. this paper investigates the approaches used by Nigerian companies in effectively utilising social media marketing amid the COVID-19 pandemic era. (Das et al., 2022); Xu et al., 2020) have conducted research on the topic of consumer behaviour in the digital age. In recent times, experts have emphasised that embracing digital technology is an efficacious tactic in coping with the ongoing pandemic. During the pandemic, numerous medical facilities and physicians worldwide have embraced telemedicine as a means to provide medical care to patients. The amount of remote healthcare appointments for individuals with COVID-19 has shown a consistent rise since the start of the pandemic (Greenhalgh et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 lockdown, customers' usage of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, and WhatsApp has increased significantly (He & Harris, 2020). Hence, it has become crucial for businesses to utilise digital marketing as a means of connecting with customers. The adoption of digital marketing communications has consistently risen in the B2B sector over the last ten years (Pandey et al, 2020). Nevertheless, it is crucial to have a thorough comprehension of digital marketing and its strategic application by various organizations, regardless of their business-to-business (B2B) or business-to-consumer (B2C) nature, in order to effectively promote and establish their products and services. Crucial for constructing your individual digital marketing plan.

Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted business activities, leading to the need for businesses in Nigeria to adapt their marketing strategies. The performance of the businesses prior to the pandemic was on the rise but since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, this performance scale has dropped drastically due to the curfews and restrictions placed by the authorities and this has resulted in a huge loss on the part of the businesses. One means of addressing this major problem will be to develop a means where the businesses can reach out to customers and deliver their product or services to them in their homes despite the restrictions put in place.

This however, is a major problem as most businesses do not have the wherewithal to apply social media marketing effectively and as a result their businesses are death a huge blow and sometimes lead to them folding up the business. The lack of social media literacy has placed most businesses in a disastrous state as they have no means of reaching out to customers and delivering their products or services which would have meant they stay in business despite the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Irrespective of the fact that the social media is freely available to businesses, most of them still lack the literacy to use it credibly and effectively and as such their products are not well represented in the large market and this results in huge losses and financial decline which is a major problem this research looks to resolve.

This paper examines the challenges faced by Nigerian businesses in effectively utilising social media marketing during this period.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the challenges faced by Nigerian businesses in utilising social media marketing strategies during the COVID-19 era.
2. To explore effective social media marketing strategies adopted by Nigerian businesses during the COVID-19 era.
3. To evaluate the impact of social media marketing on business performance during the COVID-19 era in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The Impact of Covid-19 on Social Media Marketing

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on social media marketing. With people spending more time online, brands have had to adjust their strategies to meet changing consumer behaviour. According to a recent survey, there has been a 22% increase in social media usage since the start of the pandemic. This presents both opportunities and challenges for marketers. Mason et al. (2021). One of the biggest challenges that marketers face is the need to be sensitive to the current climate. Consumers are looking for brands to be empathetic and understanding of their situation. This means that marketers need to be mindful of the tone and messaging they use in their campaigns. Additionally, with many businesses facing financial difficulties, marketers need to be creative in finding ways to engage with consumers without appearing opportunistic (Mason et al, 2021).

Influencer Marketing Strategies

Influencer marketing has become even more important during the pandemic as people turn to social media for connection and entertainment. By partnering with influencers, brands can tap into their engaged and loyal audiences to reach new customers and build brand awareness. (Grin, 2018). One example of successful influencer marketing during the pandemic is the #StayHome campaign by Airbnb. They partnered with influencers to create content that encouraged people to stay home and find alternative ways to travel. This not only helped promote Airbnb's brand values but also provided value to their audience during a difficult time. (Radhika 2019)

Social Media Advertising Strategies

Social media marketing has become an essential tool for businesses to communicate with their customers, share information, and promote their products and services during the COVID-19 era. By using social media to communicate with customers, businesses can demonstrate their commitment to customer service and build relationships with their followers (Litsa, 2020; Emetumah et al., 2022).

Marketing Problem

Brush et al. (2009) found that the marketing system is another problem that companies or firms face in growth, as many companies have problems communicating product features, marketing efforts, and implementation. sales to win and retain customers, and to price products and services attractively., establish effective distribution channels and continuously develop products to support sales. This poses a significant challenge in marketing as it is not ideal to

exclusively define your product for a specific group or market (Asian Productivity Organization, 2001). Despite this fact, Brush et al. The authors of a 2009 study contend that extensive marketing campaigns are not the most effective means of achieving success. In contrast, they suggest that cultivating personal connections, utilising word-of-mouth recommendations, fostering repeat business, and employing targeted marketing strategies are more efficient and triumphant approaches, both in terms of cost and outcome.

Technological Problem

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) typically have lower productivity levels and struggle to compete with larger companies. This is primarily due to their limited utilisation of advanced technology, failure to fully utilise machinery, and insufficient funding for technological improvements. Consequently, SMEs face various technological challenges, as they largely rely on existing knowledge rather than actively adopting new innovations. Many managers lack the knowledge to utilise the correct technology for their business, leaving them unable to select the suitable technology for their organisation. The prevailing belief was that small-scale businesses have a different position than large-scale businesses when it comes to technology accessibility. The goal is not solely to have access to technology or to enhance existing technology, but rather to utilise these as tools for achieving dynamic efficiency and fostering innovation (Harvie & lee, 2005; Anorue et al., 2021).

Macpherson and Holt (2007) found that the expansion of a company is influenced by the expertise and abilities of its managers. Managers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are typically less qualified when compared to leaders in large enterprises (LEs) (Tannock et al., 2002). As a result, they tend to select lower-quality production technology, lack proper accounting systems, and underestimate the necessary funding (Asian Productivity Organization, 2001). Because of financial constraints and the challenges of pulling employees away from production, small and medium-sized enterprises generally allocate less resources towards formal training compared to larger enterprises.

Theoretical Framework

The research was guided by Social Marketing theory

Social Marketing Theory

Social Marketing Theory, which emphasizes the use of social media platforms to influence target audiences (Nansel, 2022). The framework was utilised to understand how Nigerian businesses can effectively employ social media marketing strategies during the COVID-19 era. Social marketing theory is a blend of theories and tactics used to determine how socially useful information can be promoted to the appropriate audience(s). Businesses, corporations, and organizations are “accumulating vast amounts of evidence about human behaviour and how to change it” (Bagdasian, 2022). Social marketing focuses on the 4Ps including price, product, place and promotion. In social marketing theory, there are 6 parts that help break down its real meaning and application: raise awareness, target the right audience, reinforce the message, cultivate the image or impression, stimulate interest and deliver desired results. The ultimate goal is to understand consumer behaviour and attitudes, and satisfy their wants and needs, before finally getting the message across on a product.

Social marketing theory was developed by Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman in the 1970s. Their definition includes social marketing as "the process of applying marketing principles and techniques to create, communicate, and deliver value in order to influence the behaviours of target audiences in a socially beneficial way." (Public health, safety, environment and community) as well as the target audience". (Kotler et al., 2012). The main focus of this theory is on consumer behaviours and attitudes. To view a product, it is not enough to sell it. As product sellers, we need to understand how these people act, think, and react to tailor the way we sell to consumers. As mentioned earlier, social marketing theory will be based on the 4Ps – price, product, place and promotion. The product must be a wish. Price is important because consumers have to pay a price to get what they want, and most of the time the consumer concessions are justified. Location is where the target audience can be found and where they will grow best.

Population of the Study

The population of this study consists of (20) small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) precisely in Yenagoa Bayelsa state, Nigeria

Sample Size

The sample size of the population is 20 respondents. This sample representation is premised on the fact that getting the entire population across the State for the research has huge financial implications for the researcher. More so, this research is guided by time, thus, the time period allotted for the study was not enough to go around the length and breadth of the State to meet with respondents.

Method

This study utilised a qualitative research approach to gain insights into the experiences of Nigerian businesses. Semi-structured interviews was conducted with a sample of business owners and marketing professionals, focusing on their social media marketing strategies during the pandemic. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes and patterns.

This research was designed with the sole aim of delivering credible results bearing in mind that the data obtained could be useful for future references. Hence, primary source data was sought after simply because there was a need to gather information from first hand users of social media platforms for business transactions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research made use of samples from the main actors of business in Bayelsa state. The purposive sampling technique was employed and the data was obtained via deliveries of copies of questionnaires using social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

In this research, a judgmental sampling technique was used to select a sample of (20) business precisely in Bayelsa state Nigeria. In evaluating this research study, data which range from 2020 to 2022 covering a period of three years was used.

Media marketing and COVID-19 are the independent variable and are proxied by Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

The survey was carried out from July to August 2023. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents using the 'Google form' method, i.e., this was done with the help of 5 research assistants. This will gave the respondents enough time and comfort to critically respond to the items on the questionnaire.

The instrument utilized for the study was a questionnaire. It is divided into two sections; A and B. Section A makes up the participant's business profile which includes the age of the business, name, nature of the business, and so on. It was necessary to verify the business profile in order to ensure that the business was in operation and most importantly utilizes social media platforms in its operations. Section B is made up of questions that assess how well the SMEs know and apply numerous social media marketing in their business operations. This section also addresses inquiries regarding social media marketing.

Perceived usefulness (PEU) and perceived ease of use professional employer organization (PEO) are also assessed in this section.

The questionnaire used was such that it was able to get the necessary information on the mediating role of social media between factors affecting the performance of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions asked were closed-ended in order to assist the respondents in giving quick and succinct responses so as to aid in the research data collation.

Data Analysis

The survey data obtained from 'Google form' were analyzed utilising descriptive statistics. Additionally, the quality of participants' responses was assessed using descriptive statistics, as well as percentages and tables. This action was required in order to establish the credibility of the data and to make the presentation easily comprehensible. The questionnaire utilised was designed effectively to obtain essential information regarding the intermediary function of social media in the impact of various factors on business performance amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate the collection of research data, the interview questions were designed to be closed-ended, allowing respondents to

provide prompt and concise answers. An example of the questionnaire utilised is included in the appendix, consisting of two sections (A and B). Section A consists of the participant's business profile, which encompasses details like the business's age, name, nature, and other relevant information. In order to guarantee the business's activity and its effective use of social media platforms, it was essential to authenticate the business profile. Section B consists of questions that evaluate the SMEs' familiarity and utilisation of various social media marketing strategies in their business activities. This section covers inquiries about social media marketing as well. In this section, the assessment also includes evaluating the level of perceived usefulness (PEU) and perceived ease of use (PEO). are also assessed in this section. allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced, strategies adopted, and impact observed in the social media marketing practices of Nigerian businesses during the COVID-19 era.

Analysis and Findings

A total of 20 questionnaires was distributed to different businesses all upon reception of the results all 20 questionnaires were filed a total of 100%

Business Profile

1) Years of operation:

- a) Below 3 {12%}
- b) 4 – 10 years {52%}
- c) 10 – 20 years {25%}
- d) 20 and above {11%}

2) Nature of business:

- a) Software {16%}
- b) Photography Service {47%}

3) Does your firm make use of social media Yes {100%} No {0%}

The first part consists of questions that provide detailed information about the profiles of companies. From the results obtained, it can be seen that most of the assessed companies have been in business for 4 to 10 years while only a few of them have been in business for more than 20 years. It is necessary to know the number of years of operation to determine the level of experience of companies that are eligible for assessment. Another parameter is the nature of the business which shows that the majority of companies are rated as photography services, while the least are those that do business with software companies. This is especially due to the large number of photography studios in Bayelsa state and most of them use social networks in their business activities. The final parameter for analysis in a company profile is to determine if the company uses social media in its operations.

4) To what extent do you make use of social media in your firm?

- a) Very well {78%} b) partially {17%} c) rarely {5%} d)

5) Do you use these social media platforms?

Digital marketing technique	Yes	No
Facebook	95%	5%
Instagram	60%	40%
WhatsApp	97%	3%
Twitter	52%	48%
Others	5%	95%

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

6) How would you rate the level of use of the following social media platforms on a scale of 1-5 in your business?

Keys: 1= Very poor, 2=Fair, 3=Good, 4=Very Good

Social media platform	2	3	4	5
Facebook	0%	11%	22%	67%
Instagram	4%	54%	27%	15%
WhatsApp	0%	13%	13%	74%
Twitter	7%	57%	23%	13%

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

7) To what extent has the application of social media affected the following business operations during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1= very low, 2= Average, 3= High, 4= Very High

BUSINESS OPERATIONS	1	2	3	4
Marketing	5%	7%	13%	75%
Sales and selling	8%	10%	12%	70%
Financial performance	8%	11%	18%	63%
Operational efficiency	9%	13%	21%	57%
Please specify others and rate	8%	16%	39%	37%

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

8) To what extent has the application of social media affected the following financial growth measures?

BUSINESS OPERATIONS	1	2	3	4
Customer base	6%	8%	22%	64%
Sales and turnover	9%	13%	20%	58%
Profitability	11%	14%	27%	48%
Market share	7%	12%	17%	64%
Working capital	7%	18%	29%	46%
Financial growth	5%	6%	21%	68%
Please specify others and rate.....				

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

9) Since the introduction of social media in your business, how has been the profit performance?

Steadily decreasing [10%] Decreasing [12%] Static [14%] Increasing [43%] Steadily Increasing [20%]

10) What is the percentage increase in your customer base and market share owing from the use of social media?

a) 0 - 30% {45} b) 31 - 50% {68} c) 51 – 100% {128} d) 100% and above {13}

11) What is the percentage increase in the overall performance of the business owing from the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic?

a) 0 - 30% {43} b) 31 - 50% {82} c) 51 – 100% {117} d) 100% and above {12}

12) Do you think the benefits of social media outweighs the cost incurred

YES {78%} NO {22%}

13) Do you think social media usage has an effect on your turnover?

YES (87%) NO (13%)

Analysis

This section took an in-depth look at the operational strategies adopted by the company with a focus on the benefits of using social media in terms of consumer response and profitability. The extent to which they use social media was

one of the metrics analyzed and it was found that the majority of companies used social media to a very large extent in their business. them and no company excludes media from their operations.

Among the social media platforms used by businesses, WhatsApp is used the most by Facebook and the least used is Twitter. This is partly because WhatsApp has become more popular than other social media platforms in recent times, and coupled with the fact that it is easy to use, it boasts of reaching a large number of consumers. This was confirmed in the next parameter which unravels the most used social media platform and it is found that WhatsApp is used the most, followed by the least used is Twitter. (Ndife, 2020) agrees with this study that social media usage has a significant positive relationship with the performance of SMEs in Nigeria, specifically in terms of sales performance, customer base expansion, and profitability.

In addition, it's important to know how social media is impacting some key metrics of a company's business and transactions during the pandemic. The parameters considered are marketing, sales and sales, operational efficiency, etc. It has been found that the impact of social media is greatly felt in marketing. This is due to the fact that one of the sole purposes of using social networks is to reach consumers through promotional advertisements and thus build a consumer base. (Jahid et al., 2021) highlights the importance of social media marketing for MSMEs, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides valuable insights into the factors influencing the adoption of social media marketing and the positive impact it has on MSME performance.

Another important aspect of social media's impact during the COVID-19 pandemic is selling and selling, as it has helped SMEs to sell their products and offer their services at a rapid pace during the pandemic. This also has a fair impact on operational efficiency, and this is because some employees are not familiar with the strategies required to leverage and use social media in business applications, thus effectively. low activity. (Tawa et al., 2023) concludes that social media marketing has a positive relationship with SME performance in the North-East region of Nigeria. It emphasises the importance of incorporating social media marketing strategies into the business practices of SMEs in this region to enhance their overall success.

In addition, the extent to which social media has a financial impact on business growth in terms of customer base, sales and revenue, profitability, market share, working capital, and financial growth has been investigated. analysis and it was found that the use of social media has a positive impact on the growth of business as they record revenue and a positive customer base leads to increased finance growth.

Most businesses have improved financial growth despite the COVID-19 pandemic; This is due to the adoption of a social media marketing strategy during the pandemic to overcome restrictions and lockdowns. (Olubukola, 2022) emphasised that the social media engagement strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic led to audience growth and engagement.

The majority of those surveyed also mentioned that they have gained increased profits from adopting social media marketing strategies. This increase in profits is so far insignificant but for the social media strategies used.

There has also been a significant increase in customer base and market share due to the adoption of social media by SMEs. More than half of the assessed SMEs declared positive revenue for this metric.

The use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted SMEs to continually adopt social media marketing strategies, and half of respondents said they saw an increase in overall performance. despite the pandemic. It is a known fact that technology is expensive and the adoption of social media marketing technology will require the financial strength of business, but the return on investment seems to be worth it as more than half the number of respondents indicated that the benefits of social media far outweigh the costs incurred.

The final question in this section is about the impact of social media on the revenue of business and more than half of them said they have positive revenue, which implies that it is advisable to apply social media marketing.

The COVID-19 pandemic, rather than being a threat to business has become a growth vehicle for business that have adopted social media in their business strategy. Social media use was uncommon before the pandemic, but government restrictions and lockdowns have led to its adoption, which has benefited small and medium-sized businesses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media marketing during the Covid-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges and opportunities for marketers. It is important to adapt to the new normal and be creative in our approach while remaining authentic and transparent with our audiences. One key takeaway is the importance of leveraging influencers to connect with audiences in a meaningful way. Another is the need for brands to prioritize authenticity and honesty in their messaging. By doing so, we can build trust and loyalty with our customers even in uncertain times. The findings from this research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on social media marketing during the COVID-19 era and provide valuable insights for Nigerian businesses.

Recommendations

1. The recommendations drawn from this study will assist businesses in devising effective social media marketing strategies, enhancing their resilience to explore effective social media marketing strategies adopted by Nigerian businesses during the COVID-19 era.
2. evaluate the impact of social media marketing on business performance during the COVID-19 era in Nigeria.
3. SMEs should try as important as possible to post on social media platforms regularly and be professional in their dealings with consumers on social media as this will reflect appreciatively on the brand as social media has created a platform where SMEs can increase mindfulness for their brand

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