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# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON BASIC ENVIRONMENT, CONSEQUENCES, DIGITAL AND ONLINE EXPERIENCE UNDER LOCKDOWN PERIOD IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for a sharp drop in activities of economic sustainability, and has consequences in most countries that are still difficult to measure. The objective of this research is to identify restaurant entrepreneurs' perceptions about the future, government measures, strategies they will apply, and lessons learned for the future after the mandatory lockdown of restaurants and hospitality establishments related to pandemics. The framework was developed through content analysis with line-by-line coding applied to questionnaires collected online from people. The results reveal the existence of common concerns to all entrepreneurs in the restaurant business for the post-pandemic period, about the measures that the governments should implement, and about the strategies and lessons learned for the future. Resilience in the face of the future, fear of a lack of appropriate government measures, strategies designed for markets with greater immediate availability, and the creation of working capital are visible concerns in the restaurant business.*

**Keywords:** Restaurant business; pandemic crisis; post-crisis management; economic sustainability; tourism management.

## Introduction

COVID-19 crisis had an impact on every aspect of business irrespective of size and kind of ownership. The majority of organizations have been struggling to survive and grow during the pandemic crisis. The organizations like Pizza Hut, Gold Gym, JCrew retail chain, Hertz Car Rental Company, and Aldo Shoe Firm filed for bankruptcy during the Coronavirus pandemic. However, the companies with a strong digital platform like Zoom, Amazon, Uber Eats, and Slack acquired many new customers and had a healthy growth rate while the majority of the firms struggled for revenue and retaining customers. Firms like Mahindra Tractors were able to achieve sales growth in rural markets using digital marketing (www.business-standard.com).

Specifically, this study examines the business implications of the Corona-Virus-Pandemic that has paralysed the global economy. To do that, the authors analyse literature to understand the economic impacts (including implications for businesses) of the pandemic and the economic recovery patterns. In understanding the Corona Pandemic impact on businesses, the authors underline the importance of effective and pro-active leadership. The authors contend that the leadership approach and the extent and operational modus of infrastructures significantly condition the response effectiveness, impact on business and the economic recovery timescale. Taking a retail marketing approach in this paper, the authors illuminate the retail marketing implications of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Human nature has witnessed different forms of health crises, and to believe that Covid-19 may be the last of such health crises would be unimaginable. That in mind, the authors propose a retail marketing model that would enable a sustained effective response to health crisis induced economic shocks in the future. Towards achieving the required sustainability impact, the authors underline the importance for a strong and effective leadership. Within the leadership perspective for this study, the authors also recognise the criticality for facilitating infrastructures. Thus, the authors recognise that consumers engage in decision making in their preference formation and emphasise the importance of a marketing and brand strategy.

## Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many conservative firms to go online (Hwang, Nageswaran & Cho, 2020). The retailers are turning to omni-channel to reach out to customers. The sellers who had an omni-channel distribution network were quick to adapt to the government-imposed lockdown situation whereas retailers having no or less presence in online channels took time to build or ramp it up (Hwang, Nageswaran & Cho, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis also witnessed the phenomenon of competition. In this phenomenon, the competing firms were also sharing information with each other, and displayed cooperation between the firms. The examples include sharing of technical knowledge in the manufacturing of products, joint efforts to develop a vaccine, and sharing stock level information during the pandemic (Crick & Crick, 2020).

The organization used digital marketing as a channel to reach out to the target customers during the period of Covid-19 lockdown. The use of Augmented reality, Virtual reality, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) was also being used to target customers. The use of channels like WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Meet increased multi-fold during the COVID-19 crisis (He & Harris, 2020; Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Hence, digital marketing is excessively being used by organizations to target customers including high-involvement products like real estate, automobiles, and servers.

Amazon is using Augmented Intelligence which emphasizes using the optimal use of human inputs and machine learning applications in its predictions and customer-based processes (https://aws.amazon.com/ augmented-ai/). Amazon calls this service Amazon A2I. It uses an AI-based chatbot and automated website curation based on the customer search history on the portal. The automated digital advertisements are delivered to customers based on search words and browsing history. Techniques like text mining and image analytics also help digital marketers in enhancing their precision in reaching out to the target customers during the pandemic.

Many organizations used social media campaigns as part of Corporate Social Responsibility to make citizens aware of social distance and mask to bring attitudinal change in citizens (Habes et al., 2020). The iconic Nike brand which advocated playing outside with advertisements like "Move more move better" has recently changed the advertisement tagline and emphasized playing indoors, rather than venturing outside. The advertisement by Nike became an instant hit on social media. The brands required creativity to be used in more agile ways to create a timely impact during the pandemic (Balis, 2020). Mende and Mishra (2020) compared the enormity of COVID-19 situation implications with global climate change. There was found a need to develop dynamic capability in organizations to respond to such crises by realigning systems for product re-development, developing new strategic alliances, and taking initiatives for value-creating activities during pandemic (Seetharaman, 2020).

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, many countries globally risk becoming economically insecure. According to Jackson et al (2020), the economic fall-out from the pandemic raises the risks of a global economic recession with levels of unemployment not experienced since the Great Depression of 1930s. The severity of the impact of Covid-19 on the Nigerian economy is further emphasised in the World Bank's (2020) estimate that the poverty rate in Nigeria would increase significantly, leading to 6million additional people joining the Poverty Circle by 2022.

From the above, it is evident that Covid-19 had major implications for the global economy, as lockdown was enforced leading to restriction of movement of people and goods. Due to the lockdown measures, supply networks were disrupted, and production activities were largely stopped. As a consequence, too, consumers could not source food supply for their daily upkeep, nor engage in their employment tasks - thus their means of livelihood was more or less taken from them. This study proposes that with appropriate digital retail marketing strategy, organisations would be better situated to absorb the shocks arising from such pandemic induced movement restriction and also effectively serve their market segments (customers).

Next, the underlying theories (leadership, retail marketing and strategic marketing and innovation) of the conceptual proposition of this paper are explained.

## Conceptual Review

### *The Economic and Business Implications of COVID-19 in Nigeria*

As commented by Jackson, Weiss, Schwarzenberg & Nelson (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic affected global economic growth beyond anything experienced in human history. Africa's most populated country - Nigeria has also been hard hit in several ways by the Covid-19 pandemic. The health implications were devastating with many deaths, as the medical care system, which was already broken and overstretched and lacking the capacity to meet the

medical needs of the population, had a huge challenge in providing Medicare for Covid-19 infected patients let alone put appropriate containment plan in place.

While the immediate health impact is still evolving, the health consequences are felt heavily by the populace. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused major economic problems in Nigeria leading to loss of income and livelihood, looming debt crisis, amongst others (United Nations, 2020, p.2). Prior to the pandemic, Nigeria's economy was gradually recovering from the 2016 recession, however per capita incomes were still declining (World Bank 2020). In all, the Covid-19 pandemic exerted major effects on businesses and the economy, culminating in deepened unemployment, redundancy, massive job losses and hindrances in the discharge of government activities and responsibilities. The devastating effect of Covid-19 pandemic was felt across all sectors of the economy.

***Benefits for People Buying 'Online':***

i. **Lower Prices:** Managing an online storefront is far cheaper than an offline, brick and mortar store. Typically less staff are required to manage an online shop as web-based management systems enable owners to automate inventory management and warehousing is not necessarily required. As such, e-commerce business owners can afford to pass operational cost savings on to consumers (in the form of product or service discounts) whilst protecting their overall margin. Furthermore, with the rise of price comparison websites, consumers have more transparency with regard to prices and are able to shop around, typically purchasing from online outlets instead.

ii. **Accessibility and Convenience**: Unlike many offline stores, consumers can access e-commerce websites 24 hours a day. Customers can read about services, browse products and place orders whenever they wish. In that sense, online shopping is extremely convenient and gives the consumer more control. Furthermore, those living in more remote areas are able to order from their home at the touch of a button, saving them time of travelling to a shopping centre.

iii. **Wider Choice:** For the past twenty years, the growth of online shopping has to a large extent been based around increased choice. With an almost endless choice of brands and products to choose from, consumers are not limited by the availability of specific products in their local town, city or country. Items can be sourced and shipped globally. Interestingly, one recent study found that consumers are actually starting to become frustrated by e-commerce sites that offer too much choice. Whichever way you look at it though, more choice has likely been a good thing over the long term.

While one Forbes survey data shows that women are more likely to be concerned about the effects of COVID-19, it also shows that men are more likely to have it impact their shopping behaviours. One-third of men, compared to 25% of women, reported the pandemic affecting how much they spend on products. Additionally, 36% of men, compared to 28% of women, reported it affecting how much they are spending on experiences (travel, restaurants, entertainment, etc.).

The Indian retail market is greatly divided up between the unorganised sector, which includes about 13.8 million conventional family run neighbourhood stores and the organised retail sector with a share less than 10%. The organised sector includes all organized brick & mortar stores and online shopping sites. Despite the boom in B2C e-commerce sector in India, majority of Indians continue to have more faith in the neighbourhood brick & mortar stores for shopping as they prefer touching and feeling the products and negotiating discounts over-

the-counter, before buying. In India, a great majority of B2C ecommerce retailers draw customers to shop online by offering bargains such as free delivery, discounts, buy-one-get-one-free and exchange offers. However, many Indian shoppers known to be cost-conscious and conservative as a part of their value system, are generally not attracted into making quick decisions based on promotions and advertisements. Moreover, online shoppers, many-a-times, come across problems concerning product delivery timelines and customer support services. Customers' perception of risk toward online web sites is aggravated due to the inferior IT set-up used by several e-trailers, resulting in hacking of personal information.

Enter the novel Corona virus which causes a highly infectious disease Corona virus disease (COVID-19) that has infected more than 4 million people worldwide. Since it spreads primarily through contact with an infected person (when they cough or sneeze) or when a person touches a surface that has the virus on it, the best way to guard against it is to stay at home. This has increased online shopping usage, globally. In India, it has led to a rise in the number of FTUs or first-time-ecommerce-users in India, who had been so far inhibited to shop online. The SARS outbreak that infected over 2700 people in 2002 too is known to have dramatically changed people's shopping habits as they were afraid of shopping outdoors.

On 25th March, 2020, Big Basket - a key online grocery player in India had the following message "We'll be back soon! We are currently experiencing unprecedented demand. In light of this, we are restricting access to our website to existing customers only. Please try again in a few hours." So overwhelming was the response that it faced a breakdown due to a steep increase in demand amid COVID-19. Grofers – a rival had a similar kind of message which said "Due to the sudden rush, we have stopped servicing many locations, but we are working to increase capacity and will be resuming operations shortly." Amazon – one of the leading ecommerce players in the world, has announced on its site that the customers are relying on them like never before in their social distancing and self-quarantine efforts. Hence Amazon is temporarily prioritizing its available fulfilment and logistics capacity to serve essentials such as household staples, packaged food, health care, hygiene, personal safety and other high priority products. It is temporarily going to stop taking orders for lower-priority products. Globally too, Amazon has seen a surge in orders and is raising overtime pay for associates working in its warehouses, during the Corona virus outbreak.

This spike in B2C ecommerce in India is of course due to existing online shoppers stocking up on essentials given the corona virus outbreak and the lockdown imposed by the government (to check its spread). However it also consists of perhaps two more segments – apart from the one that buys online, regularly. A segment that did not shop online, given the inhibiting factors detailed in the beginning of this article and another segment that up till now, was either ignorant about online shopping or did not have a device or data plan. It would be interesting to check – how many shoppers from these two segments switch to online shopping, even after the Corona virus crises is over.

## Research Methodology

The conceptual premise of this paper is on the impact of crises, such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic on societies (economies, businesses and consumers), and a retail model that would effectively eliminate the point-of-sale consequences for consumers when there is movement restriction. Therefore, this paper, which was based on review of literature, was carefully focused on capturing literature that fits within the conceptual frame. The literature presented in this paper was sourced through databases and websites. Qualitative in nature this study

involved the systematic collection, organisation, description and interpretation of textual, verbal or visual data (Hammarberg, Kirkmann& de Lacey, 2016).

In an attempt to ensure that appropriate materials were used, the authors made use of a mixture of review methods namely traditional literature review, and document analysis. This process was to ensure a multidimensional perspective on Covid-19-Pandemic and its implications for retail businesses. To offer a wide-ranging overview in this study, the authors gathered and synthesised substantial peer-reviewed articles about corona virus, retail business management, strategic marketing and leadership. Considering the newness of the virus and how it has impacted businesses, the authors thought it best not to narrow our search for articles but instead carry out a detailed, comprehensive search of literature by making use of the traditional literature review method (Jesson, Matheson & Lacey, 2011; Li & Wang, 2018).

For a study of this nature, the authors felt that organisational and institutional documents would be useful. Owing to this, we applied document analysis as part of our review method. Therefore, we consulted institutional websites such as the World Bank, the United Nations, World Health Organisations and several other government agencies' reports. The authors basically adopted the counsel of Dey (2005) who argues that "… in documentary analysis, the criteria for selecting documents, or for focusing on particular extracts, should reflect the issues on which the researcher is seeking evidence

## Conceptual Review

### *Perceived Safety*

The digital communication during the pandemic from the organizations had a safety message in it. This was done to make the customers aware of COVID-19 related safety guidelines besides showing that the organization was sensitive to these issues not only for customers but also for the employees and other stakeholders. This helped organizations win the trust of the customers. The "safety" was the topmost concern for customers while ordering online or visiting retail stores. The organization's digital communication strategy must have this element. This boosted customer confidence in the brand. For Example – one of the most successful advertisements of Asian Paints "Har Ghar Kucch Kehta Hai" (literal translation – every home communicates a message) had "stay home, stay safe" as a central theme. The entire advertisement had focused on safety and celebrating being at home and the brand appears only in the last 4 seconds in a 60-second commercial.

The perceived safety provided confidence to the customers to visit the store and order products online. The digital communication to the customers shared the standard operating procedures (SOPs) being followed at the physical store and warehouses of the organization. The keyword like safety, priority, protocols, stay home, social distancing, and care; in digital marketing communication to the customers will help in retaining old customers and attracting new customers. The safety message in social media also helped in getting earned media as employees, customers, regulators, and other individuals' share this message in their respective social media handles.

### *Creative Persuasive Communication*

The digital marketing content by the organizations should be creatively designed. It should use the science of persuasive communication in the content. The content of the campaign should be precise and must have emotional appeal. The creative content received higher

earned media through likes, shares, and comments. For example – Uber Eats launched a creative banner advertisement as "Your go-to restaurant in the comfort of your home". The banner advertisement had moving visuals of local cuisine as per the location of the user (www.thinkwithgoogle.com). This advertisement became an instant hit and garnered a lot of views, likes, shares, and mentions on social media. Many of the existing Uber subscribers engaged with the advertisement.

The content, which is logical, emotive, and authentic will qualify as persuasive content. The team-lead of the digital marketing strategy must ensure that the advertisement content qualifies on these criteria. The advertisements with creative persuasive communication help in bringing attitudinal change in consumers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations like Asian Paints, Ceat Tyres, Uber Eats, etc. released various digital content to motivate citizens to maintain social distancing, wear a mask, and sanitize their hands after touching public open surfaces like ATM and biometric screens. The consistency of such messages had helped in bringing attitudinal and behavioural changes among the masses. Similarly, the "hand washing campaign" by the Dettol brand using creative persuasive communication had resulted in the desired results of behavioural change towards hygiene. The digital marketing team must brainstorm to come up with content, which is persuasive, authentic, and must have an emotional appeal for getting sustained customer engagement with the brand.

***Paid Media***

The majority of the respondents felt that managing the promotion budget between different advertisement channels is a tight rope walk. The search advertisement has its own advantage of precise reach with higher click-through-rates (CTR[1]) but inhibits higher investment in this channel due to its comparatively higher cost. However, all the respondents agreed that the paid media was giving them the best and faster results. The campaigns started with the paid media which was supported by the owned and shared media of the organization and the partner advertisement agency. The pandemic saw the highest spike in investment in paid media as the organization was under revenue pressure to get assured CTR results. The reliance on the owned and earned media had reduced during the COVID-19 period. The organizations were not willing to take chance or experiment as there was already enough business environment uncertainty due to the ongoing pandemic situation.

The paid media during the pandemic was dominated by Google search and Facebook display advertisements in the organization. The respondents shared that the advertisement budget allocation by organizations on Instagram's social media channel was increasing. This is because Instagram is one of the fastest-growing social media channels in terms of the number of subscribers. It has also a high youth following and subscription. The paid media was also helping in garnering a greater number of unique visitors to the landing page sites during the pandemic. The respondents also shared that cyber fraud was on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic. The marketing team keeps on randomly checking that the advertisement impressions were being uploaded at allocated publisher sites and no chat bots were being used by the agency. All these checks helped in ensuring that the paid media resulted in real customer engagement, thereby leading to better CTR and sales.

***Adaptability***

The analysis of the case study and semi-structured interviews with marketing executives consistently highlighted that adaptability of organizations was the key to emerge as a winner from this pandemic crisis. The organizations which were agile to adapt to digital mode and built-in system and processes quickly as the pandemic started have started showing positive financial results from the third quarter of the year 2020. The adaptability was not only in

terms of putting digital infrastructure in place in the organization but also change in the employee mindset and organizational culture for being productive in a digital business environment. The adaptability in the current pandemic situation was also forced on organizations as it was sudden and prolonged with no precedence in size and scope.

The analysis also showed that the speed of adaptability was of critical importance. Organizations like Zoom Video Communications, Inc., Asian Paints, and Mahindra Tractors were achieving a better financial result in the post-pandemic situation because of the early changes these organizations made as the pandemic started. Zoom brought many policies and feature changes to its platform as the pandemic started. It is the fastest-growing video communication platform which is also reflected in the growing share prices of the company. The adaptive approach backed by digitization and robotics technology infusion in manufacturing and warehouses is the new normal during the pandemic. However, it would require resource allocation by the respective organizations besides the top management support.

***Support by Top Management***

The analysis showed that all the organizations like Asian Paints, Ceat Tyres, Mahindra Tractors, Uber Eats, and Zoom Video Communications, Inc. were able to transform themselves and managed the COVID-19 crisis efficiently due to support by top management. The top management was actively involved in forming teams of senior executives to carry out various transformation exercise in the company. The top management ensured that all the employees were kept informed about the major decisions taken in the organization and especially those impacting them.

The respondents shared that the team related to digital transformation and new initiatives had the full support of top management to manage resources for creating digital orientation within the organization. The teams took the help of consultants and digital agencies besides input from internal teams to shift to online collaborative tools to facilitate work from home (WFH) for employees. The digital platforms of the organizations were updated. In some cases, new cloud-based software services were subscribed to facilitate sales planning, tracking, and optimization. These changes required faster decision making and approval by top management. All the respondents believed the dynamic capability of the organizations can be leveraged in crises only by providing autonomy to teams and faster approval of the changes by top management. This is in line with the dynamic capability theory proposed by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997).

## Theoretical Framework

### Contingency Theory

Crisis comes with social, cultural and economic consequences at both micro and macro levels (Preda & Stan, 2016). Consequences such as increased poverty and inequalities are usually the outcomes of crisis such as Covid-19 (United Nations Development Programme, n.d). To effectively respond to such pandemic crisis, nations and organizations must have a good leadership drive (Preda & Stan, 2016; Nyenswah, Engineer & Peters, 2016). According to Alkharabsheh, Ahmad, & Kharabsheh (2013), the nature of crisis determines the leadership approach and rational decisions. Thus, ensuring a strategic and responsive leadership approach is a critical navigation factor in such pandemic times.

Leadership scholars contend that transformational and transactional leadership styles are critical management tools in times of crisis (Alkharabsheh, Ahmad & Kharabsheh, 2013; Zohar & Luria, 2004). That contention may draw its plausibility from the way these leadership styles are enforced: transformational leadership style inspires and motivate followers, while transactional leadership focuses on organization, teamwork and supervision; leadership features that would aid effective crisis management. However, the fit of any leadership strategy would depend on the dynamics of the crisis (Vera & Crossan, 2004). That notion is supported by recent literature (Nyenswah, Engineer & Peters, 2016). Forwarding a contingency leadership approach for effectively managing in a period of crisis, Nyenswah et al (2016) examined the Ebola virus disease outbreak in Liberia. They noted that different leadership styles were adopted at each of the four situations of the crisis (crisis recognition and early mobilization, emergency phase, declining epidemic phase and lastly the long tail.

Recognising that there is no single best fit leadership strategy for effectively responding to all crisis situations, we embrace the contingency logic and suggest a leadership approach that embraces pro-active and innovative marketing foundation (e.g. Opute 2020; Opute, Irene & Iwu, 2020) towards achieving effective retail marketing response to the Covid-19 Crisis.

Taking into consideration the peculiar dynamics of Covid-19 (for example, lockdown and extended implications), the authors forward a leadership viewpoint that recognises the need for a strategic marketing orientation that would enable organisations ensure a retail marketing strategy for not only effectively absorbing the economic shocks associated with such pandemic-induced lockdown but also effectively meeting the customers' needs.

## Empirical Review

Over the last ten years, the Portuguese restaurant industry has experienced enormous growth, associated with the growth of tourism in Portugal, especially in the Algarve coastal regions, Lisbon, and Porto. Furthermore, Portuguese wines, Portuguese cuisine, and Portuguese chefs have become internationally renowned, which has resulted in an increase in the number of wine tourists and gastro tourists. According to the Bank of Portugal data, in 2018 the share of the accommodation, catering, and similar sectors represented 10% of companies in Portugal, 9% of people in service, and 3% of turnover.

The restaurant business sector plays an essential role in the economy of a country even though many small and medium-sized restaurants fail during their first four years of activity, which is an example of the need for strategies to financially sustain their business beyond five years. Other authors have also pointed out the importance of a survival strategy for the restaurant sector and for re-establishing consumer confidence.

Economic sustainability is the additional income provided to local inhabitants to compensate them for the presence of tourists and what that can result in. It can also be defined as the improvements to the local economy that the development of tourism can produce in the long term, taking into account all the impacts that affect the different sectors and the economy of local industries. Núñez-Rios, Sánchez-García, Rojas, and Olivares-Benitezalso state that organizational sustainability and sustainable performance continue to be a challenge for small and medium-sized companies because their resources and organizational structure are very limiting. Unsustainable economic growth generated by a strong fiscal stimulus or a combination of tax reductions and increases in expenditure can lead to catastrophic and long-lasting effects on macroeconomics stability in some countries.

**Discussion of Findings**

During times of crisis of immense daunting challenges with significant implications for businesses as well as customers, businesses must embrace agile response strategies. This is the underlying rationality for the conceptual premise of this paper. Combining leadership and marketing strategy foundations, this study forwards recommendations for effective retail marketing response and recovery. Taking the Covid-19 pandemic as a focal point, this study forwards a retail marketing strategy that would enable organisations effectively meet the needs of their customers even in health crisis situations where countries and cities are put under strict lockdown. The authors argue that achieving such retail marketing strategy for effectively containing the implications of such health crisis requires a strong leadership that is not only pro-actively driven but also embraces innovative retail marketing strategies. The authors argue that careful fit-for-purpose strategy is essential towards ensuring effective response. While the proactive measures that lend utility in responding to crisis situations could take different forms, the measure and timeliness of response effectiveness hinge significantly on two major factors: a steady and measured leadership; and a clearly functioning retail infrastructure.

The marketplace is becoming increasingly dynamic and the plausibility of the customers being the king is gaining increasing validity. To compete effectively in such dynamic market landscape, organisations require a suitable retail marketing strategy. In this study, the authors extend that pertinence and argue that organisations aiming to effectively absorb and contain the implications of natural disaster induced crises require a retail marketing strategy that contains initiatives for enabling organisations to effectively absorb and respond to the unfolding challenges. One critical lesson that has been learned through the Covid-19 pandemic is the pertinence for retail marketers to embrace digitalised marketing. Digitalised technologies based marketing, also called e-commerce, which has been defined as "the process of buying, selling, transferring, or exchanging products, services and/or information via computer networks, mostly internet and intranet" (Turban, King, Liang & Turban, 2010:48), has enabled economies like Germany cope more effectively with the movement restriction implications as they had already existing marketing processes that allow customers to place their orders online and their orders are delivered to their door steps. The 'place' marketing mix component is no longer physical space specific but could be virtual space based.

The post-COVID-19 retail landscape demands that retail marketers find new ways of identifying and satisfying emerging customer needs (WRC, 2020:9). Retail Marketers need to start visualising and planning for the post-COVID-19 scenario. There is need for retail marketers to come up with business models that are agile and responsive to market shocks. The post-COVID-19 environment will require retailers to shift from a short-term "fire-fighting" mentality to sustainable long-term thinking structured along the need to develop business models that are robust and withstand market shocks and uncertainties.

Digital technologies are increasingly defining daily life dynamics (Opute, 2017). Consequently, for consumers as well as companies, digital technologies are significantly constituting a tool for stimuli response (for the former) (Opute et al, 2020; Belk, 2013; Opute, 2017) as well as delivery of marketing strategy and tracking consumer behaviour (for the latter) (Opute, 2020a+b; Ozuem, Howell & Lancaster, 2008). There is a growing trend of paradigm shift from the point of practice of marketing, especially in securing competitive advantage not only in local (e.g. Opute, 2020) but also in global markets (e.g. Rachinger, Rauter, Müller, Vorraber & Schirgi, 2019; Opute, 2020a; Lobo & White, 2017).

Within that focus of securing competitive advantage, companies may not only leverage the internet and emerging technologies in the products and services delivery to customers, but also in securing strategic engagement with customers (e.g. Opute, 2020b; Ozuem et al, 2008). Leveraging that foundation, this study underlines that retail marketers can, through their effective implementation of e-commerce practice, boost their digital marketing environment, and thereby effectively interact with their customers, capture their products' or service's emotions, towards adopting pro-active marketing initiatives to meet their needs, either by ensuring timely and appropriate product (or service) delivery or filling new market needs through product or service innovation (e.g. Opute, 2020a).

Issues around business continuity and innovation will become significantly important in the post Covid-19 period. The post-COVID-19 environment will demand that retailers develop new innovative models to drive business's capacity to keep their customers, who in the modern-day market landscape are becoming more powerful and could quit at any slight opportunity (Opute, 2017). The importance of the innovative retail marketing strategy has been demonstrated by Grant Pattison, the former boss of Massmart, in the Edcon Group marketing turnaround. Equally important is that innovative retail marketing stride is the pertinence for a pro-active orientation towards creating strategic and creative partnership across different sectors. While the effectiveness of such innovative approach has been documented, for example, Global retailers such as Spar have embraced the concept of joint procurement as a way of overcoming the challenges they are facing in terms of the supply of products to their stores (WRC, 2020:9), this study emphasises the importance for strongly leveraging the digital technology enablement.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

### Strengthening the Digital DNA

The organizations during the pandemic phase should keep on strengthening their digital DNA. The digital DNA consists of digitally-savvy employees, faster decision making using digital platforms, digital connectivity, and state-of-art digital infrastructure. It helps to connect seamlessly with all stakeholders in the organization. This will help in reducing operational costs, promote innovation, and enhance agility to manage similar crises in the future. The digital orientation would also help to leverage the power of the latest techniques like deep learning, machine learning, and artificial intelligence for reaching out to target customers, feedback, and new product development. It would also help in harnessing the power of social networking sites for the marketing of our products as we have witnessed increased screen time of consumers on social media during the pandemic. Going forward, developing a digital mindset as a part of organizational culture should be a major change management exercise. The deeper the digital DNA in an organization, the more resilient and stronger it would be in a post-pandemic world.

### *Check Against Cyber Frauds In Digital Marketing*

The COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed cybercrimes including digital advertisement-related frauds (Buil-Gil et al., 2020). The organizations, while increasing their budget on digital marketing, must be vigilant about invalid traffic being generated by chatbots or by agency linked agents. Such activity makes the organizations bleed dollars for each (fake) click as per cost-per-click (CPC) agreements without any authentic customer engagement. The machine learning and deep learning tools help detect the invalid traffic and block such fake clicks on a real-time basis. The authenticity of claims regarding the number of impressions on social media by the hired advertising agency also needs to be checked by the advertiser (the

organization which is paying for the advertisement). The advertiser wants and believes that they are showing a digital advertisement to real persons, however, it may not happen every time. There are also millions of fake websites which is not visited by any humans. The impressions on these fake websites are seen by automated bots. Hence, there is a need to check cybercrime like the use of chatbots for clicking or checking advertisement, domain spoofing, and the use of botnets. Many large organizations use third-party services to verify the delivery of digital advertisements. These third parties were appointed by advertisers to keep a tab or cross-check the impressions, CTR, engagement duration, etc. claims made by the advertising agency. Therefore, the organizations in the post-pandemic scenario need to be cautious so that each naira spent on digital marketing results in desired customer engagement.

***Business Community Plan***

The organisation big and small, should be made aware of the relevance and importance of a business continuity plan (BCP). The BCP should be done in organizations at least once each quarter. The BCP should also include cyber-attack, data theft, and advertisement fraud. The BCP scenario building should also consider shifting consumer preferences using consumer analytics. The worst-case scenario may be that the organization's product and services become redundant given the shift in technology and customer's taste. The contingency plan for a quick recovery in such a scenario should be part of the revised BCP. The BCP exercise should consider how to protect brand reputation and sales in a situation like the current corona virus pandemic. The worst-case BCP conditions related to digital marketing include the closure of social media channels, the exit of the entire digital marketing team from an organization, or the resignation of the digital marketing head of the team. The BCP should ensure that there is a plan for fast recovery from the crisis and its implementation of a pre-decided strategy at the time of the crisis.

***Focus on Growth Segments***

The precision in terms of targeting customers would be critical in the post-pandemic business scenario. This would require leveraging data and technology to find growth segments in the target market. There is a need to revisit the older target segment to further narrow the most potential target segment. This new focused target segment (also called growth segments) would lead to a higher conversion with a lesser investment of resources including the least cost per conversion. The behavioural targeting using customer digital footprints besides retargeting and personalized offerings would be a game-changer for the organizations. The growth segments within the existing target segment should be delineated using the behavioural targeting method. The majority of the digital marketing budget must be invested in these growth segments to get maximum conversions. The positioning in these growth segments must include health/safety aspects either in the product, delivery process, installation, and related aspects during the entire duration of the pandemic phase.

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