COMMENTARY

Squaring small and medium businesses and branding post Covid-19 in Nigeria: Tripartite imperatives for performance

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Since the Corona virus is expected to create a paradigm shift of so called new normal, contemplation of imperatives needed to adapt to the post Covid-19 world is in order. In the case of Nigeria, the already troubled small and medium business (SME) sector and branding of small businesses require attention. Departing from the strict marketing perspective it is typically understood, branding is construed as a function of the overall state of a society in this article. As such, three foundational requirements, namely, technological, socio-economic, and educational imperatives, are identified as society wide policies that must be re-imagined and implemented consistently for SMEs in Nigeria to have strong basis for their branding as well as their emergence as competitive brands post Covid-19. A wide range of secondary sources such as reports, articles in the field of marketing, branding and small business branding, and contemporary global and national developments are integrated in advancing the position of this article.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Up until the end of 2019, the world was concerned with typical issues that have dominated global discourse for years. Some such as economic growth, terrorism, conflicts, narcotics and drug related crimes, climate change, migration, and political dynamics are enduring; others such as artificial intelligence, big data and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and calculated dis/mis information on social media are relatively nascent. To a lesser or greater degree, these topics left the whole of humanity hung gingerly on a slope gyrating between maintaining the status quo, caution and uncertainty. Then the Corona virus pandemic, or Covid-19, struck: suddenly our collective existence is threatened, even misgivings and contentions between States were relegated to the background as countries and organizations collaborated to mitigate the consequences on the socio-economic fabric of the world. Post Covid-19, experts and think-tanks have made numerous predictions that point to intense decimation of jobs due to business failures resulting in increased global unemployment and poverty.

Per Africa, the World Bank (2020) forecasts that 23 million Africans are at risk of sliding into Covid-19 induced poverty, further increasing an already large poverty net that made the continent the world’s most impoverished (Brookings Institution, 2019). In addition, Africa is predicted to experience its first recession in over two decades, a condition that will further compound a situation already complicated and dire.

In light of these grim situations and the so called “new normal” Covid-19 is expected to bring or hasten in the economic scene, this article discusses the implications of post Covid-19 world for Nigerian small and medium businesses (SMEs) within the context of branding. In doing this, extant issues in the Nigerian SME landscape are brought to the fore and three crucial imperatives are expatiated, the argument being that minus steadfast implementation of the imperative SME branding will remain compromised in Nigeria. In advancing this argument, insight is drawn from secondary sources in form of reports, policy papers, and scholarly articles in the field of marketing, branding, and small business branding as well as current situations both globally and at a national level.

2 | AN OVERVIEW OF THE SMALL BUSINESS LANDSCAPE IN NIGERIA

Small businesses are the most common type of business in Nigeria whose contribution is critical to economic growth (Kale, 2019). As of 2018 for example, SMEs constituted 96% of all businesses in Nigeria, employed 84% of the workforce and accounted for 48% of GDP (Akpata, 2018). Despite being the bedrock of the country’s economy,
however, the SME terrain in Nigeria is in a parlous state. For instance, although most daily needs of the populace are sourced from SMEs, “the production and supply chain of these products are done with little or no high-tech mechanization” (Ossai, 2017:157), a situation linked to the myriad of relentless internal (entrepreneur and industry factors) and external (policy factor) challenges (Agwu & Emeti, 2014). Aptly summarizing the problematic SME sector of Nigeria and proposing the remedy to salvage it, the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN, 2017:5) declared:

That we currently have a low ranking on the global economic scale could be attributed partly to the fact of ad hoc and piecemeal measures targeted at the MSME sub-sector, which must now be replaced with integrated and well coordinated interventions.

The SMEDAN position unambiguously points to the absence of a systematic and coordinated structure that informs interventions aimed at monitoring, supporting and growing SMEs. Unlike a fellow sub-Saharan country like South Africa that has a fully fledged department that formulates SME policies and monitors the sector’s performance, Nigeria does not. Instead, since the return to democracy in 1999, successive administrations have instituted various socio-economic development schemes aimed at, among others, skill acquisition, employment creation, and poverty alleviation. Interventions and schemes such as the National Economic and Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) and its replication at state and local government levels, National Poverty Alleviation Programme (NAPEP), Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P), and the current National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) all have implications for SMEs development (SMEDAN, 2017). In addition, there is motley of so called “youth empowerment” programs either under the aegis of the government, such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) range of short-term skill acquisition trainings, or those that are private initiatives. Unfortunately, frequent policy somersaults and haphazard approach erode advantages that could have uplifted the SME sector. Added to prevalent economic woes, this condition invariably accounts for the reason many people consider owing a small business either as a “side hussle,” that is, an additional source to augment income, or no more than a way to avoid salaried job.

The concept of “side hussle,” its popularization in Nigeria, and relationship to SMEs require a bit more analysis within the context of the overall economic situation. In addition to being part of the Next-11 group of promising economies, Nigeria belongs to the MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey) bloc of emerging economies by virtue of its young demography and economic viability. Also, in terms of ease of doing business, Nigeria currently ranks 131 out of 190 countries (World Bank Group, 2020), a significant 15-notch improvement from the previous 146 position. All of these suggest that the resource rich country is faring well. Ironically, 40% of Nigerians live in poverty (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020) while the country is in the 146 position (World Bank, 2019). Food inflation has risen steadily since the imposition of stringent border controls and continues the upward trajectory as Covid-19 bites harder. In order to break from the strain of unemployment and poverty, the opinion exist that one needs a “side hussle”: enter SMEs into the scene. From this perspective, SMEs are a means to an end – subsistence. For a sector regarded as a major economic backbone critical to the economic recovery plans of government (Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2017), the foregoing is not a good picture. It is also branding unfriendly.

3 | BRANDING: THE PILL, THE MALAISE

The brand is firms’ biggest asset because it signals a promise which, if consistently delivered, results in consumer satisfaction and prominent standing in the market (Balmer & Greysery, 2006; Kapferer, 2008). Therefore, the aspiration to become a strong brand is not exclusively for large businesses, but include SMEs as well (Abimbola, 2001; Agostini, Filippini, & Nosella, 2015; Hirvonen, Laukkanen, & Reijonen, 2013). Keeping in mind that branding is less prescriptive and more subjective as the context demands (Kay, 2006; Mitchell, Hutchinson, & Quinn, 2013), Sinek (2009) provided a generic values template that organizations need to succeed namely clarity of purpose, discipline of method and consistency of action. These tripartite factors correlate with a strategic mindset that characterizes strong brands and aligns with the concept of brand leadership.

So, whereas branding may not be cast in a prescriptive formula, its execution is both dependent on and a function of a strategic and deliberate approach. Unfortunately, SMEs typically lack the financial resource, managerial competence and patience for the time such an approach requires. In the case of Nigeria, the twin perception of a small business as a “side hussle” or as a way to escape salaried employment compromises SME branding because the objective is by default, towards making money for survival or income augmentation. By implication, little attention is given to the long-term investment required for nurturing a successful brand because it is not in tandem with instant pecuniary gratification. In reality, scholars have found that it is characteristic of SMEs to be principally motivated by basic survival needs, described for instance in Maslow’s needs hierarchy (see Greenbank, 2001; Walker & Brown, 2004). Invariably, this situation leads to an important distinction that has considerable implication for SME branding. In their review, Kerr, Kerr, and Xu (2017) found evidence that suggest entrepreneurs have exceptional personality traits and motivations which makes them successful compared to other people. Similarly, Gilmore (2011) opined that while the entrepreneur is central to transforming an otherwise ordinary venture into a successful business, a SME owner-manager may not necessarily have entrepreneurial disposition to achieve such feat. By implication, branding (and brand orientation) of SMEs:

1. Is conditioned on a strong entrepreneurial orientation because the SME owner will pursue opportunities even in challenging situations, applying a critical and strategic mindset and seeking expansion as well distinctiveness for their firm.
2. Will be significantly limited or permanently injured by narrow objectives for the fact that even barest operation of the business that ensures survival needs of the owner will suffice.

To suggest that branding is not necessary for SMEs contradicts a consensual scholarly and practice fact. Yet, any attempt to divorce the extent and depth of adoption of branding from the socio-economic context of a society is naïve. In this regard, the previously discussed socio-economic context in Nigeria and its impact on SME branding cannot be trivialized. Apparently, a socio-economic milieu characterized by institutional policy failures and acute poverty will result in heightened struggle for the basic necessities of life—food, shelter, accommodation—necessary for survival. This is the reality of most Nigerian SMEs and accounts for why small business branding in the country appears set for continued malaise. However, in the post Covid-19 economic sphere, situation number two above, which reflects the reality of the country, is not desirable for SMEs in Nigeria: the first case is the only viable option that must be pursued for small businesses in the country to be progressively active domestically and competitive internationally. As it were, the viable option does not significantly subsist and, going forward, achieving it will be herculean; for the Nigerian SME sector to produce strong brands post Covid-19, the following three imperatives must necessarily be in place.

4  |  THE TRIPARTITE IMPERATIVES

4.1  |  Technology imperative

Theoretically, technological determinism is founded on the notion that technology controls social transformation and informs social attitudes. Regardless of whether one is on the hard technological determinism or soft technological determinism divide, technological advancements are construed as crucial pillars in social transformation. Pre-Covid-19 the world was gradually moving toward the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an era of considerable disruptive technology induced changes to the socio-economic structure of the world (Schwab, 2016). Entirely founded on technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data, and robotics, developing countries—like Nigeria—with chronic infrastructural deficit were already at a disadvantage. As an infection that can be mitigated by physical distancing, Covid-19 is heightening the promotion, development, and rapid deployment of contact-less technologies manifested, for instance, in telecommuting. For instance, while Twitter has sanctioned perpetual telecommuting for its employees post Covid-19, several other companies around the world are contemplating to introduce telecommuting in some form.

By far the most important post Covid-19 implication for Nigerian SMEs and their branding is the overt technological deterministic imperative. The message is simple: adapt to appreciably function within the dynamics of the times and remain competitively relevant or crumble. This is because the pandemic has given traction to a technological deterministic necessity for all firms such that the extent to which technology is integrated into the business model for the purpose of facilitating its processes and driving value delivery will become a major aspect that determines innovative, competitive, and distinctive brands. In the absence of, at least, adoption of minimum innovative technologies in line with the technology imperative of the times, the relevance of a SME as a competitive brand cannot be guaranteed. This necessity echoes the Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) (see Vargo & Lusch, 2007) where specialized competencies comprising knowledge and skills are construed as the main factors firms require for anchoring their overall processes, both internally and externally. The correlation is clear as per Covid-19 accelerated technological determinism and SME branding in Nigeria. Either the SMEs realize the changing landscape and its imperatives, have and deploy requisite knowledge and skills to stay competitive or, remain a non-descript, struggling venture or, at worst, collapse.

Indeed, the technological determinism imperative is already acknowledged. In a May 22, 2020 publication of Premium Times online newspaper on SMEs and Covid-19, Adegboyega (2020) quoted an industry expert as follows:

Business owners need to improvise technologically to be able to reach a larger number of their customers... that is one of the basics of businesses: agility. The government should sensitize people on the use of technology so as to suppress the effect of the pandemic.

Whereas SMEs do need to be technologically savvy and compliant, reducing the role of government to mere sensitization on the importance of technology in business is unfair to entrepreneurs and small business owners and/or managers. In the case of Nigeria where government has failed to provide essential infrastructures such as constant electricity supply and good road networks, the odds of success are already stacked against SMEs. In the 2020 Startup Ecosystem Ranking report by Startupblink, Nigeria’s position dropped significantly. The concluding remark of the report reads thus:

The main challenges that Nigeria faces concern inadequate infrastructure, resulting in unreliable power and poor internet connections. We are confident that if infrastructure is improved, Nigerian founders will be able to move forward for the benefit of their country and local economy (Startupblink, 2020: 143)

However, the technological imperative will pose a major challenge in terms of its effect on jobs. In a society like Nigeria where most small businesses still operate the brick and mortar model, many jobs will be lost and livelihoods compromised as SMEs embrace, for example, automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and e-commerce for their business operations. Jobs once done physically, perhaps by more than one person, will be eliminated and individuals rendered redundant. Notwithstanding this negative impact, technology is a non-negotiable component Nigerian SMEs must adopt. On their part, government across all level in Nigeria has the responsibility to create a buffer that
will lessen and cushion the effect of technology on livelihoods of the citizens. In this regard, the necessity is urgent and rapid re-engineering of the society as per education and socio-economic policies that are reflective of the impending technology driven future and sustainably balances it with livelihood.

To be certain, achieving a balanced technological onus post Covid-19 is a function of socio-economic and educational policies been implemented. Both are fundamental halves of a whole; the foundation that will provide crucial infrastructures, create a suitable environment which stimulates entrepreneurial spirit, capacitate people with requisite knowledge and skills, foster innovation and nurture distinctive and competitive SME brands.

4.2 | Socio-economic imperative

One half of the two fundamental foundations pertain to socio-economic policies. Admittedly, efforts have been made to ease doing business in the country in aspects such as business registration. However, it is still a microcosm of the holistic balance required. Consider for instance that in early 2020, the Lagos State government, Nigeria’s commercial city and a prominent hub for SMEs, banned commercial motorbikes from plying many roads in the state. The ban led to the wasteful demise of innovative SME brands like Gokada and Oride, brands redefining the face of commercial motorbike transportation in the city through ride hailing technology. This is an example of counterproductive social frameworks that are inimical to successful branding and growth of innovative SMEs. Going forward, it is important to strike a workable equilibrium between contesting socio-economic necessities.

In balancing competing socio-economic needs, attention must be given to the urban-rural divide which is responsible for migration from rural, mainly agrarian inclined locations to urban areas such as Lagos, Port-Harcourt and Kano, the prominent hubs of commerce and trade. In addition to the popularization of politics as a lucrative industry, the economic prospect of these centers of commerce and trade is fast nearing critical mass because Nigeria’s economy is chiefly monolithic and heavily reliant on the petroleum industry. Over the decades especially from the 1960s when commercial exploration of oil began in Nigeria, other viable sectors of the economy, including the agricultural sector previously prosperous during the colonial era till around early the 1970s, were abandoned and left to rot. The resulting national fixation on the petroleum industry proceeds is partly responsible for the catastrophic decimation of rural economy and accounts for the ballooning migration of people in search of elusive the “greener pasture” into urban areas.

Whereas, pre-Covid-19, the Nigerian government embarked on an economic agenda intended to revamp the untenable economic situation, the concern is whether it will not be yet another lopsided and half-hearted project. The bigger concern is whether it will be holistic enough to stimulate and nurture next generation SMEs that will emerge as strong brands. The latter concern is critical because currently, SMEs are associated with urban areas to the detriment of rural locations whose business engagements are typically no more than micro or subsistence holdings. In order to have a truly robust SME environment, rural areas must be strategically contemplated in socio-economic policies such that entrepreneurs can stay back or migrate to local communities to explore and exploit resources and opportunities, a situation that will expand the small business sector, fuel local competition and inspire innovation.

4.3 | Education imperative

The other half is the education imperative. Like other facets of the Nigerian society, the education sector has been in the doldrums for decades crippled by incessant industrial actions, inadequate funding, internal administrative bickering, and political meddling to mention a few. As a result, calls for a total reform of the education sector are persistent and rife. Such reform must necessarily include the pedagogy of branding specifically. Until the 20th Century, branding was studied and researched exclusively from the perspective of large firms (Abimbola & Kocak, 2007; Centeno, Hart, & Dinnie, 2013; Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Consequently, entrepreneurs have had to adapt standard marketing frameworks to fit their circumstance (Gilmore, 2011) yet SME context differs significantly from that of large businesses. If Nigerian SMEs must emerge as strong brands, it is necessary to have a deliberate and small business tailored pedagogic policy that teaches individuals the relevance of strategic marketing and branding in transforming their small business into distinctive and competitive going concern. In truth some institutions of higher learning, professional associations, government agencies and private organizations offer entrepreneurship training but there is a fundamental flaw in its execution: it is uncoordinated as a matter of policy and delivered on a need-basis for those who indicate interest and/or whose discipline mandates it.

From a strategic perspective, entrepreneurship education should be a matter of national policy made compulsory for all individuals across all levels of education, beginning from, at least, secondary schooling. In the current need-basis format, many individuals, whether they have intrinsic business acumen or stumbled upon a business opportunity, are automatically disenfranchised from acquiring invaluable knowledge about marketing and soft power of branding. Certain inalienable facts must be recognized:

1. That some individuals will have natural entrepreneurship acumen and some can acquire the skills through learning. Regardless of which applies, the naturally gifted entrepreneur still requires education to sharpen and give laser focus to their innate potential while sound pedagogic training is needed to instill or awaken entrepreneurship mindset in those who acquire it formally.

2. That an entrepreneur may not necessarily be capacitated in management issues such as marketing and branding necessitating a manager skilled in those areas. Whether the entrepreneur choose to improve on their deficient management skills or employ a skilled manager, the quality of entrepreneurship education dispensed will determine the soundness of managerial competencies.
While some individuals may naturally have entrepreneurial acumen, such people are likely to be statistically miniscule in a population and insufficient to activate the full extent of SME opportunities. Only a tailored and strategic national entrepreneurship education policy instilled in people from a young age and present at all stages of education is capable of promoting a strong entrepreneurial culture. Post Covid-19, entrepreneurship education has to be re-imagined in terms of teaching that integrates conventional principles with novelty and provides application frameworks that matches local context with global trends. This is the task of what Boyer (1990) called scholarship of teaching, integration and application.

5 CONCLUSION

Nigerian SMEs have the potential to be strong brands because the country is immensely endowed with human capital and natural resources. Ironically, that same potential is the albatross confronting SMEs in the country not because “potential” is undesirable, but because the intrinsic prospect has not been properly managed and harnessed making it recessive. Post Covid-19 the DNA of business, in a world already at the threshold of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, will mutate into a technology and innovation core upon which brand distinction will also depend. As this ideological shift expands its reach, innovative firms will adapt fast, be more dominant and strengthen their brand profile and status. Less innovative and laggard firms will battle to stay alive sinking slowly into oblivion or get acquired by innovative ones. Currently, SMEs in Nigeria can be categorized as mainly laggard firms at the mercy of relentless and unstoppable tide of global change. They need help to emerge as strong, competitive brands. That help is a matter of government led, far-reaching and fundamental re-engineering of socio-economic and educational policies, both of which are critical to the realization of the post Covid-19 technological imperative for business. In the absence of this, the competitiveness and branding of Nigerian SMEs does not look bright.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Authorship is singular and author is responsible for the entire content.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The author declares that no ethical conflict exist.

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