

DIGITAL CHANNEL MARKETING: CRITICAL TOOL FOR WINNING CUSTOMER PATRONAGE IN POST COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to empirically investigate the imperativeness of digital channel marketing in achieving enhanced customer patronage of fast food restaurants in Nigeria, amidst Covid-19. The research examined the importance of digital marketing tools from the context of Covid-19 induced economic setback as it affects restaurants operators in the city. Cross-sectional survey design was used in accessing the study's subjects and its population was limited to only customers of fast food restaurants in Port Harcourt. Due to the research constraint to ascertain the actual number of customers of these restaurants, we considered the entire residents of Port Harcourt as our population, upon which a sample of 400 were drawn with the help of Taro Yamen formula and accessed conveniently. A total of two hypotheses were formulated and tested using Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient. Results revealed a positive and significant relationship between digital channel marketing and customer patronage. The research concluded that the crisis occasioned by Covid-19 re-echoed the strategic importance of digital marketing channel in building competitive advantage in the eatery market. The research therefore recommends that alert fast food restaurants who want to build resilience and continuously satisfying customers amidst covid-19, should specifically incorporate online delivery and digital menu in their organizations' service delivery operations.

Keywords: Digital Channel Marketing, Covid-19, Digital Menu, Customer Satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the use of digital technology is gaining momentum in recent years, especially with the advancement of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) world over. It may well be said that this technology has been thought of as a paradigm shift in the scheme of things and scholars have argued that organizations worldwide must align effectively with this trend by restructuring their business models to incorporate digital channels if they must compete favourably (Arifur & Aminul, 2018; Mustafa, 2015; Ugonna, Okolo, Nebo & Ojjeze, 2017). This entails using digital marketing tools in every aspect of business processes and operations in relating with organizations' target markets and other relevant stakeholders. However, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, also known as Covid-19, threatened and saw the socio-economic relationships among people, organizations, and institutions metamorphosed into unprecedented health crisis, hence, negatively affected world economy. Succinctly to say that the pandemic made digital channel marketing more strategically useful for organizations to adapt to the situation and remain competitive (Nkpurukwe, et al., 2020). The restaurant industry in Nigeria which this research was domiciled was one of the worse hit by the crisis, thus, compelling government to initiate several Covid-19 protocols, which include; community lockdowns, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, travel and in-ter state restrictions, etc (Bartik, Bertrand, Cullen, Glaeser, Luca, M. & Stanton, G., 2020). All restaurants were asked to limit their operations to only take-outs, without any form of dine-in. More realistically, the National Restaurant Association (NRA, 2020) reported that the percentage of customers of full-service (sit-down) restaurants declined by over 85.2% since the start of the pandemic, dropping to 52.3 percent in the 2nd and 3rd quarter of the year. More so, after a thorough evaluation of implications of the pandemic on global quick service

restaurants and its induced economic setback, growth in the industry was readjusted to a revised 2.2% CAGR for the next 7-year period (NRA, 2020).

In view of these setbacks occasioned by the pandemic, scholars and practitioners in this area of discourse have argued the strategic importance of applying digital channel marketing as a way of adapting to the situation and building competitive advantages in the industry (Gössling et al., 2020; Naijatechguide Team, 2020; Ciuci Consulting, 2020). Consequently, fast food practitioners are beginning to rejig their strategies by replacing traditional methods of service delivery with digital technologies such as online delivery and digital menu, thereby enhancing customers' experience without endangering their health. According to Naijatechguide Team (2020), online delivery is beginning to gain momentum given its strategic usefulness (amidst the pandemic) to continually delivering value to customers despite government imposed restrictions. More recently, smart restaurants have been adopting food delivery apps to ensure that guests do not only have the opportunity to choose from their favourite meal options, but also, get it delivered fresh, on-time, and at a preferred location. In addition, Ciuci Consulting (2020), is of the view that dine-in services have changed dramatically, as 21th century restaurants are digitalizing the dine-in process with table tablet ordering systems known as 'digital menus', whereby a menu is uploaded onto special software, upon which guests could place orders and make payment.

Many studies have considered the impact Covid-19 on restaurant service delivery and the imperativeness of digital tools in adapting to the pandemic. Vince (2020) examined Covid-19's devastating effect on the restaurant industry. The scholar examined the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on annual sales of full service restaurants, suppliers, and the suppliers' suppliers. NRA (2020) on its part, analyzed global restaurant industry and the looming recession amidst Covid-19. The team of researchers examined prior and post Covid-19 industry sales with a view to ascertaining the level of damage induced by the crisis. Diaz (2020) also came up with nine restaurant industry trends that are most useful in 2020 amidst Covid-19. In view of the above studies and to add to existing related literature, this research used online delivery and digital menu as dimensions of digital channel marketing in order to evaluate their impacts on customer patronage in the face of Covid-19 as it relates to restaurants in Port Harcourt.

Statement of the Problem

It is no longer news that the outbreak of Covid-19 slowed down economic activities particularly those related to restaurants and guests transactions, including suppliers and distributors of raw materials and finished products. As earlier reported that the percentage of customers of full-service (sit-down) restaurants declined by over 85.2% since the start of the pandemic, dropping 52.3 percent in the first quarter of the year (NRA, 2020). This entails that the level of customer patronage (or sales) of restaurants have been on the decline since the crisis started. What could be possibly put in place to change the situation for good? Though, studies have suggested the imperativeness of digital marketing tools to salvage the situation, however, this research wants to specifically examine whether online delivery and digital menu could help improve customer patronage as regards restaurants business in Port Harcourt.

Model Specifications and Conceptual Framework

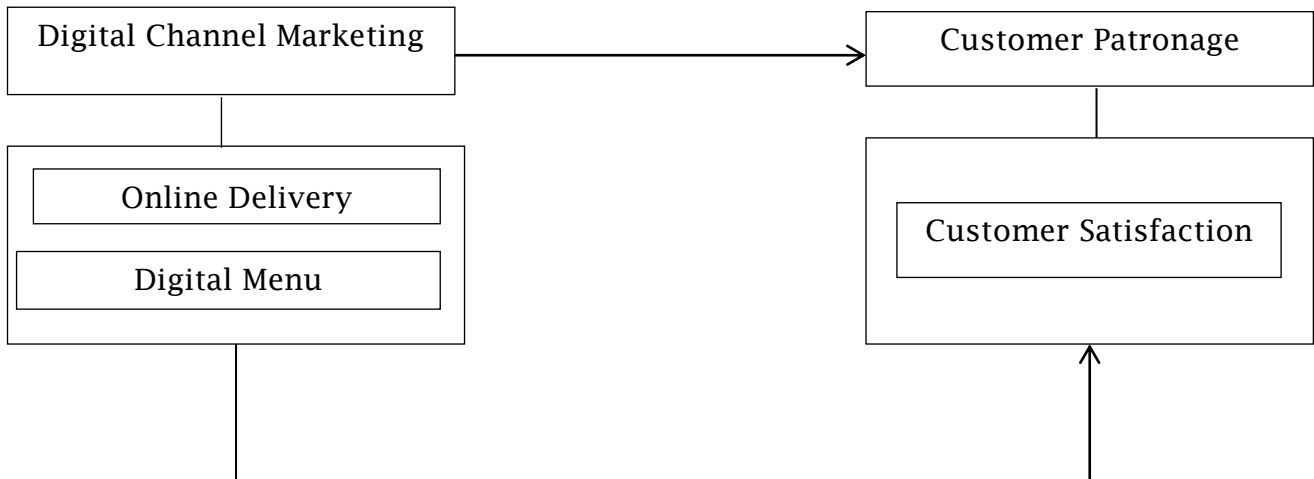
This research is an empirical study with two main variables. The first is independent variable, which is digital channel marketing. The second is the dependent variable, which is customer patronage. While the former has online delivery and digital menu as dimensions; the latter was measured with customer satisfaction.

CP	=	$f(\text{DCM})$ -----	Model 1
DCM	=	(OD, DM)-----	Model 2
CP	=	CS-----	Model 3
CS	=	$f(\text{OD,DM})$ -----	Model 4

Where:

CP	= Customer Patronage
DCM	= Digital Channel Marketing
OD	= Online Delivery
DM	= Digital Menu
CS	= Customer Satisfaction

Below is the conceptual framework for this study:



Source: Dogan & Christina, 2020; Najatechguide Team, 2020.

Literature Review

Underpinning Theory

It is well said that technology evolves through innovations by organizations in their efforts to stay competitive. When new or improved ways of relating with stakeholders, particularly customers emerges through innovative insights by strategists, people (users) are usually skeptical to adopt the innovation, however, after its usage has been found to be delightful, then people can freely subscribe to such product or services. The above assertion relates to the theory of Technology Adoption Model (TAM) propounded by Fred Davis in 1989. It is noteworthy to state that the underlying propositions of TAM suggests the degree to which people come to accept a new innovation. Basically, the TAM model was design to understand how users come to subscribe to a wide range of computing technologies or innovations (Dans, 1989). According to Chen, et al., 2011), TAM was conceptualized from two theoretical constructs, which are: perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use. It is interesting to mention that both constructs from a new innovative stand-point examine the intention to use a new system. From the perspective of our research, this relationship underscores the imperativeness of digital channel marketing in adapting to the economic crisis induced by the pandemic. Due to the fact that customers may not be able to dine together in restaurants for now due to government restrictions and fear of contracting the virus, therefore reaching customers with relevant digital channels by restaurant strategists, become pertinent in building competitive edge over rival players. Thus, TAM is suitable for this research.

Conceptualizing Digital Channel Marketing

The term digital channel marketing has been explored by plethora of researchers in recent years, however, its definition keeps on evolving. Persons, Zeisser & Waitman (1999) defined digital channel marketing as exploitation of internet-based technology channels to communicate products and services to customers in ways that help firms achieve their goals and fulfillment of consumer needs. Nair (2016) defined digital channel marketing as the medium through which organizations

promotion products and services with the aid of electronic devices. Hairong, Daugherty & Biocca (2002), conceptualized digital channel marketing from a corporate identity perspective. To these authors, digital channel entails an identity of a company which people associate the company with; and through which it presents itself in the virtual world to an enormous number of users. They went on to say that digital channel consists of interne-based platforms in promoting organizations' offerings with a view to strengthening the competitive base of organizations. According to Mulhern (2009) digital channel marketing refers to the application of digital-enabled communication medium to create an integrated, targeted, and measurable communication process that helps companies acquire and retain customers while building a deeper relationship with them. Wymbs (2011) argued that digital channel marketing has its roots in interactive marketing, and represents personalized and participatory media in which users become contributors to content and creators of marketing communication, rather than just passive users.

Artur (2016), while stating that digital marketing based on technologies should pay adequate attention on values, advantages and possibilities provided by the digital world as perceived by customers; went on to present six attributes of marketing in relation to digital channel. They include: ubiquitous connectivity, engagement, social graph, personalization, user-generated content, and immersive environments. For restaurants to effectively drive value for guests, these six attributes must be present in their digital marketing architecture. More so, literature summarized four main objectives of digital marketing, which are: enhanced efficiency of communications (Nkpurukwe, Onyeaghala & Ozah, 2019; Sharma, 2002; Walters, 2008); fostering customer relationship communications and interaction (Welling & White, 2006); creating brand awareness and image (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Welling & White, 2006); and generation of sales leads (Bodnar & Cohen, 2012; Welling & White, 2006). It is important to stress here that organizations have specific objectives to achieve while adopting digital marketing strategies, and this is due to firm peculiarities or priorities. However, these objectives as captured by scholarly works are for reference purposes.

Customer Patronage

The competitive nature of the present day business environment expose consumers to several brands using multiple marketing strategies. Customers' assessment of these marketing strategies comes with its own behavioural consequences as they develop certain attitudes and behavioural patterns to the different marketing strategies. Customer patronage is an indicator to signal a customer's likely response to marketing inputs (Ademola, 2013). The author further opined that patronage is the support, encouragement, privilege or financial act that an organization or individual bestows to another. According to Kotler & Keller (2006), patronage is defined and determined in behavioural terms. Behavior can be seen as way in which individual controls him/herself. It could also mean the act of being a regular customer to a shop. Customer patronage is influenced by a combination of attitude, normative beliefs and motivations that will influence purchasing behavior (Olsen & Connolly, 2000). Consumers have diverse motivation, preferences and taste. They are constantly seeking for solutions to their various states of deprivation (needs) through products offering and promotional packages. The information is received by consumers and is meant to undergo some mental assessment and filtering to decipher the benefits attached to product offering before purchase is being made. Their decision could either lead to a favourable or unfavourable attitude which might affect their patronage. Accurate predictions of consumer variables by marketers will ensure consumer patronage of the marketer's brand over that of competitors. According to Kumar (1999), gaining customer patronage is an important objective of strategic and relationship marketing initiatives. Customers are more inclined to patronizing a business that goes to extra mile in marketing itself and offering special treatments have a positive impact on customer and keeps them returning to the business (Ademola, 2013).

Digital Channel Marketing and Customer Patronage: Strategic Implications for Post Covid-19

Literature on the nexus between digital channel marketing and customer Patronage in the period of Covid-19 is few, however, a lot of scholars have found interest in this area in recent months due to the impact of the pandemic on restaurant operations. As earlier noted in our conceptual framework, this study adopted online delivery and digital menu as dimensions of digital channel marketing. Shantashree & Debomalya (2020) who study examined the influence of online food delivery apps on the operations of restaurant business; found that due to increase in the use of smart phones, online delivery apps have become a conventional medium in buying meals from restaurants. The study generally revealed that online delivery apps has a huge influence on guests satisfaction and patronage especially during the period of Covid-19. Churchill, Hemanth, Kapi & Havinash (2020) investigated the impact of online food delivery on customers. The authors found that online food delivery has a positive and strong correlation with customer re-patronage intention. They also found that the health crisis occasioned by Covid-19 made more than 80% of eat-out loyal customer patronise restaurants who are into online delivery.

In addition, Dogan & Christina (2020) found that a major percentage (64.71) of restaurant guests in the United States believe that due to Covid-19, various digital technologies in service delivery such as; service robots, digital menus, contactless digital payments, keyless entry, and touchless elevators; were necessary in order to reduce the spread of the virus. More so, Kinetic Consulting (2020) in the team's research, found that over 50% of customers prefer online delivery channels and completely avoid dining with friends outside their homes due to the pandemic. The report further indicated that digital menu has a significant influence on guests' satisfaction and referral behaviour. Lastly, Charlene, Miranda & Phil (2020)'s study revealed that digital menu is a leading digital tool modern restaurants used in the period of Covid-19 crisis. Finding from their study showed that digital menu is perceived to be safe and convenient for guests and this has a strong influence on guests' patronage and repurchase intention. It was against the above postulates the following hypotheses were formulated:

Ho1: Online delivery has no significant relationship with customer satisfaction amidst Covid-19.

Ho2: Digital menu has no significant relationship with customer satisfaction amidst Covid-19.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted quasi-experimental design as the elements under study are not entirely under the control of the researcher. Consequently, the study's view was sociological positivism and objectivism. It therefore used quantitative analysis which required test of hypotheses, test of correlations and cross-sectional survey; and was carried out in a non-contrived environment involving guests of restaurants as our unit of analysis, hence, the involvement of questionnaire as a means of data collection. Basically, the population of this research consists of customers of fast food restaurants in Port Harcourt. A publication by Business Directory (2020) reveals that there are 30 fast food restaurants in Port Harcourt. In view of the above and due to the research constraint to ascertain the actual number of customers of these restaurants, we considered the entire residents of Port Harcourt as our population, upon which samples were drawn and accessed conveniently. According to All-population.com (2020), the total residents in Port Harcourt stands at 2100711. Given the above population figure, the corresponding sample size is 400 with the help of Taro Yamen formula. This therefore means that a minimum of 13 and/or maximum of 14 copies (for some restaurants) of questionnaire were administered to customers of these eateries.

Further more, the research used both primary and secondary data. The former were sourced through structured copies of questionnaire, while the latter were gotten from textbooks, journal articles, internet publications, etc. Besides, data from this study involves ordinal data obtained from a 5-point Likert scale and required that the analytical tool be parametric. More so, the research instrument was evaluated through expert checking for content, therefore, a pilot study

was conducted to pretest the instrument. To determine the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's Alpha test was carried out. In addition, the research adopted a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical tools with the help of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21.0. More so, charts, frequency tables, averages as well as percentages constituted the descriptive statistical tools. Those were employed to conduct the necessary demographic and univariate analysis. Bivariate analysis was carried out through a parametric inferential statistical tool, and Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was used in testing the two proposed hypotheses.

Data Analysis and Discussions

Table 4.1 Questionnaire Distribution and Retrieval

Questionnaire	Frequency	Percent (%)
Administered Copies	400	100.0
Returned Copies	384	96.0
Not returned Copies	16	4.0
Returned & usable Copies	353	88.3

Source: field survey data, 2020

Table 4.1 showed a total 400 administered copies of questionnaire; however, 384 representing 96% were returned. In addition, 16 copies were not returned, but 353 representing 88.3% were both returned and usable.

Table 4.2 Results of Reliability Test

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Online Delivery	0.826
Digital Menu	0.890
Customer Satisfaction	0.851

Source: SPSS Output, 2020

From the table above, all variables in the research instrument have showed signs of reliability, since all test results are more than the standard of 0.700 (70%).

Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

Ho1: Online delivery has no significant relationship with customer satisfaction amidst Covid-19.

Table 4.3 Correlation Analysis between Online Delivery and Customer Satisfaction
Correlations

			Online Delivery	Customer Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Online Delivery	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.879**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
		N	353	353
	Customer Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	.879**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
		N	353	353

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2020, SPSS Output.

Decision: Table 4.3 showed a correlation coefficient and probability value of 0.879 and 0.001. Since the PV is 0.001 < 0.05, we therefore reject the null hypothesis. This suggests that with

Covid-19 in place, there is a positive and significant relationship between online delivery and customer satisfaction of fast food restaurants in Port Harcourt.

Hypothesis Two

Ho2: Digital menu has no significant relationship with customer satisfaction amidst Covid-19.

Table 4.4 Correlation Analysis between Digital Menu and Customer Satisfaction

Correlations			Digital Menu	Customer Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Digital Menu	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.885**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
		N	353	353
	Customer Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	.885**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
		N	353	353

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2020, SPSS Output.

Decision: Table 4.4 revealed a correlation coefficient and probability value of 0.885 and 0.001. Since the PV is 0.001 < 0.05, we therefore reject the null hypothesis. This revealed that there is a positive and significant relationship between digital menu and customer satisfaction of fast food restaurants in Port Harcourt especially during the pandemic.

Discussion of Findings

Ho1 aimed at investigating whether online delivery has a significant relationship with customer satisfaction amidst Covid-19. As shown in table 4.3, the hypothesis was tested using Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient and result revealed a correlation value of 0.879. This meant that the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted, which revealed a positive and significant relationship between online delivery and customer satisfaction during the pandemic. By way of comparing this finding to previous ones, Shantashree & Debomalya (2020) found that due to increase in the use of smart phones, online delivery apps have become a conventional medium in buying meals from restaurants. The study generally revealed that online delivery apps has a huge influence on guests satisfaction and patronage especially during the period of Covid-19. Churchill, Hemanth, Kapi & Havinash (2020) found that online food delivery has a positive and strong correlation with customer re-patronage intention. They also found that the health crisis occasioned by Covid-19 made more than 80% of eat-out loyal customer started patronizing restaurants who are into online delivery.

Also, **Ho2** aimed at examining the relationship between digital menu and customer satisfaction. Result revealed a correlation coefficient value of 0.885. Our analysis revealed a positive and significant relationship between digital menu and customer satisfaction. Accordingly, the null hypothesis was rejected, and subsequently, the alternate hypothesis accepted. This finding however corroborates with the finding of Charlene, Miranda & Phil (2020), when they revealed that digital menu is a leading digital tool modern restaurants used in the period of Covid-19 crisis. Finding from their study showed that digital menu is perceived to be safe and convenient for guests and this has a strong influence on guests' patronage and repurchase intention. Vince (2020) reported that digital menu has a significant impact on guests' revisit intention, which in-turn lead to guests' loyalty. The author, however, revealed that Covid-19 has made more than 60% of guests of top cuisines patronise firms with digital appeal due to fear of contracting the virus.

Conclusions and Managerial Implications

Though, the outbreak of Covid-19 impacted negatively on the Nigeria economy, particularly the restaurant industry in Port Harcourt. However, the crisis re-echoed the strategic importance of digital marketing channel in competing favourably. Specifically, it was evident that online delivery was further revealed as an important marketing tool to drive customer satisfaction during the pandemic. This is perhaps, due to how convenient and safe it was in having those special meals despite the crisis. Again, this was made possible with the increasing usage of smart devices and food apps. In addition, digital menu is also viewed as not only a new innovation among restaurant operators and guests, but also, a way of reassuring the latter of their safety as State imposed restrictions were gradually easing up. Due to compulsory social distancing in dine-ins, digital menu becomes a key marketing strategy to improve customer patronage.

It is also interesting to express that the increasing advancement of digital technology, coupled with the inability of authorities to clearly determine when the pandemic will be over; it should be noted that digital channel marketing has come to stay. Therefore, alert eateries who want to build resilience and continuously satisfying customers amidst covid-19, should specifically incorporate online delivery and digital menu in their organizations' service delivery operations. Due to the idea that this research has revealed solutions to pressing contemporary issues occasioned by the pandemic; therefore it has contributed to existing thoughts in the area of digital marketing as it relates to the restaurant industry.

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