



Understanding Marketing Communications Strategies During and Post Covid 19: A South African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a shift in consumer behaviour, as there was an increase of 1st-time E and M-commerce shoppers. This resulted in South African marketers adjusting to digitisation by creating clear communication and marketing strategies. The research objectives of this study were to understand how South African brand and marketing managers adapted to the COVID pandemic and to comprehend how marketing communication strategies in general have changed since. A qualitative methodology of structured interviews was conducted. A convenience sampling method was used to select the participants. The research findings indicate that the eight managers interviewed relied on face-to-face interaction with the customer through in store promotions and events before COVID-19. Several interviewees stated that communication on product benefits and features relied heavily on in-store activations. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all marketers who participated in the study revealed that they invested in digital communications. As more brands and businesses used digital platforms and social media to drive their products, marketers had to work on communicating to convert into sales, but they also increased customer engagement. The study highlights how innovative marketing communication strategies in the post COVID environment leads to an agile enterprise having a competitive advantage. The study also highlights the importance of understanding income and demographics of the South African customer in different regions of the country, as that influences the marketing strategies used.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Marketing Communication Strategies, Digitisation, Covid-19.

JEL Classifications: M31; D1; O31

1. INTRODUCTION

The hard lockdown imposed on South Africa (S.A) in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in 2020 posed a vast challenge in terms of the way marketing communications were conducted by businesses. During the pandemic, marketers were unable to utilise traditional marketing communications methods to reach their customers, such as television commercials, face-to-face campaigns, product sampling or in store advertisements as many establishments were mothballed (Sheth and Kellstadt, 2020). Traditional marketing tries to persuade potential customers by highlighting the qualities and advantages of a product or service (Kapoor and Kapoor, 2021). However, communication is frequently uni-directional, as the marketer must rely on potential clients to read, hear, or see what you have to say. Even though

some marketers had gradually started changing their marketing communication strategies to best suit digital transformation through the internet long before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were still many traditional marketing communication strategies in practice (De Pelsmacker et al., 2018; Vieira et al., 2019).

South African marketers had to find a way of communicating with customers during the lockdown, being mindful of their tone and message as well as the current environment. Increased entry of 1st-time online/E-commerce users in S.A. contributed to a shift in marketing communication strategies and a focus towards digitalisation, which is “transforming business processes by leveraging digital technologies, ultimately resulting in opportunities for efficiencies and increased revenue”. According to Kalbarczyk-Guzek (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic has presented marketers with an additional

challenge, showing that the future is unpredictable and businesses and agencies that have prepared for success in the future are more likely to withstand any changes that may come their way. Marketers are to adjust to these changes by creating clear strategies and keeping a constant state of readiness to deal with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The 4IR is “a new chapter in human development, enabled by extraordinary technology advances...that are merging the physical, digital and biological worlds in ways that create both huge promise and potential peril” (WEF, 2022).

Adversity forces innovation and the post COVID marketing landscape is vastly different to what was the norm before 2020 (Fenitra et al., 2022). Some of the major changes that have been adopted by marketers include interactive marketing – where customers’ actions and preferences serve as the catalysts for interactive marketing campaigns (McDonald, 2022). This moves the focus away from campaign centric marketing that has traditionally been a mainstay in the industry (Wang, 2021). Marketers’ efforts to provide customer friendly and customised experiences are aided by the expanding use of virtual and augmented reality technologies (Rauschnabel et al., 2022; Zanger et al., 2022). According to Van den Bergh and Behrer (2011), marketers that continue to promote the benefits of their brands through traditional means are no longer successful.

Campaign-based marketing still has a crucial place in the marketers’ toolbox, but the use of technology and artificial intelligence to support smarter, less expensive, and more sustainable marketing practices are now common (Kopalle et al., 2022). This technology forces the post COVID marketer to compete with entities that have very little, if any, fixed costs; and customers can now filter information about products in a way that cuts out suppliers (McDonald, 2022).

1.1. Research Problem

The research problem relates to the changing nature of what a post COVID customer is, and what that means for marketers. As customers’ demands changed, brands could no longer segment their customers as they were accustomed to before the pandemic. According to Sridhar (2021), 71% of consumers will use social media daily, more than ever before. COVID-19 had a significant impact on the increase. Because of social isolation and the rise of remote employment, consumers primarily used social media for communication, engagement, and transaction. In addition, consumers use social media as a tool to learn about brands, it is almost as prevalent as radio or TV advertisements and word-of-mouth. In the future, one in three consumers said they would prefer to learn about brands in this manner. However, consumers are increasingly turning to social media to find brands and make purchases from them. Social media is a very important influencer of purchasing decisions and more than half (51%) of buyers research a product or service before buying, by reading reviews on forums or social media. Customers use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and review websites like Hello Peter to praise, defend, and criticise various goods and services. The unfiltered opinions of peers who have used a product or interacted with a company are more likely to be trusted by customers. These meant customers were no longer dependent on brands for product knowledge and buying behaviours. To accommodate these changes, brands had to become

more customer centric in their strategies. Customer centricity involves understanding customers’ lifestyles, perceptions, and expectations. Brand loyalty became outdated as customers opted for the most convenient and affordable brand at any given point in time. Barysevich (2020) concurs, stating, that not only is the consumer journey getting shorter, but it is also getting more difficult. Users now have easier access to product research because of social media. For instance, if a customer sees a product on Instagram, they can instantly look up the hashtag to read other reviews and determine whether to purchase the item. Customers spend more time researching and visiting more review sites as a result.

The second element of the research problem is that many South Africans still do not have easy access to technology. This resulted in several brands losing sales during this time, as they were not able to communicate with their customer base holistically. Customers in underdeveloped communities did not have access to magazines, newspapers, or catalogues and no face-to-face communication could take place. These customers were disadvantaged during the pandemic. On the contrary, customers in suburban areas quickly adapted to the new norm as more and more businesses shifted to online marketing, which included various social media networks. Some businesses began offering same-day delivery services to their urban customers. This resulted in customer behaviours and preferences changing drastically. Therefore, customer retention had to become a huge focus for brands. As customers started living through their mobile phones, they were exposed to a completely different experience. However, considering that, South Africa is an underdeveloped or developing country, brands cannot only focus on digitisation. As mentioned above, a large proportion of the population does not have access to electricity, and the majority of South Africans have not adopted technological advancements. This means that brands still need to focus on traditional marketing to accommodate this customer base. With these being ‘back to normal’, to create a competitive advantage, brands need to incorporate both traditional and digital marketing communication strategies for their customers and segment them accordingly.

Our research objectives are twofold: to understand how South African brand managers adapted to the pandemic and to comprehend how marketing communication strategies in general have changed since the pandemic.

1.2. Significance of this Study

The significance of this study is that it highlights how innovative marketing communication strategies in the post COVID environment leads to an agile enterprise having a competitive advantage (IBM, 2022). Understanding these strategies is essential for marketing success in the 4IR. The study also highlights the importance of understanding the income and demographics of the South African customer in different regions of the country as that influences the marketing strategies that are used.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Marketing Communications

Contemporary marketing requires more than the business producing a good product, pricing it appealingly, and ensuring that

it is available to the targeted customer groups. Businesses also need to communicate with their existing as well as prospective customers as well as with the public. The marketing communication mix comprises of nine key methods of communication: “advertising, online communication and social media, mobile communication, direct marketing, events and experiences, word of mouth, publicity and public relations, personal selling, and packaging” (Chernev, 2019).

The communication process consists of nine elements: “sender, receiver, message, media, encoding, decoding, response, feedback, and noise” (Kotler et al., 2019; Hemonnet-Goujot et al., 2020). To communicate their message, marketers must consider the way the targeted audiences generally decode messages. They also need to transfer their message via effective media that reach their targeted audience and cultivate feedback channels to track reactions to the message (Kartajaya et al., 2021). Developing effective communication requires eight steps: “(1) identify the target audience, (2) choose the communication objectives, (3) design the communication, (4) select the communication channels, (5) set the total communication budget, (6) choose the communication mix, (7) measure the communication results, and (8) manage the integrated marketing communication process” (Kotler et al., 2019).

In terms of segmenting the target audience, the marketer will need to close gaps that exist between the existing perceived value of the product and its positioning in the market. Communication objectives ideally assist in terms of creating a need for the category, increasing brand awareness, improving attitudes towards brands, or boosting sales (Blakeman, 2018). Creating memorable communication entails making three vital decisions: what to say (message strategy), how to say it (creative strategy), and who should say it (message source) (Krizanova et al., 2019). Additionally, communication networks can be personal (supporters, adept, and using social channels) or nonpersonal (mass media, events). In selecting the marketing communication mix, marketers need to scrutinise the distinctive gains and costs of each communication tool as well as the business’s positioning (Eagle, et al., 2020). They must also reflect on the type of target market in which they are retailing, how prepared customers are to purchase, and at what stage the product is, in the product life cycle (Kotler et al., 2019). Gauging the success of the marketing communication mix campaigns requires obtaining feedback from the target audience as to whether they identify or remember the communication, how many times they viewed it, what aspects they recollect, their feelings towards the communication, what their preceding attitudes toward the brand, and product were, and what those attitudes are currently (Pepels, 2021). To attain strategic marketing goals, holistic marketers must create communication campaigns that can break through the clutter or “noise” and reach customers on a personal level (Chernev, 2022).

2.1.1. The role of marketing communications

Marketing communications are the “means by which firms attempt to inform, persuade, and remind customers—directly or indirectly—about the products and brands” they sell. They signify the opinion of the business as well as its products; they are a means by which the business can create a channel of

communication and form associations with customers because they can reinforce customer-loyalty. Marketing communications is also effective in terms of showing customers “how and why a product is used, by whom, where, and when” (Moodley, 2019). Hence, customers learn who manufactures the product as well as what the business and brand represent, and thus they can be enticed to use or consume it (Pahwa, 2021). Marketing communications allow businesses to associate their brands to other people. In this way they contribute to brand equity by establishing the brand in memory and creating a brand image—as well as driving sales and even affecting shareholder value” (Eagle et al., 2020). Marketing communications is quickly moving to the online space using search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) to connect with buyers (Kotler et al., 2022). Scholars have maintained that it is imperative to create strong brand equity (BE) through synergies derived from a combination of several synchronised marketing messages, which would lead to long-term competitive advantages and overall business growth (Chernev, 2020; Kotler et al., 2019; and Anabila, 2020).

2.1.2. Marketing communications during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses have been forced to seek new ways to communicate with customers and meet their demands (Eagle et al., 2020; Kotler, 2020; and Gunawan and Sari, 2021; Alhassan et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2022). More than half of the world’s population uses social networks currently (Nesterenko and Rosokhata, 2021). Business managers have also started to recognise the significance of digital marketing communications. Thus, there is a substantial reduction in the use of traditional exhibitions and direct marketing and an increase in virtual exhibitions. Websites, branding, and mailing were the primary marketing communications tools used by businesses to promote their products or communicate with strategic partners during the isolation restrictions (Kuvaieva et al., 2021). Various “digital habits” that evolved during the pandemic have continued despite the quarantine. Furthermore, in 2021, the audience of social networks increased by 10% and by the beginning of July 2020, amounted to 3.96 billion users (Nesterenko and Rosokhata, 2021). A study conducted by Vanko et al. (2021) pertaining to the use of social media showed that 63.7% of respondents said that they had been more active on YouTube, followed by 62.3% for Facebook and 43.1% for Instagram. Facebook has been found to be a vital tool for digital marketing communication, and because of the coronavirus pandemic, it has started to play an essential role in the online space (Jacobson et al., 2020; and Vanko et al., 2021).

2.1.3. Increased role and application of technology to assist marketers

There has been a clear shift toward marketing communications strategies that are based on data, with companies seeking to use new technologies to enhance productivity, profitability, and the customer experience with the firm (Hwang and Kim, 2022; Vandycke and Viegas, 2022). These new technologies have the potential to bring together data from different sources and harvest it using advanced techniques to get powerful insights that produce competitive advantages (Shah and Murthi, 2021; Nyagadza et al., 2022; Bani-Melhem et al., 2022). However, Lee and Lee (2021) are sceptical that we are experiencing a 4IR, arguing, “4IR

technologies have an impact on subsequent innovations in less broad fields than 3IR technologies, and thus, 4IR technologies may not be powerful enough to bring another boom in the capitalist economy.” Their optimism about the prospects of these technologies, however, has not dimmed, as evidenced by increased research into them. In this section, we briefly describe what they are and how they assist marketing efforts in the post COVID world. Hoffman et al., (2022) define new marketing technologies as “scientific knowledge and/or its application in the early adoption cycle for firms and/or customers with the potential to influence the activity, institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” According to Hoffman et al., (2022), modern technologies are altering marketing strategies in four distinct but interrelated ways that are listed below:

- They facilitate novel modes of interaction between customers and businesses.
- They provide new kinds of data that allow for new ways to analyse them (we’ll talk more about this in the next section);
- They produce innovative approaches to marketing; e.g., Crolic et al. (2022), who report that chatbots that act like people (anthropomorphism) hurt customer satisfaction and perceptions about the firm when customers are angry.
- The modern technologies demand new frameworks for strategic marketing (e.g., De Luca et al., 2021; Buhalisa and Volchek 2021).

Kumar et al., (2021) and Rosario et al. (2021) find that big data, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Machine Learning (ML), have the most potential to transform marketing. We briefly describe how these will assist marketing decisions in the future.

2.2. Big Data

The term “customer data” describes all the different types of information (personal, behavioural, psychographic, and demographic) that businesses store about their customers (Spiceworks, 2021). Big data (BD) refers to the computational and systematic analysis of data sets that are too large or complicated to be handled by traditional methods of data analysis (Sharma et al., 2022). Data science has been applied in marketing to get a competitive advantage. Thus, BD is inextricably intertwined with the study of marketing, since the latter is a sector, whose activities are crucially dependent on the capacity to handle the increasingly varied forms of structured and unstructured data pertaining to and generated by both businesses and customers (Grover and Kar, 2017). Examples of innovative big data analyses include those by Filieri and Mariani (2021) who show that online reviewers with cultural values of high individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance (the extent to which people are at ease with being uncertain about something), and indulgence have a greater probability of producing helpful reviews of a business. This highlights the importance of understanding cross-cultural psychology, as it is useful for increasing the chances of a marketing campaign succeeding in different communities. Due to sheer scale of data available, the challenges involved in identifying patterns, drawing insights, and curating it require partnering the marketing function with “computer science, behavioural sciences, and quantitative sciences” (Sheth and Kellstadt, 2021).

2.2.1. Artificial intelligence used in marketing

A growing number of businesses are enhancing their marketing communications by adopting AI-based platforms, and examples include Google Assistant, Amazon Lex, and Microsoft Cognitive Services (Wu and Maslov, 2022; Dung Le et al., 2022). Google Assistant is a virtual assistant that is powered by artificial intelligence. Google has collaborated with vehicle makers that include Ford and Nissan so that Google Assistant can be used, from switching on the air conditioning to opening the boot (Simms, 2021). Brands vie for customers based on the quality of their customer service, and major brands are partnering with AI. Hence, we will see marketers work with these platforms because customers now expect it (Simms, 2021). Marketers can integrate their digital product sales and services into these AI platforms, where customers can pay using the platforms’ virtual payment systems without retrieving physical credit or going to a physical shop. Examples include Samsung (Pay and Wallet) and Apple (Pay and Wallet). Marketers can work with brands as the tech platforms offer virtual wallets that store digital keys, boarding passes, identification documents, and credit cards. Ferasso et al., (2020), have identified opportunities for the integration of AI and robotics into business processes as a driving force in the evolution of business-to-business (B2B) marketing. Marketing teams that seek competitive advantages can identify opportunities by using customer relationship management (CRM) software that is compatible with all types of AI (Castelo-Branco et al., 2019). AI-based CRMs “automate processes, conduct digital ecosystem analysis, and assist in terms of prediction and forecasting, as well as the client’s behaviour study using data analysis and customer experience algorithms” (Saura et al., 2021).

2.2.2. Machine learning (ML) usage in marketing

Machine learning refers to how computer systems apply statistical models and algorithms to analyse and draw conclusions about data patterns without being explicitly instructed in terms of what to do (IBM, 2022). ML can be used in data analysis as a tool that may help marketers acquire new insights into customer behaviour and boost the efficiency of their marketing communications. For example, Nagarajan et al. (2021) elaborate on the use of ML to determine the relative importance of core and augmented service features and emotions in various service scenarios to understand the factors that reveal and predict customer happiness. Schlegelmilch et al. (2022) use ML to understand customer sentiment and emotions from two million tweets in multiple languages to demonstrate how ML can be used to assist firms with an international footprint.

2.2.3. Virtual reality usage in marketing

“Virtual reality” (VR) refers to a technology that uses modelling and simulation to place a user in a simulated 3D environment (Britannica, 2022). Its usage in marketing has been investigated in multiple studies. Virtual reality (VR) creates immersive and engaging user experiences and offers great opportunities for marketers to display their offerings in an artificial environment that is designed to imitate the physical world. For example, a customer can wear goggles that place them (the user) in a virtual environment as an avatar, experiencing sensory stimulation and simulation such as “sounds, touch, smell, or heat” (Bardi, 2019). However, there is a lack of direction in the literature regarding the

strategic design of virtual reality (VR) experiences to influence the beliefs, opinions, and actions of customers in a positive way (de Regt et al., 2021). There was an increased use of VR in tourism, and it was positively received by customers during the pandemic (Itani and Hollebeek, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). However, as Talwar et al. (2022) demonstrate, the post-pandemic use of VR in tourism has declined. The authors find that customers are more willing to return to in-situ tourism after vaccination.

2.2.4. *Augmented reality usage in marketing*

Augmented reality is “an enhanced, interactive version of a real-world environment achieved through digital visual elements, sounds, and other sensory stimuli via holographic technology. AR incorporates three features: “a combination of digital and physical worlds, interactions made in real time; and accurate 3D identification of virtual and real objects” (Microsoft, 2022). AR can be used to enhance the standard internet presentation formats of images, videos, and textual descriptions (Zanger et al., 2022). AR usage in marketing inspires customers and increases the likelihood of closing a sale (Gatter et al., 2021). AR has been shown to enhance brand equity through a personalised customer experience (Holmqvist et al., 2020; Jarvonik, 2021). Assimilating virtual information into real-world settings and experiences is at the heart of an augmented reality experience (Rauschnabel et al., 2022). Traditional marketing, in most cases, cannot target material that is specific to the user or the environment. For example, a customer can virtually apply makeup to their own face using their phone’s front camera, whereas traditional marketing would only show how makeup looks on a model, in a magazine, or video (Rauschnabel et al., 2022). Mercedes-Benz has been an early adopter of AR and has used it to overlay moving 3D arrows into a navigation system.

3. METHODOLOGY

Structured interviews were used in this qualitative study. An interview schedule with pre-determined questions was used for each participant. Data from the qualitative study was analysed using thematic analysis, which involved selecting, coding, and categorising the data, and conclusions were drawn based on patterns in the reduced set of data. Examples of coding units used in the data analysis included words, sentences, paragraphs, and themes, for example: “marketing communications before COVID-19,”; “marketing communications during COVID-19,” “digital marketing,”; “promotions methods.” Structured interviews were conducted with eight marketing or brand managers via the online Zoom platform at a time convenient to them, and all Zoom sessions were recorded. The target sample consisted of eight marketing and brand managers from the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, financial services, and technology industries. A convenience sampling method was used to select the participants.

Inclusion criteria: brand managers and senior marketing managers from the private sector, with over 5 years of experience in terms of implementing marketing strategies were included in the sample. Exclusion criteria: Junior assistants and marketers with little to no experience in marketing communications campaigns were excluded as were micro and small entities.

Sample: The sample consisted of the following:

- Chief Marketing Officer-electronics manufacturer.
- Marketing manager, spaghetti manufacturer.
- Brand manager – maize meal producer.
- Brand manager - detergent manufacturer.
- Marketing manager - financial services provider.
- Head of marketing - hair care producer.
- Brand manager, – hair care producer.
- Brand Manager – rice brand.

Participation in this study was voluntary and respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. No form of coercion was used to pressure the respondents into participating. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. No names or personal contact information of the participants are divulged in this paper.

4. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The following responses were volunteered by the participants in response to the marketing communication methods used in their businesses before and during the pandemic. These have been grouped into themes to aid interpretation.

4.1. Pre-COVID - Dominant Use of Traditional Marketing Methods

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all the marketers interviewed relied on face-to-face interaction with the customer through in store promotions and events. Several marketers stated that communication on product benefits and features relied heavily on in-store activations. Two marketers advised, “They relied on sponsors’ partnerships for brand awareness to communicate offerings to potential customers.” Digital communications were used, but not as the main touch points for customers. One marketer responded as follows: “The communication was centred on events and provided opportunities for customers to experience the brand through these touch points.” Three of the marketers informed me “that their brands were previously not even active online, though they had social media pages, they were not putting any spend behind it to amplify reach and engagement.”

4.2. Increased Use of Digital Marketing

Technology advancements have dramatically altered the nature of communications and methods of reaching target markets. This is particularly true of younger customers, which many social marketing programmes seek to target. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all marketers invested in digital communications as well as the use of social media influencers for marketing. One marketer said: “we went big on social media and partnered with influencers that have a high following on social media to increase our reach and engagement.” Half of the marketers interviewed advised that increased communication on digital platforms was not the plan prior to COVID, but most of the marketing investment that was meant to go on to do activations was redirected to digital. The other half advised that they were looking at increasing digital marketing communications in the space, but it was at a slower pace; so COVID-19 pandemic fast tracked that move.

4.3. Importance of Television and Radio for Marketing

Marketers and brand managers that participated in the study generally agreed that South African television and radio still had the highest reach and impact in terms of awareness. According to one, “in future television investment planning, they will increase while decreasing spends on retail activation. Promotions will also be done on radio.” Three of the marketers informed the researcher that for mass reach, television and radio will still be key. One participant stated that “digital channels still have limitations to access due to high data costs, and their products are targeted at low earning customers.”

4.4. Factors Influencing the Choice of Marketing Platforms

All the marketers who took part in the study agreed that digital platforms have an advantage because they allow for a more targeted reach based on factors such as customer location and age. One participant responded, “communication on digital platforms is not as expensive as television and radio. A single flight of a television advertisement can cost between R75, 000 and R100, 000, whereas the same amount can be used to create content for a month on social media.” Another stated that, “marketers understand that they will still need to maintain that crucial balance between good communication and over-communication as digital fatigue is a reality and customers are bombarded with adverts online.” According to marketers, “the use of the internet as a complementary channel to television and other media is being adopted in SA, following global trends.”

4.5. Digital Marketing Challenges

Marketers also started realising that “digital fatigue” is a reality as more and more brands and companies use digital platforms and social media to drive their products; so, they constantly had to work on not just communicating to convert to sales but to increase customer engagement. This is congruent with the findings of Moodley and Naidoo (2022). Marketers used the digital platforms to share how they are supporting their customers during this uncertain time to increase brand loyalty and brand love. As it became clear that social distancing was here to stay and “back to normal” was far away, and with the death toll rising, businesses had to prove that they would persevere despite the adverse circumstances. The tone of the communication switched from sombre to determined, and the content focused on the measures taken by companies to adapt their businesses. Another challenge that marketers in the study noted was that although most South African customers have smart phones, access to the internet is still a challenge for lower income earners due to high data costs. Moodley (2019) agrees with this finding that some customers that have “been left out,” as some marketers did not have a budget for television and radio. One marketer also had trouble in creating a digital marketing communications plan, as “not everyone in their teams were skilled on the digital landscape so there was high reliance on external agencies to assist with the digital communication strategies.”

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Conclusions Based on the Findings from the Literature Review

The following were the major conclusions drawn from the literature review:

5.1.1. Marketing Communications During the Pandemic

Marketing communications have quickly pivoted to the online space, using SEO, and SEM. Creating strong brand equity hinges on synergies, derived from a combination of several synchronised marketing messages, which is critical for long-term competitive advantages and overall business growth. The shock of the COVID-19 pandemic forced marketers to seek new ways to communicate with customers and meet customer demands. More than half of the world’s population, including a large portion of South Africans, use social networks currently, and businesses are acutely aware of this. Therefore, businesses have begun to channel their marketing efforts in this direction to capitalise on this global space. Thus, there is a substantial reduction in the use of traditional exhibitions and direct marketing and an increase in virtual exhibitions. Websites, branding, and direct mail were the primary marketing communications tools used by businesses to promote their products or connect with strategic partners during the isolation restrictions. Various “digital habits” that evolved during the pandemic have continued despite the quarantine. Studies show that people are more active on YouTube, followed by Facebook and Instagram. Facebook has been found to be a vital tool for digital marketing communication. There has been a clear shift toward marketing communications strategies that are based on data, and businesses are mindful of this, with companies seeking to use new technologies to enhance productivity, profitability, and the customer experience with the business entity. Big data, AI, and ML, artificial and augmented reality, have the most potential to transform marketing.

5.2. Conclusions Based on the Findings from the Qualitative Study

5.2.1. Pre-COVID - dominant use of traditional marketing methods

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all the marketers interviewed relied on face-to-face interaction with the customer through in store promotions and events. Communication on product benefits and features relied heavily on in-store activations. Partnerships and synergies were created to enhance brand awareness. Some participants who had not previously used online platforms were putting plans in place to quickly transition to digital platforms.

5.2.2. During the COVID-19 pandemic- increased use of digital platforms

The marketers interviewed have commented that while working on their annual communication strategies, they were looking at more ways to reach their customers through a mixture of channels like digital platforms and regional radio, while spending less by having the communication more targeted to their customers. It was difficult to communicate with customers during these uncertain times when people were losing loved ones, losing jobs, and being stuck at home. Marketers found that in their communication with customers, they had to be mindful of the current state. As the pandemic was still prevalent and people were dying. Hence, communication with empathy was crucial. During the pandemic, there was an increase in marketing spend in terms of digital communications as well as social media influencers, which increased their customer reach compared to before the pandemic. Many marketers were contemplating moving to online platforms

before the pandemic. However, COVID-19 fast tracked that move and increased digital marketing communications, despite the high costs of data in S.A. Promotions via radio and television are also expensive, but they were still a key consideration because they were complemented using social media. Increasing customer engagement was a priority. Providing support to their customers was critical, and the businesses were forced to adapt their marketing communications methods to stay connected with customers. However, in South Africa, thousands of customers were not reachable due to the lack of devices and data, especially in deep rural areas. There was a high reliance on external agencies to assist with the digital communication strategies, as staff were not equipped to handle digital communication campaigns.

5.3. Recommendations

As the country moves across different levels of future restrictions, marketers must remain flexible in their planning. Marketing communications activities must be syncopated with corporate objectives, which lead to tangible results. A flexible and proactive approach is necessary going forward. Marketers should monitor the environment closely, as they will need to rapidly change tactics should their customers' needs and environmental demands change. This is consistent with the views of Gorlevskaya (2016), who posits that "public behaviour, media consumption, level of involvement, and customer expectations influence the transformation of applied communication tools." Marketers should monitor and evaluate their marketing activity and effectiveness in meeting business goals monthly. Quarterly reporting should become mandatory to allow marketers to monitor their performance and adapt their approach where necessary. This will allow for long-term, albeit flexible, planning; nothing should be set in stone for annual planning. Crisis communication plans should also be in place for several potential scenarios. The internet space is seen as growing globally, and South African marketers must ensure that they invest in it while also taking advantage of the opportunity to connect and engage more with customers. With all the tools and analytics available through digital communications platforms, marketers must consider how to take a more targeted approach to see a higher return on investment on their digital communications by targeting the right customers and potential customers.

Bearing in mind that South Africa is still a third world country, where possible, television and radio must always remain key for mass awareness and reach in S.A., especially while internet access is not accessible to everyone. Radio campaigns can be regionally targeted to specific audiences. Marketers must also continue to encourage the use of online platforms by collaborating with suppliers on tactical trade promotions. Hence, customers will benefit from group deals and discounts if they shop online. This will assist in making sure that, should we go back to harder lockdown restrictions, customers know that their preferred products and services are easily accessible online, compared to competitors. As marketers move toward using more digital technology, they must not be oblivious to the fact that not every customer or potential customer is online. As a result, the communication mix should be tailored so that it can reach customers via other channels such as print media, such as pamphlets. Marketers should constantly be looking at opportunities to engage with customers, not just

to sell to them but also to get feedback on what their customers would like to see or hear from them, so they can improve on their product or service offerings. Marketers should also take advantage of customer engagement opportunities to understand customer behaviours and trends so that they can always offer the best and most relevant products or services. Marketers should include in their communications strategy what they are doing during the COVID-19 pandemic to take some financial strain off their customers. Marketers should continue to upskill themselves on new technologies such as TIKTOK, Instagram, and Twitter. This will ensure that the correct platform is used for each objective, such as an awareness or sales drive. Understanding which platform will assist with the objectives will make for easier planning and yield positive results.

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