

Use of Advertising as a Strategic Tool for Health Promotion during COVID-19 Pandemic in Select Newspapers

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Abstract

This study was designed as content analysis and the period of study spanned from 30th March 2020 to 4th May 2020. The two newspapers used in the study were *Daily Trust* and *The Leadership* and 52 editions (26 for each newspaper) were content- analysed with specific attention to placement of advertisements on COVID-19 in the pages of the newspapers. Findings revealed that out of the 141 advertisements identified in the two newspapers, 83 were related to COVID-19 and only 58 centered on preventive measures. The major sponsors of these COVID-19 related advertisements are the cooperate organisations. It was, therefore, recommended that the government should consider utilising advertising during disease outbreak and pandemic to stimulate the public to achieving common healthy life style.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Advertising, Health Promotion, Behaviour Change

Introduction

It is not unusual to use advertising as a strategic tool for health promotion. A clear understanding of the health behaviour and experiences of the consumers is crucial in developing health promotion messages that reaching the target audiences with significant effect (Quattrin, Filiputti, & Brusaferrro, 2015). Advertising messages are used to expose high proportion of a population to health promotion communication contents, using various mass media. Health promotional messages that come in form of advertising are capable of communicating, information, increasing awareness, and affecting a large number of people to produce positive health changes on a grand scale by enforcing positive health behaviour among individuals.

Scholars like Susan *et al* (2005); Murphy *et al* (2013); Quattrin, Filiputti & Brusaferrro (2015) have investigated the effectiveness of advertising in health promotion using different research methods and different samples and concur that advertisement is a crucial tool for health promotion. According to Sheng, Sheer, Liet *al* (2015), “one of the major goals of public health communication is to design effective messages that can persuade the target audience to change attitude or behaviour relevant to a range of health issues. These messages can be delivered in the form of advertisements, brochures, pamphlets and other educational materials (p.105).

The novel coronavirus 2019 has been identified by scientists as one among the family of Human Corona virus (HCoV). These zoonotic viruses that affect the respiratory tract of an infected person were first identified in 1960s (Huang *et al* 2020). But, the SARS-CoV-2 popularly known as COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and the human to human transmission rate is consider very fast and disturbing (NCDC, 2020). The role of the media in such emergency situation is germane not just because of the information role the media play, but because of its power to change public opinion. It is expected of the media as part of her

social responsibility to support the government in critical times such as this. The media can help to mobilise citizens to adhere to government rules and regulations of the lockdown, educate them on where to seek help and also keep the government abreast of the needs of the people. During previous pandemic like the outbreak of Ebola in the UK, Pieri (2019) opines that mass media messages should be guided with specific topic to mobilise national and international resources to fight the pandemic. Similarly, Smith and Smith (2016) aver that the mass media was very instrumental in the fight against the spread of Ebola by educating the public on preventive measures.

In Nigeria, the first COVID-19 case was recorded on 27th February 2020 in Lagos (NCDC, 2020). The federal government as part of the prevention measures, imposed a total lockdown for six weeks on Lagos State, Ogun State and the Federal Capital Territory because of the high increase in recorded cases and the fast rate of its transmission. About 111 case was already confirmed in Nigeria on the first day of the imposed lockdown (Leadership, 2020). The federal government also set up a task force committed to supervise the activities of all agencies and institutions in the fight against the COVID-19. One of the obligations of the task force was keeping Nigerians abreast of developments of the pandemic by educating and informing the citizens on newest discoveries.

Evidence from scholars such as Msughter & Phillips (2020); Onwe *et al* (2020); Kwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo (2020) have proven that the mass media played a vital role in curtailing the spread of the Coronavirus. These studies revealed that newspaper coverage of the coronavirus was adequate but most of the studies limited their research investigating the frequency of news stories, features and editorial section of the newspaper. There seems to be dearth of studies that investigate advertisements on COVID-19 in the pages of Nigerian newspapers. It is, therefore, important to fill in this gap to understand how advertisements on COVID-19 promote public health messages that help to sensitise and educate the public on preventive measures.

Statement of the Problem

Within just few months of the outbreak, coronavirus has caused a lot of serious health problems to many nations of the world, 174,032,728 cases of COVID-19 were recorded across the globe from the month of December 2019 when it started in China to June 2020. Also, about 3,738,030 people have died from medical complication associated with the virus within the said period (ECDPC, 2020). These prompted institutions around the world to take certain responsibilities in order to contribute to controlling the fast and wide spread of the virus. Health workers' unions mobilised their members to brace up the daunting challenges in curtailing the great terror that threatens human existence; policy makers are advocating for safety control measures, scientists and academics are investigating, trying to make sense out of the disturbing events; and of course the media are disseminating information to educate citizen on the novel virus.

In the discharge of its surveillance function in the society, the mass media help in national development by exposing dangers in the society such as diseases and pandemic. Many researches (Msughter & Phillips, 2020; Onweet *al* 2020; Kwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo, 2020) have been conducted with in this short period to investigate the role of the mass media in the fight against the spread of the virus. These studies posit that there was adequate knowledge about the virus and that the role of the mass media was significant and effective. But, there seems to be a

paucity of study on the role of advertising as a strategic tool to help in influencing people to take up preventive action against the coronavirus. This is the gap this study fills.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to

1. Determine the frequency of advertisements on COVID-19 on Nigeria newspapers during the federal government lock down.
2. Identify the advertisements issues on COVID-19 in Nigerian newspapers during the federal government lock down.
3. Identify the sponsors of advertisements on COVID-19 in Nigerian newspapers during the federal government lock down.

Review of Related Literature

The outbreak of the Coronavirus also known as COVID-19 in the city of Wuhan China in December 2019 has undoubtedly put the world to a pause. All aspects of human activities (social, economic and political) was affected globally with high rate of deaths recorded on a daily basis just within few months of the outbreak (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2020). It has definitely put the economics of most nations on serious trail and has overstretched the healthcare system of the world. The virus which is said to travel fast among human gets easily transmitted from human to human through physical contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person. Symptoms of COVID-19 include: fever, cough, shortness of breath and diarrhea. In a severe stage, COVID-19 could cause failure of the kidney and the immune system (NCDC 2020). Due to the novelty of the disease and the unavailability of treatment, prevention was prescribed as the safest way of surviving.

Some of the safety protocols recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) are frequent hand washing with soap under running water, the use of alcoholic based hand sanitizers, six meters of physical distancing, and the use of facemask. Knowledge was considered as an important weapon to fight against the spread of the virus (WHO 2020). The people need to have accurate information on how to protect themselves, and to know places where they can get tested, or report any suspicious sign of infection spread in the community.

According to Susan *et al* (2005), “information alone is rarely sufficient to change behaviour, marketing messages often are targeted to specific population segments, presumably for the purpose of increasing the company’s market share among that segment of the population” (p.2). Health is one of the sectors that benefit from advertising; it has a great impact on the sales of product and services, increasing brand loyalty and influencing the attitude and behaviour of consumers.

Advertising which is the creation of public awareness and access to information about product and services, if properly use, can contribute significantly to the fight against COVID-19. This can influence readers’ perception of observing the preventive actions and it will create a pool of ideas about the virus, personal risk status and community vulnerability. Clearly, “knowledge is catalyst in the formation of individual perceptions about health risks and the benefits of preventive action: (Susan *et al* 2005, p.2). According to Pati and Chauhan (2014) “the goal of health promotion is to empower individuals and communities to achieve the highest possible levels of well-being available to them... control over their environment and the

conditions that affect their lives and are designed to include these groups for strategies for change.” (p. 3). Newspapers and the mass media in general, play an important part in influencing the opinions of the general public and their engagement in health related issues such as awareness on outbreak of pandemics which could contribute to improved knowledge of symptoms, prevention measure, vaccines and available nearest health care centers. The media apart from just informing and educating the public, also has the power to change their opinion on an issue through the application of special treatments to the news; a process known as “framing” in the media house.

Among various concerns to health issues is the availability of information about disease, risk factors, symptoms, available treatment, vaccines and prevention. Most especially during an epidemic and or pandemic such as the COVID-19, knowledge is crucial for individuals to perceived health risk and derive possible preventive action. Certainly, consistency in the provision of accurate and adequate health-related message in a persuasive way through the mass media will enable the targeted audience to take preventive action and change health behaviours (Ryan, Dunwoody& Tankard 1991). As more than just purveyors of information, the mass media can set agenda for public discourse, promptly people to think towards certain health issue like the Coronavirus. Thus, the media can influence the attitude of the people to positive health behaviour. Martinson and Hindman (2005) opine that “the mass media is an important source of health information and, the newspaper outranked other media (p.1).” Concurrently, a study by Sadler *et al* (2005) found that more African American women listed mass media as a key source of information on breast cancer and diabetes than listed physicians and the print media were listed three times as often as electronic media. Readers give more serious consideration to and are more influenced by health-related content in magazines that present them with culturally aligned role models and information of personal relevance.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored based on the postulations of the Social Marketing Theory. It’san approach that encourages targeted population to development and sustain an interest in the attainment of societal goal. Quattrin, Filiputti and Brusafarro (2015) aver that social marketing promotes ideas, attitudes and behaviours to achieve goals for social good through the marketing principles and techniques, often use mass media tools to communicate health promotion messages. Social marketing theory suggest that the delivery of messages encouraging healthy behaviour or other social change requires the same multi-pronged marketing methods employed in product sales. It is “the design, implementation and control of programmes seeking to increase the acceptability of a social idea, cause or practice in a target group” (Kolter & Zaltman, 1971). The social marketing approach hinged on the principles of both marketing and advertising; these principles are best known as the 5PSs:

Product: COVID-19 ads. should be unique, simple and short. This will enable people to easily learn and recall. For example, ads on the necessary preventive action should illustrate how to wash hands properly, how to wear facemask properly and how to maintain social distancing when in crowd.

Price: Items required by the people to protect themselves should be affordable.

Place: Items needed by the people should be easy to find in the local market to avoid travelling far distance.

Promotion: The ads. must catch the attention of the people; it must be easy to remember and the should stimulate people to action, desire to work.

Position: Different ads for different groups of individual according to age, illiteracy, and languages variance.

Methodology

The researcher adopted content analysis as the research design. The researcher analysed 26 editions of two Nigerian newspapers during the federal government lockdown. Kerlinger (2000), cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2011) opines that content analysis is a suitable method of analysing communication manifest contents in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. The study period is the 35 days of the first phase of federal government lockdown which spanned from 30th March 2020 to 4th May 2020. But, only the 26 daily publications were analysed using the census research criteria. The weekends editions were excluded. The two newspapers (*Daily Trust* and *The Leadership*) were purposely selected because of their nation-wide circulation. The units of analysis were advertisements; both text and a combination of text and pictures. Items were group based on the objectives of the study. The identification and explanation of the categories given below:

- i. Frequency of advertisements.
- ii. Dominant issues in the advertisements.
- iii. Sponsors of the advertisements.

Table 1: Content Categories

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Sponsors of the Advertisements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Newspaper- these are advertisements from either <i>Daily Trust</i> or <i>The Leadership</i> newspapers. b) Government- this includes state, federal government, and any other government agency. c) Cooperate- this include Banks, Non-Governmental Organisations, Community Based Organisation and any other private organisations, that are not funded by the government. |
| Dominant Issues in the Advertisement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Preventive- ads on the preventive measures on COVID-19 recommended by WHO, NCDC b) Palliative – ads on assistance either in food stuff, construction of medical centers or donation of money by the government, organisations, of individuals. c) General Epidemiology- ads that take about the virus in general and may include the two listed above. d) Others- ads that are not related to COVID-19. Like job vacancy, school admission, Construction or supply bidding. |

Results

The aim of this study was to analyse how advertising was employed to create awareness on COVID-19. Findings revealed that advertising was insufficiently used to create awareness on COVID-19.

Table 2: Distribution of Advertisements on COVID-19

| Name of Newspaper | COVID-19 Advertisements related to Issue | COVID-19 Advertisements related to Sponsor | Total |
|--------------------|--|--|-------------------|
| <i>Leadership</i> | 48 (34.0%) | 33 (39.8%) | 81 (36.2%) |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 93 (66.0%) | 50 (60.2%) | 143 (63.8%) |
| Total | 141 (100%) | 83 (100%) | 224 (100%) |

Source: Content analysis 2020

Table 2 shows that the newspaper the distribution of advertisements in the *Leadership* and *Daily Trust* newspapers that were analysed. It shows that a total of 224 advertisements were coded. The advertisements identified in the newspapers were related to COVID-19 issues and sponsors. It indicated that out of the 224 advertisements, *Daily Trust* newspaper had the majority of advertisement with 143 (63.8%) advertisements while the *Leadership* had only 81 (36.2%) items. Out of the 224 advisements identified, only 83 were related to COVID-19 while 141 advertisements were about issues of COVID-19 related to preventive, palliative, general epidemiology and others. This indicates that not all adverts of COVID-19 carried by the selected newspapers indicated sponsors.

Table 3: Distribution of Advertisements related to COVID-19 Issues

| COVID-19 Issue | <i>Leadership</i> | <i>Daily Trust</i> | Total |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Preventive | 21 | 37 | 58 (41.1%) |
| Palliative | 7 | 6 | 13 (9.2%) |
| General Epidemiology | 5 | 7 | 12 (8.5%) |
| Others | 15 | 43 | 58 (41.1%) |
| Total | 48 | 93 | 141 (100%) |

Table 3 indicates that there are 58 (41.1%) ads on preventive measures against COVID-19, 13 (9.2%) ads on palliative, 12 (8.5%) ads on general epidemiology and 58 (41.1%) on others advertisements that are not related to COVID-19. This means that majority of COVID-19 related ads were centered on creating awareness on the preventive measures against the spread of the virus.

Table 4: Distribution of COVID-19 Advertisements related to Sponsors

| Name of Newspaper | Self | Cooperate Bodies/private | Government | Total |
|--------------------|-----------|--------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| <i>Leadership</i> | 00 | 22 | 11 | 33 (39.8%) |
| <i>Daily Trust</i> | 28 | 12 | 10 | 50 (60.2%) |
| Total | 28 | 34 | 21 | 83 (100%) |

Table 4 indicates that from the 83 COVID-19 related ads, only 33 (39.8%) were found in the *Leadership* newspaper while 50 (60.2%) were found in the *Daily Trust* newspaper. Also, in the *Leadership* newspaper, 22 ads were sponsored by cooperate Organisations, 11 ads were sponsored by the government and there was no single ads by the newspaper itself. In the *Daily Trust Newspaper*, we will see that there are 28 COVID-19 related ads sponsored by the newspaper, 12 ads by cooperate organisations and 10 by the government organisations. This shows that government did not sponsored many advertisements on COVID-19 during the luck down.

Discussion of Findings

Question one of the study sought to determine the frequency of advertisements on the pages of the newspaper. Findings showed that in the *Leadership* newspaper, the frequency is very low. *The Leadership* newspaper has an average of two advertisements on every edition and only one of the ads is on COVID-19. The cost of advertisements on the *Leadership* newspaper according to their price list is ₦708, 641 for a full colour page and ₦535, 673 for a black & white full page (*Leadership*, 2020). In the *Daily Trust* newspaper, the frequency is higher compared to *Leadership* newspaper; even though, it is still not adequate. There were 48 advertisements in *Leadership* and 141 advertisements in *Daily Trust*. During the coronavirus pandemic, *Daily Trust* gave a 40% discount for all advertisements on COVID-19 that would help to educate and stimulate people to take preventive action (*Daily Trust*, 2020). But, surprisingly, this opportunity was not fully utilised by both the governments and cooperate organisations when compared with the number of COVID-19-related advertisements that were identified. According to Ryan, Dunwoody & Tankard (1991), consistency in the provision of accurate and adequate health-related messages in a persuasive way through the mass media will enable the targeted audience to take preventive action and change health behaviours, but the reverse was the case in this situation as the findings showed that the frequency of advertisements on the dreaded coronavirus was very low.

The findings showed that majority of the advertisements focused on educating the people on how to protect themselves from getting infected with the virus. There were a lot of preventive tips on hand washing, wearing of facemask and social distancing. This has gone a long way to providing accurate information needed by the readers to make healthy decision as recommended by health bodies such as WHO and NCDC. There are also some advertisements on the donation of fund, building of medical centres and distribution of palliative. Some of the advertisements also gave a general epidemiology about the virus. Even when the country was in a total lockdown and school closure, governments and private organisations were advertising jobs and schools were advertising admission. An important aspect of any advertisement is the identified sponsor. The findings further revealed that majority of the sponsors were corporate organisations like Zenith Bank Plc, APM Terminals, Julius Berger and the Coalition Against COVID-19 (CA COVID-19).

The Daily Trust newspaper devoted every page two of her edition to advertisements on COVID-19. The government at both state and federal levels sponsored few advertisements on COVID-19. Newspaper advertisement is a viable asset during pandemic like the COVID-19. It can create a pool of ideas in an informative and entertaining manner that would appeal to the readers (Martinson & Hindman, 2005).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings, the researcher concludes that there was low rate of advertisement on COVID-19 in the *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* newspapers. Thus, it is hereby recommended that the governments and cooperate organisations should consider utilising advertising during disease outbreak and pandemic to stimulate the public to achieve common healthy life style.

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