UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

BRAND COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: NATURE, MOTIVATIONS, AND OUTCOMES

BY

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify this thesis as original and the result of my own work. Neither part nor the whole has ever been presented to this University or any institution for the award of any academic degree. All references to works by others have been duly acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

Communication has been established as being essential to the essence and endurance of brands. Consequently, brand communicators have found ways to engage their public even during crises. However, the existing scholarship does not adequately account for the strategic revisions that exigencies are engendering in brand communications. Extant work focuses on brand communications in situations where brands are the centre or sources of crises, with attention on reputation defence. With global exigencies expected to rise, particularly, pandemics in which both brands and their customers face existential and urgent threats, brands require more proactive communication approaches. This thesis therefore investigated the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic by documenting key features that characterised brand messages. It also explored the reasoning and motivations of brand communicators that led to the message frames identified. Finally, the study examined audience responses to brand messages during the pandemic. A mixed-method approach was employed, incorporating interviews, content analysis, and a survey. The study was informed by the Attribution and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Structural Equation Modelling was used to analyse the survey data while descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed for the content analysis and interviews respectively. The findings revealed that brands adopted a 'care-for-you' logic in their messaging, opting for a less combative approach in brand communication. The findings also indicate a desire to safeguard and exhibit concern for the well-being of consumers, while promoting business continuity and enhancing top-of-mind awareness as brand motivations. Additionally, the study found the efficacy of this care logic in predicting purchase intention in the exigency of the pandemic. Informed by these findings, the study introduces 'brand care communication' as an approach to communication suited to exigencies. The research contributes to the understanding of effective brand communication strategies during crises and offers insights for future research.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AVE	Average Variance Extracted
BCC	Brand Care Communication
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
CON	Congruence
CR	Composite Reliability
CSI	Corporate Social Investment
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSRC	Corporate Social Responsibility Communication
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
HTMT	Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio
OAA	Operational Adjustment Announcement
PBP	Product Brand Promotion
PCR	Polymerase Chain Reaction
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PR	Prior Reputation
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
SOL	Solidarity

SRMR	Standardized Root Mean Square Residual
STA	Skepticism Towards Advertising
TLI	Tucker–Lewis Index
TPMC	Touchpoint Magna Carta
USSD	Unstructured Supplementary Service Data
WBP	Wellbeing Promotion
WHO	World Health Organization

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly transformed the global landscape, impacting economies, societies, and everyday life in unprecedented ways (UN.Org, 2020). The pandemic's onset brought about significant shifts in consumer behaviour, media consumption, and societal values. In this tumultuous environment however, brands found ways of navigating a rapidly changing market to engage their audiences. This study investigates and conceptualises the nature of brand communication that emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to the brand crisis communication literature. The study further established brands' motivations for such communication as well as audience responses and the boundary conditions that shaped these responses.

Given that communication is critical to the survival and success of brands even in exigencies, this thesis employs both deductive and inductive protocols in identifying brand care communication as a brand crisis communication strategy that fits the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that brand care communication provides a legitimate platform for business promotion during public health and other exigencies.

This chapter presents a general introduction to the study. It highlights existing gaps in the brand communication and crisis communication streams of research, which emphasizes the problematic of this study. The chapter also presents the study objectives, research questions, and the scholarly merit of the study. It further provides a snapshot of how the chapters in the thesis are organised.

1.2 Background

Brand communication is the means by which firms and organisations seek to engage their consumers with the hope of eliciting favourable responses (Andreu, Casado-Díaz, & Mattilda, 2015). According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is defined as "a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (ama.org, 2021). Branding, on the other hand, is largely an organisation's ability to competitively position itself in the minds of target consumers, relative to competitors which stems from a well-defined brand vision that requires consistency with core values, ethos/essence, and purpose (de Chernatony, 2002; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Gregory, 2007).

A brand's vision articulates its ethos, aims, and values, presenting a sense of individuality that can help in differentiation within its competitive environment (Balmer, 1998). The processes involved in building or conveying a brand's vision to its consumers is what constitutes brand communication; meant to encourage stakeholders to patronize, positively support, and actively promote the brand above the competition (Keller, 2000; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Minkiewicz et al, 2007). Keller (2001) defines brand communication as the voice by which companies can establish a dialogue with customers and other stakeholders, about their product/service offerings and/or other company issues. It is the means by which a brand can build relationships with consumers (Keller, 2008).

A good job at brand communication draws consumers from awareness to experience and ultimately to advocacy (Wijaya, 2011). Beyond these, brand communication creates salience in the minds and hearts of consumers by linking points-of-parity and points-of-difference associations to elicit positive feelings and a strong brand-consumer connection (Keller, 2008). Though brand communication holds benefits for the focal brand, it could potentially generate negative consumer response if the communication is not well received or perceived (Ma, 2020; Wijaya, 2013). Beyond the differences that the audience is invited, through brand communication, to perceive among brands, there is often very little to the difference in their actual functional benefits. This indicates how essential brand communication is to the survival of brands.

In today's increasingly globally competitive marketplace, brand communication has assumed greater significance. Brands must employ strategic communication approaches, utilizing effective messaging tools (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Kim & Choi, 2018). Over the last few decades, however, changes in the physical, social, and economic environment have presented more challenges for brand communications (Schumann et 1991; Ho, Shin & Pang, 2017; Bodenheimer & Leidenberger, 2020). Environmental problems such as global warming, climate change, social inequality and the call for inclusivity have compelled brands to adopt a more nuanced, responsible, and less mercantile tone in their communications (Sobande, 2020; Gangadharbatla, 2021).

Brand communication has become increasingly fast-paced and complex, particularly in response to crises such as corporate scandals, heightened awareness of environmental issues attributed to brands, and growing consumer skepticism (Blomback & Scandelius, 2013; Gangadharbatla, 2021). Accordingly, brands have, increasingly, focused their communication highlighting purpose and stockpiling good reputation in anticipation of crisis (Greyser, 2009; He & Harris, 2020).

1.2.1 Brand Communication in Exigencies

Beyond existential global challenges (i.e., macro) and corporate scandals (micro), there exists another category of crises that threaten the very survival of brands and their stakeholders and, therefore, require different brand communication strategies- public health exigencies. For this study, public health exigencies are described as emergency public health situations that threaten the lives of both brands and their consumers and require swift revisions in business strategy and actions (Abbas, 2023). While such situations ascribe no direct culpability to brands, reputational repercussions may emerge from brands' responses.

Coombs (2007) describes such exigencies as victim clusters of crises because these situations are caused by external factors or stakeholders, making brands victims of such circumstances. For brand communication in exigencies, Coombs (1995, 2007) recommends strategies that are to inform and adjust the public, as well as using victimization to show sympathy and compassion. Some scholars suggest Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) due to its all-encompassing and coherent nature (Dmitrijeva & Batraga, 2012; Kitchen, 2015). Rusnac (2020), on the other hand, touts advertising's adaptability and ability to promote the reality of society by building symbolic representations of its social, moral, familial, cultural, and behavioural value systems, making it appropriate for brand communication in exigencies.

However, with public health emergencies becoming more frequent and further reaching in their effects on both brands and their stakeholders, knowing whether to make a strategic choice between advertising, IMC or any other promotional mix element provides no fail-safe solutions. Irrespective of the communication tool deployed, bigger questions remain as to the messaging logic to be applied to secure brands from appearing unconcerned, inert, insensitive, or non-resilient.

Before the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, several noteworthy public health emergencies have occurred around the globe. These include the Ebola virus disease (Reaves et al., 2014; Aliyu et al., 2016), the Avian flu (CDC, 2014; Lobb et al., 2006), the Swine flu (Johnson, 2009; WHO, 2018), among others. A review and systematic search of brand responses to these crises is summarised in Table 1.1 below. The literature largely suggests a 'business-as-usual' stance for brands operating in unaffected areas while those in affected areas and industries resort to risk communication and corporate social responsibility actions (Reaves et al., 2014; Adekunle & Adnan, 2016; Lobb et al., 2007; Kim, 2013; Crane & Matten, 2021).

In other words, the proximity of public health exigencies to brands frames their communicative responses.

However, brands do not always have the luxury of distancing themselves from public health emergencies based on their geographical location. Unlike the Ebola, Swine Flu, and Avian Flu epidemics which were comparatively smaller in magnitude of threats and effects, leaving a vast majority of unaffected people whom brands could still communicate/conduct business with, the COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone.

Table 1.1: A Synthesis of Brand Responses to Public Health Emergencies

Emergency	**Strategies**
Avian flu	1. Advertising brand (Kim 2013) 2. Risk communication (CDC, 2014; Lobb et al., 2006) 3. Socially responsible activities (CDC, 2014; Lobb et al., 2006)
Swine Flu	1. Advertising (Kim, 2013) 2. Risk Communication (Johnson, 2009; WHO, 2018)
Ebola Viral Disease	1. Risk Communication (Okunnu & Olatunji, 2020) 2. Employee Protection (Reaves et al., 2014; Aliyu et al., 2016) 3. Partnerships with Government (Reaves et al., 2014; Aliyu et al., 2016)

Scholars argue that the COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant changes in modern marketing history (Yeboah-Banin, 2021). It is likely the most profound and unprecedented socioeconomic crisis since the 1930s Great Depression with the potential to impact consumer behaviour/ethics, and basic marketing philosophy (Euronews, 2020; Bodenheimer & Leidenberger, 2020). Consequently, the nature of brand communication during the pandemic period is assumed to have been significantly nuanced. This unique context provides a rich avenue to explore and contribute to scholarship concerning the nature of brand communication during public health emergencies. This thesis, therefore, sought to investigate and appropriately conceptualize the nature of brand communication in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as a means of providing insights into how brands may communicate in the increasingly imminent risks of pandemics and other global emergencies.

1.2.2 A Background to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant environmental changes in modern history (He & Harris, 2020; Ma, 2020; Bara, Affandi, Farid & Marzuki, 2021; Cohen, 2020a). The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is known to have started in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province of China. Soon afterward, the disease spread to other Chinese cities with other countries like Spain, Italy, and Germany being affected in the early outbreak. In February 2020, over 72 thousand cases were recorded in China, and about 700 people, mostly travellers, were diagnosed in the rest of the world (Mejova & Kalimeri, 2020).

By March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had to declare the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic after the disease had been recorded in over 160 countries, and the world's media and public attention remained focused on the ongoing developments around the world (Chan et al. 2020). In attempts to contain the spread of the virus, countries started to implement measures such as social distancing, working from home, or total lockdowns (Statista, 2020).

It is hard to summarize the impact of COVID-19 and the various changes brought about by this pandemic. It has instigated, accelerated, decelerated, or shed light on some socioeconomic fault lines (UN.Org, 2020; Gangadharbatla, 2021). First, the economic impact of global lockdowns has been unprecedented with estimates that the pandemic cost the world economy between $5.8 and $8.8 trillion (Dennis 2020). Globalization was reversed and the digital drive was accelerated due to concepts like working from home and online schooling (He & Harris; Bara et al., 2021).

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of several countries across the globe decreased by double digits: the biggest decline since World War II (Dennis 2020). Social inequalities and disparities grew wider with higher unemployment and death rates increasing among vulnerable groups. The gloom that faced individuals and organisations could be described as devastating on both economic and social grounds (He & Harris, 2020; Yang et al., 2020; Bodenheimer & Leidenberger, 2020; Sobande, 2020; Gangadharbatla, 2021).

Disruptions in social activity, emotional distress, financial constraints, and the significant change in how or when consumers are exposed to communication efforts that characterized the period, spelled tremendous challenges for brands. Yet, regardless of the sensitivity of the coronavirus outbreak, it was taken up by social, commercial, and political movements as an opportunity to communicate their messages. Brands were no exception. Advertisers from public health and non-profit sectors, alongside those from news media, politics, and businesses began incorporating coronavirus into their messaging and agenda (Mejova & Kalimeri, 2020; Sobande, 2020).

The virus featured in political assaults, appeals for donations, stock market trading, commercial marketing, religious statements, and even animal rights campaigns (Sobande, 2020). Big and small brands alike also figured out the best way to communicate with their public or sell by tagging onto the pandemic. Hardly did any communication from a brand happen without mentioning the virus. There was nothing like business as usual.

The above scenario and communicative environment stand to suggest that whereas brands had adopted activism in recent years in response to sociocultural, economic, and environmental crises, brand reactions to a crisis that has survival implications like the Coronavirus pandemic took a different form. The applied nature of brand communication offered brands the opportunity to originate messaging that offered legitimacy for their communication. Nan and Faber (2004) use the term variable field in describing brand communications which suggests that the applied and practical nature of the discipline makes it susceptible to environmental changes (Laczniak, 2015).

1.2.3 Consumer Perception and Expectations of Brand Messages in Exigencies

Apart from the quest to understand the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, a key element of this study is to assess the outcomes of brand messages during the period. As brands pursue new strategies for communicating in increasingly volatile environments (Yeboah-Banin, 2021; Blomback & Scandelius, 2013), there is the need to ensure their messages are regarded as authentic, as consumer expectations of their behaviour and response in such times rise (Shoenberger et al., 2021). Indeed, some brands received severe backlash for being perceived as playing on the emotions of consumers by tagging unto the logic of "We're in this together" when there was nothing equal about the experiences of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds across the world (Sobande, 2020). Consequently, any brand hoping to engage consumers during a pandemic need to take cognisance of consumer attributions for their motivations. Scholars seem to agree that fit or congruence between brand messages and their ethos can help brands avoid consumer skepticism (Kim & Choi, 2018; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

A brand's ethos is referred to as the identity that has been judiciously nurtured and maintained over successive generations (Aaker, 1997). It is the character that a brand commits to, which is in turn reciprocated by stakeholders to ensure the ongoing success and continuance of the brand (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Congruence is also defined as the degree of fit between consumer-held knowledge, perceived character, and associations of a brand; and its communication (Zenisek, 1979). Communication here includes words and symbolic elements carefully chosen to present a brand's message. Congruence between brands and their messages has been found to exert a significant influence on communication effects, in determining consumer attributions and interpretations of brands' motives when communicating in crises or on causes with which they associate. A high degree of association is easily integrated into consumers' existing cognitive structure which generates positive responses. In contrast, exposure to inconsistent communication creates skepticism and perceptions of hypocrisy (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

The desire to strike salience with consumers, especially during exigencies is essential and serves as a great motivation for the adoption of appropriate and meaningful messaging by brands. The above is because, while brands seek to sustain the dialogue with their consumers, the public also has their expectations of brands, resulting in heightened scrutiny for brand communication (Smarty, 2020). A Kantar Group survey in March 2020 reinforced the above with the finding that 75% of their respondents thought brands should not exploit the pandemic situation to their advantage. This study therefore proceeds on the assumption that, given the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the variability of the brand communication discipline, as well as the need to meet consumer expectations for favourable outcomes, brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced a shift that needs to be investigated

1.3 Problem Statement

Coombs (2014) defines a crisis as an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes. Since brands occasionally encounter one form of crisis or another, the effectiveness of brands' responses to such situations has become an important topic in crisis communication research (Ma 2020; Taylor, 2022; Health & O' Hair, 2009). The crisis communication literature proposes several tools, theories, and strategies that brands can adopt in response to diverse crises (Du et al, 2010; Kim & Choi, 2018; Gill, 2015; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Hassinen, 2018; Brin & Nehmeh, 2019; Ho et al., 2017). Consequently, brands have several options and have responded differently to different crises over the years.

However, extant scholarship fails to account for brands' communicative responses in public health emergencies, including pandemics. Thus, gaps remain as to how brands should communicate when they and their customers face survival threats with immediate and urgent consequences. This is a critical knowledge gap given that scientists/scholars including the WHO warn of increasing risks of pandemics and other public health emergencies (Gangadharbatla, 2021; Morens et al, 2020; WHO, 2023).

This thesis argues that given the expected increasing risk of public health emergencies, there is a justification for the conceptualisation of brand communication during such crises. The magnitude of the devastation, uncertainty, and threat to livelihood presented by the exigency of the Coronavirus pandemic, provides a rich context to conceptualise a crisis communication response that allows brands to maintain a voice without appearing insensitive to the plight of their customers. Consequently, this study documents how brands communicated during the pandemic, identifies the motivations for such and then investigates the outcomes thereof.

1.3.1 Study Aim

This thesis aimed to investigate messages used by brands during the COVID-19 pandemic, their motivations for adoption, and the ensuing consumer responses, taking into account consumer expectations of brands. The above provides a means to conceptualise appropriate communicative responses when brands and their customers face existential and urgent threats.

1.4 Research Objectives

The study was motivated by the following objectives:

1. To ascertain the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To determine the drivers that framed brand communication in the exigency of the pandemic.
3. To examine audience and consumer responses to brand messages during the pandemic.

These research objectives are focused on understanding various aspects of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. They aim to provide insights into how brands adapted to the crisis, addressed consumer needs, and positioned themselves within the context of the pandemic. The objectives also provide a framework into understanding the decision-making processes of brands and their responses to the crisis as well as examine audience responses which can help to evaluate the success of brand communication strategies during the pandemic and identify areas for improvement.

1.5 Research Questions

The researcher sought to answer the following research questions to address the research problem.

1. What are the key features of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. To what extent did brands achieve message/brand ethos congruence in their messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What are the key drivers that motivated brands' adoption of different messages during the pandemic?
4. To what extent did the nature of brand messages during the exigency of the pandemic influence consumers' responses?
5. What factors conditioned consumer perceptions and behavioural responses to brand messages during the pandemic?

Overall, these research questions collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on consumer perceptions and behaviours. They address key elements of brand communication strategies, motivations, congruence with brand ethos, influence on consumer responses, and factors shaping consumer perceptions, providing valuable insights for marketers, businesses, and policymakers.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Exigencies disrupt lives and businesses, and one such example, the COVID-19 pandemic, may have long-lasting and profound economic, social, political, and cultural impacts (He & Harris, 2020) which spell significant survival challenges for brands and consumers. But, inherent within these exigencies are opportunities for brand survival that can be harnessed through communication. However, there exists very little suggestion as to what serves as an effective brand response under such exigencies. Indeed, existing scholarship does not account for the nature of brand communications in such situations, and the implications thereof. This study integrates interdisciplinary research streams to explore and contribute to the brand crisis communication literature in a number of ways.

First, the study contributes to the brand crisis communication literature by identifying and documenting emergent brand responses during the unique exigent context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It achieves this by examining the key features of brand communication during the pandemic. Subsequently, it synthesizes these features to conceptualise the idea of brand care communication as characterising brand messages during the pandemic, and as a legitimate strategy for brand communication in exigencies. The thesis also illustrates stakeholders' reception and response toward brands' messages during the pandemic as a means to proffering appropriate communicative responses for brands facing public health emergencies.

Second, the study contributes to the Situational Crisis Communication theory (Coombs, 2007) which presents a synthesis of several crisis response theories/strategies. However, the focus of these theories has been on culpability and reputational protection while little to nothing is proposed concerning crises such as what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic where no single brand is culpable. The literature acknowledges crises caused by natural acts but has no clear strategies in that regard (Coombs & Holladay, 1998; Kim & Choi, 2018). This study is an attempt to address this knowledge gap.

Additionally, for brand communicators, the thesis provides insights on how best they could communicate in public health exigencies. Communicating without a reference point in unchartered situations is very challenging. A tried and tested blueprint that has emerged from the conceptualisation of the type of messages, the motivations behind such, as well as the outcomes would come in handy for such professionals.

1.7 Organisation of the Study

This thesis is outlined in seven chapters. Chapter I introduces the study, provides a background to the research problem, and sets the tone for the discussions that ensue. Chapter 2 provides a discursive exposition of the theoretical background that frames the study. Chapter 3 discusses relevant empirical research on key aspects of the research problem, leading to the study hypotheses. In Chapter 4, the philosophical underpinnings of the study, and methods and processes adopted in executing the study are discussed. Chapter 5 presents the research findings while Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the study within the context of existing literature. The general conclusions and recommendations of the research are provided in Chapter 7.

1.8 Summary

This chapter presented an outline of the key issues that motivated the study reported in this thesis. The chapter also contextualized the study within the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic and presented the objectives and questions of the study. The next chapter will discuss the relevant conversations in the existing literature.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the theoretical foundations of the thesis, considering streams of research and the dominant theoretical spheres adopted. Crisis communication research as a vibrant area has a widespread paradigmatic domain where scholars bring varied disciplinary traditions and languages to the research endeavour (Seele & Lock, 2015; Varpio et al., 2020). Crane and Glozer (2016) propose five main streams of crisis communication research, including marketing.

This study therefore adopts a marketing/brand communication perspective on crisis communication. The chapter discusses two theories that guide the study: the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Attribution Theory.

2.2 Theories

Research in the marketing communication field, which primarily focuses on consumer responses to brand communication, borrows heavily from theories in psychology and social psychology (Crane & Glozer, 2016). Theories such as the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1988), among others, have been adopted in studies that have sought to investigate the role of marketing communication in generating purchase intent (Pirsch et al., 2006; van de Ven, 2008). Crane and Glozer (2016) also recognize the organisational identification theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) as probably the most influential theory in marketing and consumer research studies (Ma, 2020).

Despite the popularity of the above mentioned theories, this thesis adopts the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as well as the attribution theory to investigate the message content, managerial considerations and consumer outcomes of brand messages during the pandemic. From the message content and crisis response perspective, Avery et al. (2010)

identify Benoit's (1995) image repair theory and, for most quantitative studies, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) as the most adopted theories. The SCCT is therefore qualified for its inclusion in this study due to its adoption for crisis communication research that seek to assess message content and the managerial decision-making processes involved based on their assessment of the crisis situation (Avery et al., 2010; Li & Wei, 2016).

Though the SCCT is noted for crisis situations where brands are culpable, the theory caters to 'force majeure' or natural disasters in its 'victim' cluster of crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). The supposition is to juxtapose managerial considerations and the message content during the pandemic with the propositions of the SCCT. The attribution theory on the other hand was adopted due to its suitability in audience effect crisis communication research (An & Cheng, 2010)

Given the epistemological stance of this study, the theoretical underpinnings of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs, 2010) were employed to gauge brand messages/responses and the managerial considerations for such during the COVID-19 pandemic. The thesis also examines the outcomes of these messages by assessing consumer responses to brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore proposed to use the attribution theory (Weiner, 1972; Hastie, 1984). The study further builds a brand crisis communication framework based on the theoretical foundations of the attribution theory and the SCCT for its investigations.

2.2.1 The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

According to the public relations literature, the theorization of the situational crisis communication theory represents some of the early uses of the attribution theory in crisis communication (Coombs, 1995, 2010). The SCCT is rooted in efforts to translate ideas from the attribution theory into crisis communication (Hazleton, 2006). The Situational Crisis

Communication Theory (SCCT) was developed to investigate which crisis response strategy (including messages) managers should apply in specific crises to restore an organisation's reputation in the best possible way (Coombs, 2007).

From that interesting beginning, the SCCT has stood out as one of the most referenced theories in brand crisis communication research (Li & Wei, 2016; Kim, 2013). As already indicated, Avery et al. (2010) contend that the SCCT and the image repair theory (Benoit, 1995, 1997) are the two primary streams of research that account for the majority of published studies on crisis communication in public relations.

The image repair theory (Benoit, 1995), together with other theories of rhetorical origin (dissociation, inoculation theory, reactance theory, apologia, etc.), proposes several 'self-defence' strategies for brands in crisis (Kim, 2013). However, Arendt et al. (2017) contend that these theories are based on case studies, unlike the SCCT, which builds on apologia through experiments (Coombs, 2010). Owing to the influence of the attribution theory, the SCCT pursues a social scientific research method rather than a rhetorical method and is characterized by experimental design instead of the use of case studies (Coombs et al., 2010). This scientific orientation of the SCCT lends credibility to its adoption for this thesis, which has a post-positivist orientation.

Coombs (1995), under the influence of the works of Mowen et al. (1979, 1980, 1981), also provides a managerial perspective to crisis communication research where message senders paid attention to audience reactions and therefore sought appropriate ways to communicate (Coombs et al., 2010; Coombs, 2010). The SCCT adopts the scientific rigour of the attribution theory to provide a classification of crisis types and their matching strategies for managerial consideration in exigencies (Arendt et al., 2017; Ma, 2020).

The motivation to provide a managerial perspective was that managers need to understand how crisis communication can be used to protect reputational assets or even harness brand-building opportunities during crises (Rousseau, 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Ma, 2020). Li and Wei (2016), from a brand communication perspective, also endorse the SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) as a major theoretical angle to conceptualize brand crisis types and response strategies.

Coombs and his colleagues therefore began the development of the SCCT in 1995 with the premise that: crises are negative events for which stakeholders will make attributions about crisis responsibility, and those attributions will affect how stakeholders interact with the organisation in crisis (Coombs 1995; Coombs & Holladay 1996; Schwarz 2008). Accordingly, the SCCT (Coombs, 2007) is audience-oriented and seeks to illuminate how people perceive crises and their reactions to crisis response strategies. The theory proposes that crisis management needs evidence-based crisis communication guidance for decision-making by managers, supported by scientific evidence from empirical research rather than personal preference and unscientific experience (Rousseau, 2006; Coombs, 2007).

In essence, at the core of the SCCT is crisis responsibility. Attributions of crisis responsibility have a significant effect on how people perceive the reputation of an organisation in crisis and their affective and behavioural responses to that organisation following a crisis (Coombs, 2010). The extent of attributed crisis responsibility is a major factor in determining the threat posed by a crisis. Early SCCT research sought to identify the factors that shape crisis responsibility and the threat posed by a crisis (Coombs 1995; Coombs & Holladay 1996, 2001, 2002). The SCCT (Coombs, 2007, 2010) therefore identifies how key aspects of the crisis situation influence attributions of crisis responsibility and the reputations held by stakeholders.

The theory therefore posits that by understanding the crisis situation, the crisis manager can determine which crisis response strategy or strategies will maximize reputational protection (Jeong, 2009). Therefore, given the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reality that stakeholders were fighting for their lives while hanging onto limited resources, communicators needed to be careful in crafting messages that would resonate with their audience.

The SCCT further proposes a two-step process for assessing the crisis threat. The initial step is for managers to determine the frame stakeholders are using to categorize the situation based on their perceived brand crisis responsibility. The first frame is grouping the situation into three types of crises. A crisis could therefore fall into one of the following categories: accidental (unintentional and internal), transgressional (intentional and internal), faux pas (unintentional and external), or terroristic (intentional and external).

The attribution of culpability subsequently influences consumers' perceptions of, and attitudes toward, the brand involved. Though, by the parameters of the categories, a pandemic or any health crisis could be identified as a faux pas kind of crisis, Coombs and Holladay (1996) describe that category as an ambiguous situation where an organisation cannot recognize any crisis but an external entity claims there is a crisis.

Later, Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2001, 2002) remodelled the crisis classification framework into the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which sought to provide scientifically tested evidence for crisis managers as well as an integrative mechanism for the diverse crisis research that spans a variety of disciplines (Coombs, 2010). The SCCT advances that each crisis type generates specific and predictable levels of attributions of organisational responsibility. The theory therefore identifies three crisis clusters based upon attributions of crisis responsibility and crisis type to include:

(1) The victim cluster, which has very weak attributions of crisis responsibility with little or no violation of societal norms. Examples are natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering, and rumours. In such events, an organisation is viewed as a victim of the circumstance.

(2) The accidental cluster has minimal attributions of crisis responsibility, and the event can be considered unintentional or uncontrollable by the organisation such as technical-error accident, a technical-error product harm and other challenges.

(3) The intentional cluster has very strong attributions of crisis culpability, such as organisational misconduct, human error, product harm, and accident. Here, the crisis event is viewed as intentional. (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016).

The second frame is the determination of the existence of intensifying factors. These intensifying factors alter attributions of crisis responsibility and intensify the threat from the crisis. According to the SCCT, two intensifying factors in the crisis situation shape the reputational threat: (1) crisis history and (2) prior reputation (relational). Crisis history examines whether or not an organisation has had a similar crisis in the past.

A history of crises suggests an organisation has an ongoing problem that needs to be addressed (Coombs, 2007, 2010). Prior reputation assesses how well or poorly an organisation has treated stakeholders in other contexts – the general state of its relationship with stakeholders. Organisations with negative prior reputations are attributed greater crisis responsibility for the same crisis than an organisation that is unknown or has a positive prior reputation (Coombs & Holladay 2001; Coombs 2007).

In response to the assessment of the reputational threats, the SCCT proposes matching response strategies. The theory offers three broad response strategies based upon perceptions of accepting responsibility for a crisis: (1) denial; (2) diminish; and (3) rebuild (Coombs, 2007). Deny strategies attempt to prove that an organisation has no responsibility for the crisis. Either the crisis did not happen or someone else was responsible for the event. Diminish strategies seek to minimize the organisation's crisis responsibility and/or reduce the perceived seriousness of the crisis. Rebuild strategies are rather accommodative and seek to improve perceptions of the organisation through compensation and/or apologies (Coombs, 2010).

As may have been noted, the crisis communicator in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been found wanting in identifying an appropriate response strategy given the proposed response strategies of this version of the SCCT. As matching concepts, the SCCT advises corporations to use deny strategies in case of a victim crisis, diminish strategies in case of an accidental crisis, and rebuild strategies in the case of a preventable crisis (Li & Wei, 2016). Thus, the SCCT recommends that crisis managers utilize the threat level to determine the appropriate crisis response (Coombs 2007). But what would brands do if the threat was existential?

The theory also proposes ***reinforcing strategies*** in addition to the three broad response strategies. Reinforcing strategies try to add positive information about the organisation by praising others (*ingratiation*) and/or reminding people of past good works by the organisation (*bolstering*). Reinforcing strategies are rather supplementary and are best used to support the three primary strategies, all of which have culpability undertones.

Later versions of the SCCT, however, argue that crisis response should begin with instructing and adjusting information (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Coombs, 2010). Instructing information tells stakeholders how to protect themselves from a crisis. Adjusting information, on the other hand, helps stakeholders cope psychologically with a crisis. Expressions of concern or sympathy, basic information on the crisis event, and any corrective actions to prevent a repeat of the crisis would qualify as adjusting information. The types of victim crises can be managed by instructing and adjusting information (Coombs et al., 2010).

The foregoing stands to suggest that, unlike the matching concept and the reinforcing strategies, the later version of the SCCT makes a hint at brand messages that factor in stakeholder protection. These strategies suggest messaging content that could be adopted by brand managers during a pandemic. And for the first time in the literature, 'victim cluster of crisis' acknowledges natural disasters without the usual propositions of 'denial strategies but messages that proffer care, instructing as well as helping stakeholders adjust to the exigency of the crisis. This assumption of the SCCT provides an expectation of the type of communication to expect in the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coombs (2010) acknowledges that the SCCT is still developing as a theory because the research supporting the matching of a crisis response strategy to the crisis threat is limited (Schwarz, 2008). Though early response strategies proposed by the SCCT based on crisis responsibility do not make room for a crisis type like a pandemic, this addition of instructing and adjusting information can be appropriate for a victim cluster of crises. Coombs (2010) recommends adjusting information as the second half of the base response to a crisis, which can also be called "care response." This study hopes to build on the base response strategies with elements of care communication from the field of health care as the conceptual framework for this study.

2.2.2 The Attribution Theory

Coombs (2010) segmented crisis communication research into two broad categories: 1) The crisis knowledge communication research; and 2) the audience effects crisis communication research. The audience effects crisis communication research seeks to understand: (1) how stakeholders perceive and react to crises; and (2) how crises response strategies affect those perceptions and reactions. He argues further that the attribution theory and the contingency theory are the dominant perspectives of audience effects crisis communication research (Coombs, 2010). Consequently, the attribution theory was adopted for this research.

The attribution theory was propounded in the field of social psychology and is related to studies of social perception, self-perception, and psychological epistemology (Kelley, 1972). Fritz Heider (1958) is named as the "father" of the attribution theory with his first proposal that people or consumers are naive scientists who try to work out the causes of outcomes for themselves and other people (Dasborough & Harvey, 2011). Since 1958, Heider's work has been followed by other foundational contributions by Jones and Davis (1965), Kelley (1967, 1973), Weiner (1972), and Hastie (1980, 1984), which have helped to establish the attribution theory as a viable conceptual lens and laid the foundation for the subsequent decades of research.

According to Bernard Weiner (1986), one of the main proponents of the attribution theory, attributions of internal or external responsibility shape affective and behavioural responses to actors involved in an event. It is therefore logical to extend the attribution to the study of how consumers make sense of and lay attributions for organisational actions and communicative responses during exigency situations.

The application of the attribution theory is dominant in studies where educational processes that influence causal beliefs on both teacher and pupil behaviours are examined (Weiner, 1972; Kelley, 1973; Graham, 1991). Its adoption in marketing communication and consumer response studies has been very extensive, beginning in the 1970s (Robertson & Rossiter, 1974; Burnkrant, 1975; Swinyard & Ray, 1977).

Marketing researchers are noted to be the first to have connected the attribution theory to crisis communication research (Mowen, 1979, 1980). Mowen and his colleagues (Jolly & Mowen, 1985; Mowen, 1979, 1980; Mowen et al., 1981) applied the attribution theory to product recalls from a marketing perspective. However, their focus was on the effects of the crisis on consumers. Crisis communication was only a variable but not dominant in the research (Coombs et al., 2010; Mowen, 1980). They considered factors such as the speed of the response, the perceived altruistic (socially responsible) nature of the response by customers, and prior recalls. Repetitive recalls (reputation) did intensify negative perceptions of the recalling organisation.

Much later, researchers examined how crisis communication strategies affected people's reactions and behavioural intentions following a crisis (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Jorgensen, 1996). Recent applications have also sought to measure audience response to brand communication both in normal times and in crises (Boateng et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2021; Zhou & Ki, 2018) and the moderating effects of congruence in crisis communication (Kim & Choi, 2018; Ginder et al., 2021).

Attribution theorists generally argue that the functionalist perspective on information transfer overlooks the significance of the cognitive processes and phenomenal experience of an organism (Weiner, 1972; Kelley, 1973). Weiner (1972) cites a report to illustrate how distinct movie-going choices may result from causal attributions to the properties of the entity (a good movie) or attributions to the agent (easily pleased).

The attribution theory therefore acknowledges the agency and cognitive processes of agents or objects of communication as contributing significantly to communication outcomes beyond the communication message (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). In sum, the future actions or behavioural outcomes of communicative interactions are determined by the attributions made by the perceiver (Weiner, 1972). Thus, Weiner's (1972) attribution theory tenets challenge the functionalist approach to marketing communication, which calls for the investigation of techniques to moderate the effectiveness of such communication.

Hastie (1984) added to the development of the attribution theory, which provides some theoretical underpinnings for this study. Hastie (1984) proposed a hypothetical sequence of conditions and processing stages that are involved in causal reasoning, premised on the assumption that unexpected events like crises instigate attributional processing, which ends in decision-making. He argues further that attributional processing involves information seeking (Hastie, 1980) both in the environment and in memory. He adds that the review of relevant information in memory would translate to associative links between new information (e.g., an unexpected action by an actor) and old information already stored in memory (e.g., past actions of the actor).

Consequently, the attribution theory, according to Hastie (1984), posits that causal reasoning would produce richly linked constellations of memory traces concerning an individual (brand) or event that is central in the attribution process. By extension, Hastie's (1984) propositions suggest that the consumer-held image (perception) of a brand would affect their response to new information (communication), specifically, in response to a crisis. The attribution theory therefore posits that consumers make causal inferences given an event's context, especially if it is unexpected, such as a crisis (Hastie, 1984; Weiner, 1972).

Two main motives exist concerning the attributions of brand motives for social causes and their communication (Kim & Choi, 2018). Consumers may attribute a corporation's communication during exigencies to its intrinsic or altruistic motive of serving society, or an extrinsic or ulterior motive of serving itself (Forehand & Grier 2003). Findings in the two different motives – intrinsic (or altruistic) and extrinsic (or profit-making) motives – suggest that attributions of intrinsic motives generate more positive evaluations than those of extrinsic motives. On the other hand, profit-motivated initiatives generate less favourable thoughts and attitudes toward the brand/company and a lower likelihood of purchase intention than socially motivated causes or communications (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Du et al., 2010).

Though the attribution theory offers communicators the framework to gauge communication outcomes, some scholars are of the view that there is no such thing as one attribution theory (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Malle & Korman, 2013). Several theories have been proposed for attribution, either as trait inference or attribution as explanation (Malle & Korman, 2013). Reference is made to the work of Fritz Heider (1946) as the origins of the theory, which proposed two streams: "dispositional attribution," which refers to inferring characteristics from behaviour, and "causal attribution," which pertains to explanations of behaviour. Yet more recent renditions of the theory, such as the works of Kelly (1967, 1972) and Weiner (1972), are explained by the reasons of the actor (beliefs and desires that drive the behaviour) which is of interest to this study and the field of communication.

A key criticism of the classical attribution theory is that individuals may inaccurately explain events or messages and assign inaccurate causes to them (Malle & Korman, 2013). Despite critiques of these assumptions, the majority of published research has continued to operate on these widely held assumptions (Martinko & Mackay, 2019).

This thesis therefore employs the tenets of the attribution theory to examine consumer processing of brand messages during the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic and how that is reflected in their purchase intention. The theory suggests that causal attributions or inferences consumers make about brand communications due to heightened skepticism during crises have the potential to impede communication effectiveness. Consequently, the tenets of the theory informed the proposition of key moderators such as message-ethos congruence, with the assumption that brands would want to mitigate such cognitive inferences from their messages during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 Summary

The chapter examined the theoretical orientation of the functional approach to marketing communication research. The foundations of attribution and the SCCT were also discussed to imply the adoption of appropriate messaging and moderators for effective brand communication responses during exigencies. The chapter further lays the groundwork for the proposition of the framework built to unearth brand communication in exigencies as a proposed tool for brand response in a victim-cluster of crises. It would be the basis for the design of instruments and the collection of data for the study.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

Since the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, COVID-19 has been the major health crisis that emerged with the magnitude of a pandemic (Taylor, 2022). In between that space of more than a century (1918-2019), there have been outbreaks of viral and bacterial infectious diseases that have taken the world unawares. However, literature is yet to contend with how brands communicate in these situations (Kim et al., 2013; Yang, 2016).

The crises communication literature for example is encumbered with risk communication, media reportage frames (Saxon et al., 2019; Savoia et al, 2017) and brand communications in crisis in which there is internal culpability that threatens the reputation of brands (Li & Wei, 2016; Dawar & Lei, 2009). This chapter delves into existing knowledge for theorizing on brand communication during exigencies.

3.2 Conceptual underpinnings of brand crisis and communication

Crises are critical events that interrupt the normal business of an organisation or even threaten its survival (Fearn-Banks, 2001; Ma, 2020); necessitating the theorizing and conceptualisation of best practices in crisis management and communication (Seeger, 2006). Coombs (2010) defines crisis communication broadly as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis. Avery et al. (2010) add that very few topics have been so fully embraced within public relations as crisis communication. Yet, the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic saw adaptations in crisis communication that require further research.

Smith (1990) categorizes crisis communication as the legitimization component of the crisis management process: a 3-step crisis management model that involves: i) crisis management ii) operational crisis iii) crisis of legitimization. Crisis of legitimization is an iterative process that is described as the communicative response that provides information for various stakeholders and feedback for organisational learning as well as informing pre-crisis planning (crisis management). This sequence of leveraging learning to fuel the crisis management process makes crisis communication very much an applied notion: a nexus of praxis where theory and application intersect (Coombs, 2010).

The applied nature of crisis communication is reflected in the development of its body of knowledge. Early crisis communication research was done by practitioners and appeared in non-academic journals (Loewendick, 1993; Coombs, 2010). As academics embraced the need to solve crisis communication problems, publications began to appear in academic journals. Much later, theories and principles were developed in the field, which were focused on improving crisis communication that protects both organisations and stakeholders (Arendt et al, 2017).

In essence, crisis communication is largely driven by practice. This notion is supported by some scholars who are of the view that predicting a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy for crisis management is archaic because every crisis does have unique features (Health & O'Hair, 2009; Seeger, 2006). However, there is agreement on having some proposed strategies based on genre patterns that emerge from a number of studies (Coombs, 2007; Arendt et al., 2017).

Closely linked to crisis communication, are concepts such as risk and emergency communication. The Centre for Disease Control (CDC USA, 2005) has led efforts towards merging these traditions into a more comprehensive approach called ''crisis and emergency risk communication'' (Reynolds et al., 2002; Health & O'Hair, 2009). However, some scholars argue that these concepts are not the same in tradition and nomenclature (Witte, 1995; Coombs, 2010).

Risk communication is typically associated with health communication and draws on the principles of persuasion to warn the public about the risks associated with particular behaviours (Mileti & Sorensen, 1990; Eisenman et al., 2007). Crisis communication, in contrast, is conceptualized as a public relations concept and addresses the need for organisations to repair damaged images after a crisis or disaster (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1996).

3.3 Brand Crisis Communication Taxonomies

Every now and then, a variety of possible crises, including explosions/fires, dangerous products, workplace violence, managerial malfeasance, and natural disasters such as hurricanes, impact brands (Coombs et al., 2010; Eisenman et al., 2007). Crises are bound to occur, even with proactive prevention programmes. Given that brand crises can have a variety of catastrophic impacts, managers need to be prepared to respond to crises they cannot avert in order to successfully negotiate the rough waters (Kim, 2013; Li & Wei, 2016).

Effective crisis response is said to begin with a conceptualisation of the type of crisis and a commensurate response strategy. Until the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, two streams of scholarship arise from the literature as informing brand crisis classification (Li & Wei, 2016). These include the Situational Crisis Communication Theory classification informed by the attribution theory from the PR perspective and the brand equity perspective, which stems from the brand communication perspective (Kiambi & Shafer, 2016; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Keller, 1993).

3.3.1 SCCT/PR Perspective

From the attribution and SCCT perspectives, Coombs and Holladay (1996) provide a classification for crises based on crisis responsibility (intentionality) as well as the magnitude of threat posed by a crisis (locus) (Kim & Choi, 2018). They developed a matrix of four crisis types grounded on where the cause originated (internal vs. external) and intentionality (intentional vs. unintentional) using the attribution theory. A crisis could therefore fall into one of the following categories: accidental (unintentional and internal), transgressional (intentional and internal), faux pas (unintentional and external), or terroristic (intentional and external).

The SCCT therefore identifies three crisis clusters as earlier mentioned in this study: (1) ***The victim cluster***, which has very weak attributions of crisis responsibility with little or no violation of societal norms. Examples are natural disasters, workplace violence, product tampering, and rumours. In such events, an organisation is viewed as a victim of the circumstance.

(2) The ***accidental cluster*** has minimal attributions of crisis responsibility, and the event can be considered unintentional or uncontrollable by the organisation such as technical-error accident, a technical-error product harm and other challenges.

(3) The ***intentional cluster*** has very strong attributions of crisis culpability, such as organisational misconduct, human error, product harm, and accident. Here, the crisis event is viewed as intentional. (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a revisit of the faux-pas or victim cluster of crisis which though inclusive of force majeure crisis, had undertones of culpability. The general acknowledgement of the shift in marketing philosophy instigated by the pandemic extends its repercussions to crisis taxonomy to adequately accommodate existential exigencies (Dennis, 2020; Moodley et al., 2023).

3.3.2 Brand Communication Perspective

The brand-equity theory perspective is hinged on Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity model. Customer-based brand equity is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing or communication of the brand (Keller, 1993). The theory argues that consumers, based on brand communications, can potentially expect functional and symbolic benefits from a brand (Wijaya, 2011). Accordingly, Dutta and Pullig (2011) conceptualise brand crises based on this assumption into two broad types:

1) Performance-related crises or product-harm crises, commonly involve defective or dangerous products that may reduce a brand's perceived ability to deliver functional

benefits. A performance-based crisis impacts the explicit benefits or functionality of the brand.

2) Values-related crises do not directly involve the product but involve social or ethical issues surrounding the values espoused by the brand, such as price gouging, the use of child labour, and false advertising, among others. Values-based crisis impacts the brand's expected symbolic and psychological benefits (Li & Wei, 2016; Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

Votolato and Unnava (2006) also adopt the brand-equity theory perspective of crisis categorization but use different words to represent the two types of crises. For instance, Votolato and Unnava (2006) use ‘competence’ and ‘moral’ in place of ‘performance’ and ‘values’. According to Votolato, and Unnava (2006), the distinction between defaulting in extrinsic and intrinsic expectations of stakeholders is important because research indicates that products should adequately deliver functional benefits for satisfaction to occur. However, the deficiency in value or moral benefits does not necessarily cause dissatisfaction (Dawer & Lei, 2009; Li & Wei, 2016).

Greyser (2009) also proposes nine categories of brand crises based on the recognition of the “what” and the “who” in the crisis. The “what” represents the issue generating the reputational threats, and the “who” captures the public(s) involved in the crisis. The basis of this categorisation is quite similar to Coombs and Holladay’s (1996, 2001) typology involving crisis responsibility and locus. Nonetheless, the categories appear as a further breakdown of the ‘performance-based’ and ‘value-based typology conceptualised by Dutta and Pullig (2011). They involve: (1) product failure; (2) social responsibility gap; (3) corporate misbehaviour; (4) executive misbehaviour; (5) poor business results; (6) spokesperson misbehaviour and controversy; (7) death of symbol of company; (8) loss of public support; and (9) controversial ownership.

Regardless of the crises' typologies in the literature, the situation presented by the COVID-19 pandemic appears not to have been adequately accounted for in the extant literature. It is likely to be described as a ***faux pas*** crisis as it is unintentional and external in impact. However, the description provided by Coombs and Holladay (1996) has ambiguity of culpability, which is far from what COVID-19 was. Faux pas is described as an ambiguous situation as to whether there exists a crisis or not. It represents a situation where some external group may claim an organisation has done something wrong against the word of the organisation.

Subsequent to the above, Coombs and Holladay (1996) proposed denial, that is, capitalizing on the ambiguity to convince stakeholders there is no crisis as the appropriate response strategy. While brands may not be held responsible for a pandemic, denial would have had no resonance with stakeholders as brand response for the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Crises Response/Communication Strategies

Linked to the crisis typology proposed by Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2001), are a number of crisis response strategies that are deemed appropriate due to the type of crisis. Crisis response strategies, according to Coombs (2007), are a brand's words and actions to protect its reputation in crisis (Ma, 2020). Crisis communication strategies, on the other hand, are the symbolic resources crisis managers employ in the hope of protecting or repairing the organisational image (Coombs et al., 2010). Communication strategies are essentially communicative and can either improve or make the crisis situation worse for a brand and its various stakeholders.

Claeys and Cauberghe (2012), on the contrary, define crisis communication strategies as any efforts or resources a brand adopts to protect its image in crisis. They categorize crisis communication strategies to include crisis response strategies and crisis timing strategies (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). This study adopts Coombs et al.'s (2010) definition of crisis communication strategies, which principally involves the messaging and communicative aspects of crisis response.

Crisis communication strategies research, according to the literature, originated from corporate apologia, which is "a communicative effort to defend a corporation against reputation/character attacks," (Coombs et al., 2010, p. 338) to "repair and restore the image, credibility, and legitimacy" of the corporation (Arendt et al., 2017, p. 517; Kim & Choi, 2018). Contrary to how it sounds, apologia does not mean apology but rather character defence (Ma, 2020). It was developed with the assumption that corporations have a character that is subject to attack and requires defence (Coombs et al., 2010).

Ware and Linkugel (1973) identified four strategies under corporate apologia: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. These four strategies, according to Arendt et al. (2017) in a meta-analysis of crisis communication research, could be adopted separately, in combination, or with a number of lesser-known strategies in order to create a successful, persuasive message. Later researchers however described corporate apologia as rhetorical, sender-oriented (Coombs et al., 2010; Hearit, 2006; Lee, 2005); and developed other taxonomies and theories of post-crisis responses based on apologia such as dissociations (Hearit, 1995), image repair theory (Benoit, 1995) and SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

Hearit's (1995) 'dissociations' work contributed immensely to developing corporate apologia into a more refined tool for crisis communication analysis (Coombs et al., 2010). It focuses on self-defence of character by arguing that crises can call a corporation's social legitimacy with its stakeholders to question, hence the need for corporate apologia to restore it. Dissociations therefore proposes three strategies for crisis communication that seek to separate a concept into two parts. The ***opinion vs. knowledge*** dissociation argues that charges against the corporation, is an opinion, have no merit, and do not match the facts of the situation. The ***individual vs. group*** dissociation also reasons that it is just a part of the organisation that did something wrong and that the actions are not representative of the corporation as a whole. The ***act vs. essence*** dissociation on the other hand, acknowledges culpability but claims that action does not represent the true nature of the organisation.

Benoit (1995) builds on corporate apologia with his work on the image restoration, now image repair theory (Benoit & Pang, 2008). The image repair theory is one of the most comprehensive lists of potential crisis communication strategies developed from corporate apologia and extends well beyond the basic four derived from apologia (Kim et al., 2013). Benoit (1995) argues that corporations have valuable yet fragile reputations (images) that warrant protection when threatened. The image repair theory combines ideas from rhetoric, including apologia, with account-giving from social science (how people justify their actions) to generate a list of possible crisis responses that a crisis manager could adopt (Coombs et al., 2010).

Benoit's (1995) typology includes five image restoration strategies: (a) denial, (b) evasion of responsibility, (c) reducing the offensiveness of the event, (d) corrective action, and (e) mortification (Arendt et al., 2017). ***Denial*** contains two forms: simple denial and shifting the blame. ***Evasion*** of responsibility has four types: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. The third strategy, ***reducing the offensiveness of the event***, is broken into six components: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. ***Corrective action*** involves any attempts to fix the problem without sub-categories. The fifth strategy is ***mortification,*** and that takes place when everyone involved apologizes for the crisis. Coombs et al. (2010) opine that Benoit's (1995) repair theory has a bias towards mortification as the optimal crisis response strategy because it represents the bridge between apologia and apology.

In an attempt to integrate the attribution theory with the rhetorical perspective of corporate apologia Coombs and Holladay (1996) proposed the SCCT (Coombs et al., 2010).

SCCT, in response to identified errors in speculations made by the rhetorical case studies, builds on the crisis communication strategies of apologia by utilizing experiments to test their reputation-building and protection abilities (Ma, 2020). Coombs and Holladay (1996) also chart out the match between crisis situation and crisis response for effective application. Since it was propounded in 1996, a series of studies have tested and refined propositions made by the SCCT over the years (Coombs 2007a; Coombs & Holladay 1996, 2001).

The SCCT divides crisis response strategies into five groups: denial, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). ***Denial*** claims there was no crisis or admits to the existence of a crisis but pushes the blame on the crisis from the organisation. ***Distance*** accepts the crisis but tries to weaken the link between the organisation and the crisis. ***Ingratiation*** seeks to win the public's approval of the organisation. ***Mortification*** attempts to gain forgiveness for the corporation. ***Suffering*** portrays the organisation as a victim in the crisis (Allen & Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995). Ma (2020) summarizes that the SCCT recommends two broad categories of crisis response strategies: ***rebuild*** strategies for preventable-type crises (Coombs, 2007) and supplementary ***bolstering*** strategies if there is positive pre-crisis organisational public relations.

Just like the crisis typologies, crisis communication strategies also have both PR and brand/marketing perspectives. Li and Wei (2016), from a corporate branding perspective, reference McLaughlin et al.'s (1983) suggestion that all strategies can be arrayed along a mitigation-aggravation continuum as follows: ***silence***, ***concession***, ***excuse***, ***justification,*** and ***refusal***. Dawar and Pillutla (2000) also propose that brands can respond to crises along a continuum from unambiguous support to unambiguous stonewalling, which is synonymous with the accommodative-defensive continuum attributed to Coombs (1998).

While Kim et al. (2013) observed that the SCCT and the image repair theory are the most adopted theories for crisis communication research and practice, Li and Wei (2016) contend that there is no consensus among researchers about the details of crisis response/communication strategies. Li and Wei (2016) further argue that though there is no consensus, all those response strategies can be placed on a deny-apology continuum, where the involved brand accepts responsibility or not (Li & Wei, 2016; Arendt et al., 2017).

Beyond the theories and broad sets of crisis communication strategies (of rhetorical origin), researchers have also explored some specific marketing communication tools that are deemed appropriate for crisis response (Wei, 2016; Kim & Choi, 2018). Based on the general assumption that consumers will reward brands for their support of social initiatives, marketing communications with social causes attached to them seem to have been a good way to respond to consumer expectations in times of crisis (Ma, 2020). This has led to the popularity of social causes such as ***corporate social responsibility***, ***corporate advertising*** (which includes issue advertising), ***corporate sponsorship, and cause marketing,*** among others (Spajić et al, 2022; Ho et al., 2017).

As argued by some scholars, the exigencies of crisis and the applied nature of crisis communication research do not allow for a strict-jacket matching of crisis situations to responses (Gangadharbatla; 2021). However, brands' responses during or after a crisis, be it communicative (rhetorical) or engagements in social causes would require the adoption of appropriate symbols and strategic messaging features to effectively achieve communication outcomes.

Whether from a public relations perspective or a marketing communication perspective, the crisis communication literature fails to adequately cater for the victim or faux pas cluster of crises in terms of response strategies until the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In place of 'suffering' as suggested by Coombs (2007), Khare and Singh (2020) provide a synthesis of brand responses in the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic and suggest crisis specific communication which embodies solidarity and pushes an "We're in this together" vibe.

In such scenarios, according to Beer (2020), aggressive product benefits are generally less emphasized in favour of building brand connections. And every piece of communication is expected to empathise or add value to people and not just surface level communication, given heightened skepticism and public scrutiny during such exigencies (Shrestha, 2022).

Additionally, Moodley et al. (2023) and Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2022) propose innovation as being essential; citing different brands, including banks resorting to giving tips on health, fitness, and personal care as well as extending their product range to include sanitizers and other cleaning ranges. The adoption of digital channels/social media for solidarity messages, and for online experiences, while using in-store/direct marketing for product sales is also suggested (Moodley et al., 2023). These suggestions are in agreement with assertions that in a crisis, brand communication cannot be business as usual (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Kim & Choi, 2018) And though recent literature burgeoning at the back of the COVID-19 pandemic presents alternative responses, they are yet to be conceptualized and crystallised with a general nomenclature.

3.5 Messaging

Witte (1995) opines that despite agreement that the way information is presented matters, there is no clear consensus in the literature about what specific features effective crisis messages should have, given that communication with the public remains quite elusive in such times. For decades, brands have adopted the use of rhetoric and representations in their messaging to yield communication, which features emotional or rational appeals (Andreu et al., 2015; Ma, 2020). Communication research shows that the presentation of information (i.e., emotional versus rational framing) influences individual consumers' willingness to thoroughly evaluate the content of advertising messages (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014).

However, there is a need for companies to seek to match the message type, its appeal, and the perceived image of a brand (Andreu et al., 2015). Matching message type and appeal positively affect consumers' attributions of the brand's communication motives. Rational appeals assume that consumers would make rational choices and therefore present arguments to engage their reasoning. Emotional appeals target the emotions or feelings of consumers. These efforts are usually intended to present brands as humans and make them relatable and attractive to different demographic groups (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sobande, 2019).

Additionally, some academics contend that fear appeals are frequently used in risk messaging, which is associated with health crises (Witte, 1995; Zhang & Zhou, 2020). Messages that incite fear by emphasizing serious and likely threats in order to compel compliance with advised courses of action are known as fear appeals. Fear appeals typically aim to heighten the perceived threat by highlighting the seriousness of the threat and/or increasing the likelihood that it will materialize (Ma, 2020). They also make an effort to promote self-efficacy by providing a list of precise, doable, and simple actions that can be taken to neutralize the threat, as well as to raise response-efficacy—the perceived effectiveness of the advised reaction.

Whichever appeal a brand adopts, the literature admonishes that, to be ethical, crisis managers must begin their efforts by using communication to address the physical and psychological concerns of the victims (Khare & Singh; Beer, 2020). It is only after this foundation is established that crisis managers should turn their attention to reputational assets. As crisis response strategies become more accommodating, and show greater concern for victims, stakeholders perceive the brands or communicating entities as taking greater responsibility for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2005).

Messages are more effective when they are strategically matched to audience needs, values, backgrounds, culture, and experience (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2022; Murray-Johnson et al., 2001). Crisis messages should be clear and simple, appeal to reason and emotion, and offer solutions to problems (Spajić et al, 2022; Friemuth et al., 2000). Much of crisis communication as practiced in public health incorporates these features in public messages, usually carried in the mainstream media, as general persuasive campaigns (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). The situation of brands in such contexts was recently updated by scholars such as Shrestha (2022) and Spajić et al. (2022) to fill the gap that had existed in the extant literature until the COVID-19 pandemic. It suggests the formation of a society that cares, full of love, empathy, and compassion including brands who project themselves as corporate citizens through their messaging that demonstrate care and responsibility for people who are in distress (Hermanto et al., 2021).

Santos and Moreno (2018) add to the brand crisis messaging efficacy from a sponsorship perspective by recommending message-ethos congruence, as would be espoused in this chapter. They observed that incongruent, misfit messages are processed and encoded with a higher level of attention, thereby increasing the consumer's brain activity and processing, which heightens attributions. In contrast, messages that are reliable and consistent with prior expectations (congruent pairings) minimise consumer skepticism (Du et al., 2010).

Consumer skepticism towards brand messages in exigencies occurs when messages are viewed as exploitative or an attempt to clear a brand of legitimate and reputational damages (Khare & Singh, 2020; Du et al., 2010). Such consideration of extrinsic communication motives may subsequently lead to negative evaluations of both the communication and the brand (Yoon et al., 2006). This study therefore seeks to investigate the effectiveness of brand communication efforts in mitigating skepticism for brands in crisis. The subsequent paragraphs explore the audience response literature as a forerunner.

3.6 Consumer response to brand crisis communication

The essence of crisis response strategies is to protect the fortunes of a brand in terms of equity, either resource-based or customer-based (Spajić et al, 2022; Dawar & Pullutla, 2000). However, crises have the potential to harm consumers physically, emotionally, and financially, which results in consumer negativity towards a brand and its products (Bhagi & Gabrielli, 2019). Consumer reactions pose the biggest threat to a brand in crisis (Grappi & Romani, 2015). Thus, understanding consumer attitudes towards brand crises and the accompanied responses can help organisations to respond effectively to crises.

Claeys and Cauberghe (2012) opine that consumers may react to brand crisis by spreading negative word of mouth, or decide not to purchase from the brand involved in the crisis, or, more generally, develop negative evaluations of that outfit. All these reactions can lead to the brand experiencing lower sales, lower market shares, and facing a serious financial risk (Spajić et al, 2022; Kim, 2019). By implication, audience response to brand crisis communication includes purchase intention (purchase), behavioural change, and advocacy (both negative and positive). The ensuing subsections address variations in consumer outcomes to brand messages during crises, as offered in the existing literature.

Consumer behaviour researchers argue that the way people react to advertising appeals can vary greatly depending on the individual characteristics of consumers (Ruiz & Sicilia, 2004). Some scholars have indicated that demographic factors such as gender affect the response of consumers towards advertising stimuli (Keshari & Jain, 2016; Ansu-Mensah & Asuamah, 2013). Waiters et al. (2001) further elucidate that children respond favourably to advertising messages that are humorous in appeal, though Keshari and Jain (2016) identified that age does not significantly affect consumer response to brand communication but made an argument for the effects of gender.

In addition to the above, personality classifications have proven to influence consumer responses to advertising stimuli (Ruiz & Sicilia, 2004). Individual differences in the need for cognition (the tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking) significantly influence the formation of attitudes toward brand messages. Researchers have distinguished two groups of people (high and low need for cognition individuals) (Keshari & Jain, 2016). People with a high need for cognition, as argued by the elaborative likelihood model, have been proven to process and evaluate advertising information more thoroughly than those with a low need for cognition (Cacciopo & Petty, 1982).

Meyers-Levy (1989) creates a demographic connection to the elaborative likelihood model with the argument that the male and female brains function differently. Consequently, there are differences in their information processing styles. Males often employ heuristic cues and are selective information processors, indicative of a high need for cognition, whereas females are proven to generally have a low need for cognition but are comprehensive processors of information. Hence, their response to advertising messages ought to be different (Lin, 2011).

Another study by Chang (2007) investigated the preferences of men and women for advertisements that used comparative versus non-comparative appeals. The findings revealed that men are more likely than women to participate in brand evaluations when they are exposed to comparative advertising, but not women. Rather, attention-grabbing comparative appeals lead to assumptions about the deceptive nature of the advertisement among women. These processing disparities across genders have an impact on the evaluation of brand communication. Men responded better to comparable appeals, evaluating brands and their messages more favourably and intending to buy more. Due to the comparable appeals, women's perceptions of manipulative intent were elevated, which led to poor brand and advertisement evaluations and decreased purchase intentions.

Beyond the demographic and the associated cognitive variations in consumer response to brand communication, Claeys and Cauberghe (2012, 2014) also indicate consumers' crisis involvement. In line with consumer research literature, they argue that high involvement in a crisis situation influences the depth to which consumer’s process information regarding the crisis. Consequently, the importance of the content of messages differs for consumers with low as against those with high involvement.

Thus, highly involved consumers' pay more attention to brand responses, though that does not indicate favourability or otherwise (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Coombs, 2007). Given the spread and severity of damage of the COVID-19 pandemic, consumer involvement could be described as high, signifying the level of attention consumers paid to brand messages during the period. Communicators therefore needed to factor the adoptions of moderators in their messaging considerations.

3.7 Moderators of Audience Response to Brand Crisis Communication

This thesis further discusses moderating factors that influence audience responses to brand crisis communication strategies. Significant among these factors is the crisis typology discussed extensively above (Coombs, 2007). Grappi and Romani (2015) also outlined the influence of emotional reactions such as anger and sympathy on the relationship between brand crisis communication and purchase intention. However, of great relevance to this study, are attributive moderators or cognitive reactions that influence the processing of brand messages and how that impacts consumer response.

3.7.1 Congruence

Consumer response to brand crisis messaging goes beyond the crisis and delves into the message content as well as the processing of such information (Claey & Cauberghe, 2014). Seeger (2005) advises that such messaging must be consistent to minimize audience barriers (noise) such as skepticism and selective attention. Scholarship also suggests that consumers will punish firms that are perceived as insincere in their communication (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Congruence or fit offers brands and communication experts the opportunity to present themselves as consistent and credible (Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

Congruence is a well-researched concept in the brand's communication literature and is applied in diverse contexts (Till & Nowak, 2000). It is defined from a sponsorship perspective as the perceived link between a cause and a firm's product line, brand image (ethos), position, and or target market (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Congruence has been applied in crisis communication research since the 1980s (Kim et al., 2013). It is important in crafting crisis response messages because it influences how much thought consumers give to a relationship (Santos & Moreno, 2018). Stakeholders compare what they know about a brand to some standard to determine whether or not a brand meets their expectations for how the brand should behave (Coombs, 2007). According to the associative network theory, a brand's communication initiative, which is congruent with consumer-held expectations, knowledge, and associations, is more easily integrated into consumers' existing cognitive structures (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Such congruence positively affects consumer attitudes as it is deemed or perceived as appropriate by consumers (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Kim & Choi, 2018).

Fit in brand communication matters because it influences attributions made by stakeholders (Du et al., 2010). Consumers will initially attribute brand communication activities to dispositional or intrinsic motives, according to Gilbert's (1989) two-stage model of attributions. If they (consumers) allocate sufficient processing capabilities and engage in more effortful elaboration by taking into account alternative, contextual factors, they will then "correct" this inference.

A low fit is likely to enhance cognitive elaboration and make extrinsic (profit-driven) reasons more salient due to the lack of a logical connection between a social issue and a brand's ethos, hence decreasing stakeholders' favourable reactions to the message. When a brand's social initiatives are aligned with its ethos, brand communicators stand to gain. (Menon & Kahn 2003; Simmons & Becker-Olsen 2006).

3.7.2 Brand Reputation

Reputation is a vital asset and issue for organisations and brands. It is broadly defined as stakeholders' perceptions of an organisation's character (Coombs, 2010). Previous scholarship agrees that, just like interpersonal interaction, the character or image of the brand or corporation may influence consumers' reactions to its response strategy and its eventual effectiveness (Li & Wei, 2016; Ma, 2020). Corporate/brand reputation have a moderating role in the effects of specific post-crisis communication strategies on consumer reactions (Grappi & Romana, 2015; Coombs, 2010). Kim et al. (2020), in a review of over one hundred papers, found brand reputation to be the primary brand characteristic that reduces risk among consumers during crises.

The SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) also proposes prior brand reputation as an intensifying factor between brand ethos, the nature of the crisis, and the effectiveness of the commensurate response strategy. Prior brand reputation, according to Coombs and Holladay (2002), is a representation in the minds of consumers of how well or poorly an organisation has treated stakeholders in the past (Coombs, 2010). This influences the level of responsibility stakeholders attach to the crisis brand. Brand reputation plays a pivotal role in minimizing consumer response to brand crisis communication.

In the same vein, Rubio, Oubiña, and Villaseñor (2014) confirmed the importance of brand-quality (reputation) inference on the perception of risks in the food service context (Avian, flu). High brand reputation lead to more favourable satisfaction evaluations and behavioural intentions than low brand reputation (Brady et al., 2008). Consequently, the reputation of a brand is identified as a prevailing advantage that spans the entire failure and recovery sequence (Li & Wei, 2016).

Brand reputation and its reliability are significantly enhanced by brand initiatives and socially responsible activities (Kim et al., 2013). A crisis brand's prior CSR activities demonstrate its commitment to eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing its long-run beneficial impact on society (Mohr et al., 2001). Consumers are therefore more inclined to view that brand as socially conscious and assign less crisis culpability to that brand (Kim et al., 2013; Chatterji & Toffel, 2019). This reliability ultimately manifests as a brand's capability to stay ahead of other competitors in the marketplace even during unpredicted events.

3.8 Factors Motivating Brand Messages in Exigencies

Motivations for the adoption of specific brand messaging during a pandemic may be non-existent in the extant literature; however, as brands seek to apply appropriate messages to meet consumer expectations, situational factors such as the severity of the damage (Greyser, 2009; and its effects on consumers' mental health (Taylor, 2020) need to be considered. The severity of damage is a crisis-intensifying variable that relates to the locus and extent of damage (Kiambi & Shafer, 2016). When a problem has the potential to impact a large number of consumers, such as causing deaths, there is a significant degree of damage and a high risk to brands' reputation. Reputational risk for brands in a pandemic stem mainly from the expectation of responsibility from consumers given the degree of damage and, consequently, the motivation to intervene, regardless of culpability (Greyser, 2009).

The severity of the damage is intensified by the length of time the crisis takes. The Spanish Flu is noted for its severity in many ways, including the number of waves involved in the pandemic (Taylor, 2020). Additionally, the contribution of economic and financial difficulties to the severity of damage and the situational dimension of existential crises cannot be overemphasized. Brands and their stakeholders may face financial difficulties if they are unwell or unable to work. There are reports of merchants experiencing hardships due to employee absences and because customers were either too sick or possibly too terrified to go shopping during the Spanish Flu.

There may also be significant changes to routines, a break from friends and family, food and medication shortages, loss of income, and social isolation as a result of the closure of schools, and the implementation of social separation measures like quarantine (Shultz et al., 2008). All of these circumstantial threats impact consumer expectations and provide motivation or salience for brand communication.

Taylor (2020), from a psychology perspective also discusses the impact of situational factors on the wellbeing of consumers and other stakeholders of brands requiring significant attention in brand messaging during such crises. Pandemics are frequently defined by uncertainty, confusion, and a sense of urgency (WHO, 2005). Before or during the early phases of a pandemic, there is a great deal of ambiguity and possibly false information/communication on the likelihood and danger of contracting the disease, as well as the most effective ways to avoid and treat it (Kanadiya & Sallar, 2011).

Beyond the socio-economic constraints and the spread of false information that heighten consumer anxiety, uncertainty may be triggered by a number of negative emotions, perceived or real (Shultz et al., 2008). The fear of contracting the disease, the panic with regard to when the pandemic is actually ending, and the misgivings as to whether the pandemic is really over even when it is, has the potential to escalate consumer despondency (Taylor, 2020). The above scenarios signal the level of psychological issues brands would have to contend with in their messaging in order to create/sustain dialogue with consumers. Consequently, a study to document and conceptualise such messages holds a lot of significance for both scholarship and industry.

3.9 Research hypotheses development

This thesis set out to determine the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, the factors that drove such communication, and audience responses, given certain boundary conditions. It was therefore imperative to identify established and ongoing arguments or discourses to direct data collection and the theoretical foundation that the study builds on. This subsection therefore provides an integration of the various theories and arguments the study makes, and generates a framework to aid understanding of the issues the study seeks to unearth.

The relationship between brand messages and consumer response

Coombs and Holladay (1996) argue that for effective outcomes, brands would have to tie specific crisis types to appropriate responses. This suggests that the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic should trigger the evolution of brand messages tailored to the specificity of consumer needs during the period. For instance, in a pandemic, consumers would require guidance on how to stay safe, what brands are doing to support them, and how to access offerings. Thus, adopting a business-as-usual messaging frame will be suboptimal. In contrast, when brands align their messages to speak to consumers' circumstances, a positive disposition towards brands should ensue (Dawar & Pullutla, 2000).

Secondly, because in an exigency like a pandemic, consumer expectations of brands are heightened (Greyser, 2009), tailoring messages should make brands appear responsive (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014), a condition that may make consumers receptive to the brand (De et al., 2010). Finally, and as shown by extant CSR literature, benevolent brand behaviour can trigger positive affect towards brands (Ma, 2020), which can translate into purchase intentions. In contrast, keeping a business-as-usual messaging logic would make brands appear insensitive to the plight of consumers (Bhagi & Gabrielli, 2019), a condition that would prompt adversarial behaviours towards the brand (Kim & Choi, 2019). This thesis therefore hypothesizes that:

H1: Tailoring brand messages during a pandemic will increase the odds of purchase intentions among consumers.

The moderating effects of message-brand ethos congruence, and prior-reputation

The attribution theory (Weiner, 1972) anticipates that consumers have the ability to influence brand communication outcomes. According to the theory (Hastie, 1984), crises or unexpected events instigate attributional processing in the minds of consumers, which begins with information seeking, either from the environment or memory. The review of relevant information in memory would translate to associative links between new information (brand communication) and old information already stored in memory (brand ethos and reputation).

This thesis therefore argues that communication outcomes in an exigency like the COVID-19 pandemic are contingent on a number of boundary conditions that moderate favourable effects (Hastie, 1984). According to the attribution theory (Weiner, 1972), whatever information consumers receive from the crisis brand would have to resonate with their existing ideas about the brand for the communication to ignite positive affect (purchase intention). Scholarship also agrees that the degree of fit between brand messages and the ethos of a brand in the memory of consumers will result in positive consumer reactions (Kim & Choi, 2018; Du et al., 2010). This therefore suggests that the more congruent a message is with already held consumer knowledge of a brand, the more likely it is to evoke positive consumer responses. The reverse, that messages that are incongruous with a brand's ethos would elicit negative responses because of inferences of extrinsic motives, is also true. Accordingly, this study further proposes that:

H2: Perceived congruence between brand messages during a pandemic and consumers' existing perceptions about brands' purpose, conditions customer purchase intentions.

Further, Coombs (2007, 2010) identifies existing perceptions about brands as shaping responses to their behaviour during a crisis. This assertion is supported by Li and Wei (2016), who argue that, the character or image of a brand may influence consumers' reaction to its crisis response strategy and its eventual effectiveness. How well a brand is perceived to have treated its stakeholders in the past creates a good reputation in the minds of consumers. A good brand reputation also translates into a positive response (affect) to a brand's crisis communication (Kim et al., 2013; Ma, 2020; Coombs, 2010).

Therefore, a positively perceived brand with a 'do-good' image is likely to receive favourable responses from consumers in an exigency. The thesis therefore argues that:

H3: Prior consumer-held reputation of a brand moderates the effect of brands' messages on consumer purchase intentions during a pamdemic.

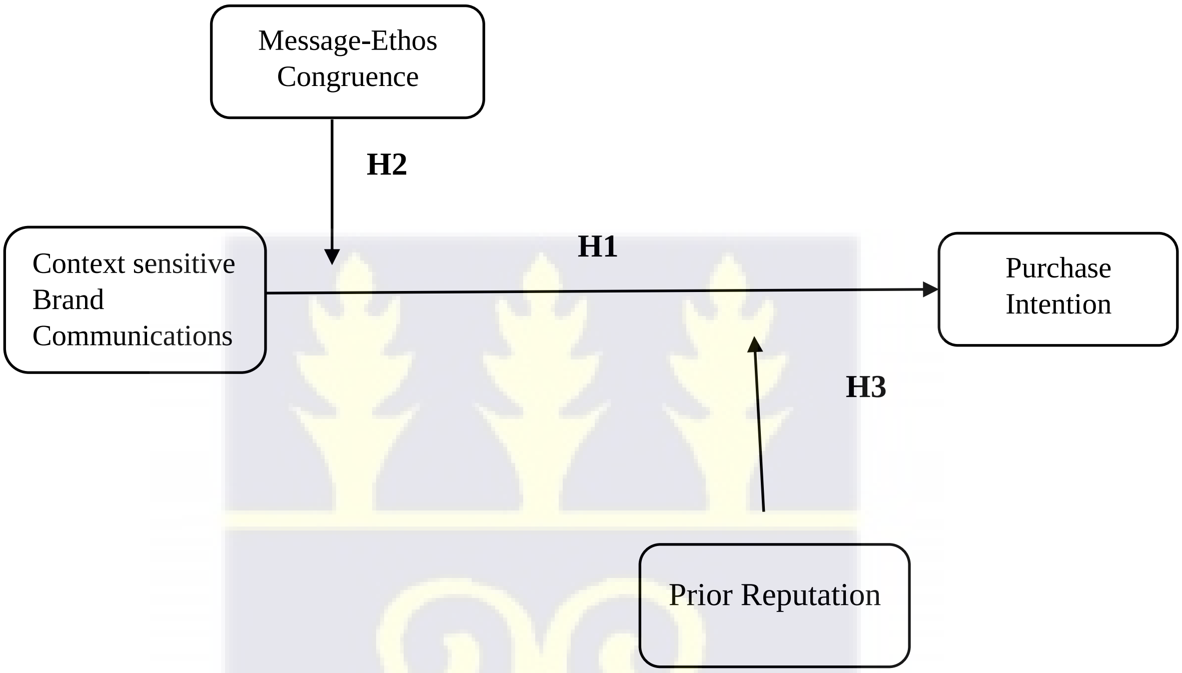


Figure 3.1: Proposed Research Model

3.10 Summary

In conclusion, it becomes apparent that regardless of abundant research on crisis communication, there still remains a gap when it comes to crisis response in exigencies such as natural disasters and health crises that do not place explicit responsibility on brands. Crisis typologies and commensurate response strategies fail to cater adequately to brand response in emergencies like a pandemic. This study therefore draws its strongest contribution by investigating brand communication in the existential context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also observed that brand crisis communication is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour, confirming its applied nature, which requires, agility and adaptability in tailoring brand responses to the unique characteristics of each crisis scenario. Moreover, the understanding of consumer responses and the applicable moderators offers a strategic advantage for brands aiming to navigate crises successfully.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the philosophical assumptions and methodological approach adopted in the study. It provides the rationale for the selection of methods, participants, and materials, as well as the sequence of the data collection/analysis. The chapter therefore contains sections on the worldview the researcher adopts, the context of the study, research design (instruments development, data collection, and data analysis), research limitations, and ethical considerations.

4.2 Philosophical Assumptions

This paper adopts a functionalist approach to brand communication research, looking at brand communication as a means to corporate profitability and survival; typical of the managerial/technical approach to organisational effectiveness (Golob et al., 2013). However, the researcher believes in uncovering patterns as well as exploring depths and therefore approaches this study from a critical realist worldview.

Critical realism is debated as the most appropriate philosophy for the marketing discipline (Wang, 2019) and marketing communication research (Chan, 2015). It has also become relatively popular in other social science disciplines kindred with marketing, including economics, perhaps because it is fairly better articulated than many other schools of scientific philosophy (Easton, 2002). Historically, marketing is said to have morphed from a descriptive and qualitative orientation to one that espoused rigour and quantification in the 1950s and 1960s (Baumol, 1957; Halbert, 1965; Kotler, 1972). Accompanied by this move was a philosophical adjustment that drew heavily on the positivist approach to research and theory development (Easton, 2002).

Yet, elements of induction in marketing communication research contended with the "narrower vision" of empiricism and called for the adoption of a less strict and idealistic approach (Hunt, 1971; Easton, 2002; Chan, 2015). The claim was that epistemological knowledge explanations ought to be both predictive and also explain why occurrences happen, using realist philosophers as examples. Eventually, the validity of positivism/logical empiricism in marketing communication research was challenged and replaced with realism and relativism (Easton, 2002). The work of Sayer (1992), which outlined key characteristics of critical realism deemed suitable for marketing research, gave the impression that critical realism had prevailed after a decade of contention between relativism and realism for the philosophical soul of marketing and marketing communication research (Hunt, 1976; Easton, 2002; Brown et al., 2022).

Critical realism is a post-positivist ontology that accommodates researcher's values and argues that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it (Sayer, 1992; Yaro, 2013). The philosophy seeks to extend idealism's main tenets into one that does not only cater for subjectivity but digs deeper to find mechanisms which are likely to lead to different events and experiences (Bhaskar, 1978). Of more relevance to this study among Sayer's (1992) arguments is that objects have particular causal powers and susceptibilities to influence knowledge outcomes (Bhaskar, 1978). It further posits that social phenomena are concept-dependent, hence, not only do we have to explain their production and material effects but also to understand, read, and interpret what they mean (Easton, 2002; Yaro, 2013).

In essence, critical realism asserts that concepts exist independent of researchers' interpretations, even though interpretations of concepts initially stem from the researcher's frames of meaning. Beyond the allowances of interpretivism that critical realism offers, its adoption over other philosophies supporting mixed methods, such as pragmatism (Feilzer, 2010) is justified by Wikgren (2004) who found that critical realism offers a fruitful foundation for an interdisciplinary research field such as brand communication, which has advertising, public relation (PR), marketing and corporate communication dimensions.

4.3 Context of the Study

This study is set within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is a SARS-CoV-2 disease known as the Corona Virus Disease, which started in China in 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation in March 2020. The quick spread of the disease through China and other parts of the world saw the implementation of measures to restrict mobility due to the high rate of infection and mortality. The world practically shut down due to lockdowns, increasing the use of digital channels to access essential services. Globally, brands resorted to providing support services to help in the fight against the pandemic, and almost every communicating entity, including brands, referred to the pandemic (He & Harris, 2020; Sobande, 2020).

By March 13, Ghana had recorded its first case, and measures to curb the spread were activated by the government with the hindsight of experiences and practices from across the globe. The period between March and December 2020, after further waves of the pandemic, saw the perennial effects of the pandemic on the physical, economic, social, and emotional lives of consumers. Almost all conversations—political, public health-related, media and entertainment-related, as well as commercial, including brand communication—became centred on the pandemic. Demonstrating sensitivity to the plight of consumers in such an exigency rendered the usual brand messaging inappropriate, resulting in the adoption of an apt brand response to engage stakeholders.

Regardless of the acute consequences of the pandemic, its force majeure nature presented no culpability for brands, which allowed for communicative engagements within context. The winning strategy, therefore, was for brands to get past the sensitivity barrier through messaging. How brands navigated the communication challenges presented by the pandemic and the commensurate audience response, given the exigency, is the thrust of this study. The pandemic provides a rich context to test the study's proposed framework, which seeks to examine the nature of brand messaging meant to instrumentally salvage brands in an emergency. The period between March and August 2020, which saw heightened uncertainties for both brands and the public, provided fertile ground to mine content to investigate the nature of brand communication during the pandemic.

4.4 Research Design

The research strategy adopted for this study is informed by the questions the study seeks to answer. To properly address the research questions, a mixed-method approach was used, utilizing both deductive and inductive methods as permitted by the critical realism philosophy, against the backdrop of testing the proposed framework for the study. The deductive methods are purposed to provide evidence of the nature of brand communication during the crisis and its effects on audience response. Additionally, the inductive approach identified the motivations and factors behind brand communication.

A content analysis [Study 1] of brand communications within the first six months after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (March to August 2020) was conducted to ascertain the nature of brand communication during the period. The unit of analysis was brand communication materials posted on the Facebook and X (Twitter) channels of selected brands in Ghana. Twenty companies in the Ghana Club100 rankings (2019) of the Ghana Investment Promotions Company were randomly sampled for the study.

In determining the reasons behind the nature of brand communication and to ascertain whether brand communicators were intentional about their communication during the pandemic, in-depth interviews were conducted [Study 2]. Brand communicators and personnel from communication consulting firms were sampled for the in-depth interviews. The sampled brands for Study 1 provided the sample frame for the interviews. Though an in-depth interview is not directly routed in a post-positivist orientation, it provides an opportunity for further grounding of the findings on the nature of brand response during the crisis.

Finally, an online survey was adopted to fully examine the outcomes of brand communication during the pandemic. This method affects the audience response feature of the study and examines the influence of the messaging on consumer response. Consumer response was measured by purchase intention. A nationwide survey was suggested to help validate the claims the thesis hoped to make. The survey is captioned Study 3.

4.4.1 Design of Study 1 [Content Analysis]

The purpose of the content analysis was to gather evidence to help conceptualize the nature of brand communication during the pandemic.

4.4.1.1 Instrument Development

An 18-item coding guide seeking to ascertain the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was developed based on Neuman's (2014) proposed rigour in instrument development for quantitative content analysis. The variables beyond the date of publication, the industry sector of the brand, and the type of material (whether video, flier/photo, audio, or PR story), mainly focused on messaging. For each unit of analysis (flier, video, press release, etc.), coding covered messaging themes or content emphasis, message tone, message appeal, and then the overall subject matter (whether purporting to prosecute a social agenda or meant to promote the brand).

The instrument also included items to indicate whether the content showed any semblance to what the literature says about brand responses to similar crises, such as solutions to the pandemic (O'Hagan, 2021) or identifying another entity as responsible for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Finally, the coding guide also had variables to ascertain the extent to which some moderators of effective crisis communication, such as congruence and building on a previous reputation of brands (Seeger, 2006; Greyser, 2009), were achieved.

The coding guide was subjected to rigorous validity and reliability tests. Supervisors' moderations were adopted to ascertain the content validity of the instrument, while Recal3's intercoder reliability check was used to determine the reliability. Recal3 can calculate the reliability for multiple coders, but on a single variable. Four coders, including the researcher and three other postgraduate students of the Department of Communication Studies (University of Ghana), coded for the variables in the instrument with five (5) pieces of content (units of analysis). The reliability test was anchored on the content emphasis variable. The initial result was a Cronbach alpha of 0.643, which informed the provision of clarity for that variable, which was relabelled as a messaging theme. The final output resulted in a Cronbach alpha of 0.840, demonstrating the reliability of the instrument (Neuman, 2014).

4.4.1.2 Sampling

A list of 100 brands from the 2019 rankings of the Ghana Club 100 was the defined population for this study. The diversity of brands in the Ghana Club 100 provides a frame suitable for probability (random) sampling for the study. Twenty out of the 100 brands were simple randomly selected to be part of the study using SPSS23. All 100 brands were listed in SPSS after which a 20 percent selection criterion was applied to randomly select brands for inclusion in the study. Following this, a review of content on the social media pages of the selected brands was conducted to ensure they included enough messages that originated during the pandemic. Where sampled brands failed on this, they were replaced using the same random procedure (Meng, 2013).

After initial searches on the social media channels of the selected brands, Facebook and X (Twitter) were chosen due to the level of adoption by most of the sampled brands as well as the availability of content (Shrestha, 2022). All the selected brands had at least 25 posts on

Facebook within the period under review, except for Total Petroleum and Unilever Ghana. A search on X (Twitter) provided much-needed content for these brands. This was also done based on the availability of content.

A spreadsheet of the links for the sampled posts was built to create a database for the units of analysis for referencing. If a brand had more than 25 posts within the period, a sampling strategy is employed to ensure variability and spread across the six months' period. Typically, 4 posts were selected from each month, 1 in every week, with an extra post chosen from any month with a higher frequency of posts. This strategy had to be adopted due to the lack of uniformity across brands in the times and days for their posts. Repeated posts were skipped to avoid bloating of the data (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2022).

4.4.1.3 Data Collection

Data gathering for the content analysis started with visits to the social media sites/pages of the 20 selected brands. The study gathered 500 brand communication posts (25 each) from the Facebook and X (Twitter) pages of the 20 brands. Protocol coding, which is characteristic deductive methods was employed, where a predefined protocol or codes was used in the analysis of the content. Coding was solely done by the researcher to ensure homogeneity and to avoid malicious data entry or data loss, as may be the case with hired coders (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Lehdonvirta et al., 2021). SPSS version 23 was used for the data labelling and subsequent coding for each unit of analysis.

4.4.1.4 Data analysis

Sampled content was consequently coded based on the research instrument. The data was analysed using SPSS version 26. Given the nominal nature of the measures of the constructs constituting the nature of brand messages during the pandemic, descriptive techniques such as frequencies and cross-tabulations were adopted in the analysis.

4.4.2 Design of Study 2 [Interviews]

An in-depth interview, described as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Lindlof, 1995:163; Moodley et al., 2023), was adopted for this study due to its inductive research technique that allows for open-ended and follow-up questions. Interviews provided a detailed exploration of issues of interest to the researcher (Creswell, 2003).

4.4.2.1 Instrument Development

A semi-structured interview guide, as proposed by the standardized interview schedule (Deacon et al., 2007), was developed to investigate brand managers' perspectives on brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The instrument primarily sought to gather data on the motivations for communicating during the pandemic. There were questions to probe the experiences and learnings of brand communication practitioners during the pandemic, the constraints and challenges they faced, how they navigated these challenges to still provide their brands with a voice, and what informed their choice of communication strategy. The 10-item semi-structured interview guide (Neuman, 2014; Frey et al., 2000) also sought to gauge brand communicators' observations of the uniqueness of the kind of communication that emerged during the crisis and how they conceptualised the substance of their brand messages during the pandemic.

4.4.2.2 Sampling

Non-probability sampling was adopted for the study (Mogaji et al., 2021). A total of ten brand communication practitioners – eight managers and two consultants – were purposefully selected out of the twenty brands investigated in Study 1. Industry representations of the sampled brands in Study 1 informed the selection of the eight brand managers; using the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre's (GIPC) industry classification. However, the principal consideration was to ensure that the research subjects could provide the requisite information that served as data for the study (Lickel et al., 2001).

The sample included eight brand managers, representing different industries as in the Ghana Club100, and two persons from the PR and digital agencies of the brand MTN or Scancom. Scancom, the company that owns the MTN brand, has been featured as the number one brand in the Club 100 ranking for more than a decade. Table 4.1 below illustrates the selected brands and the industries they represent.

Table 4.1: Industry Classification and Interview Sample

SECTOR	BRAND
1) ICT	IT CONSORTIUM
2) AGRIBUSINESS & AGRIC	AGRO ECOMS
3) OIL & GAS	GOIL
4) MANUFACTURING	UNILEVER
5) FINANCIAL SERVICES	STANBIC BANK
6) FINANCIAL SERVICES (NON-BANK)	ACTIVA INSURANCE
7) MINING	ANGLOGOLD
8) SERVICES	MTN

As is characteristic of inductive research, access and availability of participants played a key role in sampling (Wimmer & Dominic, 2011). Consequently, the choice of interviewees per industry was largely dependent on availability, though capacity considerations were not relegated.

4.4.2.3 Data collection

Interviews were scheduled after initial contact with the interviewees. Six sessions were conducted online (Shrestha, 2022), motivated by the digital drive that was heightened by the pandemic. One was done via a phone call (telephone interview) (Neuman, 2014). Interviews with the marketing communication consultants happened in person, while one was conducted in a paper and pen format where the interviewee was sent the questions to complete. This was after failed attempts at conducting an in-person interview. Data from the interview sessions was recorded either with phones or with video conferencing software. All interviews were transcribed for analysis, with each lasting an average of 35 minutes.

4.4.2.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves a critical review of the expansive data to provide themes and structure for the logical presentation that reflects on research questions (Tietaah, 2013). The study used the six stages of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which comprise: initial familiarisation and immersion in the data; generating codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; labelling themes; and then reporting. Familiarisation entailed reading the interview transcripts several times to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of the prevailing circumstances on the messaging decisions made by brand communicators.

Reviewing and labelling themes, as well as providing reports on the analysis, were guided by the quest to develop a framework that guides brands in their communication efforts during exigencies. A dossier of the drivers and considerations for brand communication was built out of the analysis.

4.4.3 Design of Study 3 [Online Survey]

The study also adopted an online survey to investigate audience responses to brand communication during the heat of the pandemic. An online survey allows for reach amongst participants remote to the geography of the researcher (Kim, 2018) and is suitable for this study, which sought to capture audience responses, nationwide. To provide a frame of reference for consumers' assessments and responses to brand communication during the pandemic, the study used the MTN brand. MTN is the biggest telecommunications company in Ghana (NCA, 2022) and has been the number one company in the Ghana Club100 on many occasions (GIPC, 2022). It is a very visible brand and has great top-of-mind awareness among Ghanaian consumers.

4.4.3.1 Instrument development

The research instrument for the study was carefully designed in adherence to long-trusted psychometric procedures (Churchill, 1979). The initial instrument development process focused on a thorough search in the literature for existing constructs that tapped into how brands communicate. Given that the problem of this study highlighted the lack of engagement in the literature on brand communication in non-culpable crises, applicable measures were generally found to be non-existent. The development of the survey instrument therefore relied heavily on the findings of Study 1, which examined brand messages during the pandemic as a means of proposing a framework to guide brand communications under similar circumstances. New measures were developed for constructs identified in Study 1. The five focal areas of messages gleaned from Study 1 are: expression of solidarity, well-being promotion, CSR communication, operational adjustment announcements, and product/service promotion.

For expression of solidarity, five (5) items were used to assess respondents' perceptions of the focus of MTN messages to which they were exposed during the pandemic. In the case of wellbeing promotion, six (6) items were used to measure audience exposure and perception to MTN messages promoting consumer wellbeing. Audience perceptions of CSR communication messages by MTN were assessed using six (6) items. Operational adjustment announcement perceptions were assessed using five (5) items and an additional five (5) items were adopted in gauging audience exposure to MTN messages on self-promotion during the pandemic.

The survey instrument also included six (6) items meant to measure customer-based perceptions of MTN's brand ethos. The intent was to gauge perceptions of MTN's self-professed ethos from a consumer's point of view as it is entailed in their vision and mission. Five (5) items were informed by MTN's vision of 'leading the delivery of a bold, new digital world to our customers' and the mission of 'making our customers' lives a whole lot brighter'. The 6th item was included as a contrast to check for neutrality or social desirability (Kim, 2018). A 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree was adopted for this purpose. The inclusion of this construct was motivated by the need to establish consumer perceptions of MTN's brand ethos before proceeding to assess perceptions of congruence between the perceived ethos and the messaging during the pandemic.

Besides these, the instrument also contained measures for perceptions of congruence between MTN's brand ethos and their messaging during. This was to enable analysis as to whether congruence between perceptions of the brand's essence and its pandemic-era messaging had any implications for how audiences assessed and responded to their message. Customer perceived brand ethos was measured with eight (8) items anchored on a 5-point Likert scale.

Additionally, the instrument included other crisis communication moderating concepts, such as customer-based brand reputation, adapted from Welsh and Beatty (2007). 10 items meant to measure consumer perceptions of MTN's reputation based on customer orientation and CSR were adopted. Customer-brand identification based on an adaptation of Escallas and Bettman's (2003) measured scales for brand-self connection was also included in the instrument. There were 8 items for this construct, measured on a 5-piont Likert scale.

The instrument also had some audience response or causal attribution scales, such as skepticism towards advertising (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998), and purchase intention or usage for both current subscribers to MTN as well as their competitors. Skepticism towards advertising was measured by 8-items intended to assess audience disposition towards brand messages and how that would moderate their perceptions/response to MTN messages during the pandemic. The scales for purchase intention were adopted from Johnson's (1979) 5-point scale. Five (5) items were iterated as usage for MTN users and as purchase intention for non-users. Altogether, the survey instrument contained 92-items measuring various constructs of interest, and using the MTN brand as a frame of reference.

4.4.3.2 Sampling

A representative sample of the Ghanaian literate adult population was surveyed. Memon et al, (2020) propose 250 as a sufficient sample for a large sample frame, as is the case for this study. According to the Population and Housing Census (PHC, 2021), this population (18 years of age and above) should include about 19.6 million people. Five hundred (500) consumers of mobile telecommunication services, identified by their phone numbers (MSISDNs), were slated to be randomly selected and sent the survey link to gather their responses, as adopted by Brandon et al. (2014). Respondents needed not to be subscribers to the MTN network. This was to help gauge the competitor-brand involvement of the non-MTN subscribers.

An SMS company was contacted to randomly sample 500 contacts from their database with the assumption that at least, a response rate of 50 percent could be achieved. However, not even a 2 percent response rate was achieved. The inability of the online survey to garner as many responses as required eventually led to the adoption of non-probability sampling. The sampling was inspired by Lehdonvirta et al. (2021), who contend that non-probability sampling with its topical and economic self-biases may not replace probability sampling but has become an option in researcher toolkits for sampling.

Quota sampling was therefore adopted in administering the online survey. Quota sampling has been argued by methodological researchers as a good substitute for probability sampling in surveys (Neuman, 2011; Yang et al., 2014), justified by the low response rates and cost of probability sampling. With a proposed sample of 500, 40 percent was to be represented by the coastal belt and 30 percent each from both the forest and savannah belts. Percentages were chosen based on the zonal population dynamics (PHC, 2021).

4.4.3.3 Data Collection

A questionnaire developed on Google Forms (Kim, 2018) was shared via short message sending (SMS) to each sample unit. Respondents' consent was first sought, and then data was collected accordingly. An initial attempt at data collection for the survey was done by employing the services of an SMS company (Arkesel). The survey link was to be broadcast after a simple random selection of 500 contacts from their database. The link, with a very good script involving a clear call to action as proposed by Fowler (2013), was published via SMS to 599 phone contacts, randomly selected from the company's database. Only nine (9) responses were realized after the first attempt.

A second broadcast was done two weeks later to an additional 931 contacts. This brought the total responses to 23. Seeing that the response rate is low, random sampling from a database of unknown contacts was replaced with a more convenient sampling approach. The WhatsApp platform was used to share the survey link with potential respondents (Yeboah-Banin, 2021; Avery et al., 2010). A snowballing approach to getting friends to share within their circle of friends was adopted. To ensure a good geographical representation, tertiary school leavers were recruited to share the questionnaire in communities outside the capital, Accra (Bolga, Sunyani, Kumasi, Takoradi, and Koforidua) There were respondents from 14 regions out of the 16 regions in Ghana. A total of 295 responses were received which serves as the sample for the study.

4.4.3.4 Data Analysis

Data from the Google forms was imported to SPSS and SmartPLS for data clean-up, purification, and subsequent analysis. The assessment involved checking for missing data, the incidence of outliers, and data normality. Given the novelty of the constructs assessing the focus of brand messages during the pandemic, the researcher tested for measurement scales using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis procedures as demonstrated by Anderson and Gerbing (1988).

Estimation of the hypothesized paths was done by structural equation modelling (Hair et al., 2014) and multivariate analytical procedures. The SmartPLS 4 software was used for the analysis of model fit and structural modelling while the R software was used for interactions and moderating effects. SmartPLS 4 provides a clean layout for the path analysis and generation of the structural model while the R software offers an easy and technically efficient route for generating graphs for the moderating effects.

4.5 Limitation

Like all research, the procedures adopted in this research have limitations. First, it is limited in the time of data collection. COVID-19 and the conversation around it peaked from March 2020, when it was declared a pandemic by the WHO (WHO, 2020), to about July 2020, which saw the ebbing of the first wave of the pandemic. Brands' responses, as the study sought to capture, also gained traction in the first six months of the pandemic and in various waves as the number of cases rose within the country. It would have been best to have conducted the survey seeking to capture audience responses during that period.

However, given the nature of the Ph.D. journey, considerations such as the crystallization of the research problem, the review of the literature to contextualize the study, instrument development, and seeking ethical approval did not allow data collection within that period. The study therefore acknowledges the possible difficulty with audience recollection of their perceptions of brand communication during the period and its influence on their behaviour.

4.6 Ethics

Being ethical lies at the core of this study. The researcher sought ethical clearance from the Ethics for the Humanities (ECH) of the Office of Research, Innovation, and Development in Accra. After an initial submission and review, approval was granted within two months with protocol number ECH 019/22-23. Subsequently, consent was sought from all participants of the study.

First, the consent of MPhil students who were involved in the validity and reliability testing of the study was sought before undergoing training and then onward coding. These were rewarded with tokens. Additionally, after settling on the sampling frame for the interviews, contacts were made with known personnel within the sampled organisations. These liaisons negotiated entry with the suitable personnel. Interview sessions were then scheduled after contacts were made and consents sought. The online survey on the other hand had an introductory content that explained the purpose of the survey and required the consent of participants before soliciting responses.

4.7 Summary

This chapter presents the strategic and tactical considerations made in the execution of this study. It justifies the philosophy and methodological techniques adopted in operationalizing the problem of the study. This chapter also discussed techniques employed for sampling, instrument development, data collection, and data analysis in the three studies conducted.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the data collected from the content analysis, the interviews, and the survey. The chapter presents the results of such analysis, which serve as the findings for the entire study. It provides an interaction between the theoretical inferences made by the study and the observations made through the data collected in answer to research questions. The findings are presented in the same order as the various studies (methods) involved in this thesis. A descriptive analysis of the categorical data from Study 1 is first presented to establish the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence leads to the conceptualization of brand care communication as the type of communication that emerged during the pandemic.

Results from Study 2 are next presented. The study employed qualitative analysis to draw themes from interviews with brand communicators to determine the motivations behind the kinds of brand communications identified in Study 1. Finally, results from Study 3 (survey) are presented, beginning with the descriptive statistics of the ordered categorical data. This is followed by the results from the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the items that constitute dimensions of brand care communication. Additionally, various reliability and validity tests on the scales employed in testing hypotheses and model fitness are presented. The chapter concludes with findings from the structural model assessments of direct and indirect paths.

5.2 The Nature of Brand Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Extant scholarship on communication during crises asserts that brands that engage their stakeholders during crises are likely to benefit in the post-crisis period (Ho et al., 2017; Du et al., 2010). However, the type of crisis presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and its commensurate response are yet to be accounted for in the crisis communication literature, leaving brands to figure out how best to engage their audiences during the period (Bennoit, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Li and Wei (2016), citing Coombs and Holladay's (1996) SCCT, provide a typology of crisis types and the matching response from a brand communication perspective without acknowledging the "force majeure" or health emergency type of crisis.

This section addresses the first objective of this thesis, which seeks to explore the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 crisis. It presents a description of the sample and procedures adopted in the study. The section also presents the profiling of the data, hypothesis testing, and research findings resulting from answering research questions.

5.2.1 Data Profiling

To explore the nature of brand messages during the pandemic, the study employed a content analysis; investigating 500 units of analysis (N = 500) composed of brand communication content produced during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The content was retrieved from the Facebook and X (Twitter) pages of 20 brands randomly selected from the Ghana Investment Promotion Council's (GIPC) 2019 Club 100 ranking.

The sample, as demonstrated by Table 5.1 below, indicates a representation of brands from various industries in the classification of the Ghana Club 100 award scheme. There was at least one brand from each industry, and for each brand, 25 pieces of text (content) were analysed. Fifteen, out of the twenty brands examined are of international origin. Financial institutions had a 40 percent representation, which is a reflection of the number of financial institutions in the Ghana Club 100 (GIPC, 2022). The text analysed included 1 audio (0.2%), 455 static images or photos (91%), 37 videos (7.4%), and 7 press releases (1.4%). Recal3's intercoder reliability was adopted to establish the validity of the coding guide developed, resulting in a Cronbach Alpha of 0.840. Data was then coded to translate the text into numerical substance for descriptive analysis (Neuman, 2014).

Table 5.1: Profile of sampled brands

Brand	**Industry**	**Ownership**	**Total Texts Analysed**
1. AgroEcoms Ghana	Agric & Agribusiness	Foreign	25
2. IT Consortium	ICT	Ghanaian	25
3. Scancom Ltd	ICT	Foreign	25
4. GCNet Ltd	ICT	Public-Private Partnership	25
5. Activa International	Financial Services	Foreign	25
6. Letshego Ghana	Financial Services	Foreign	25
7. Absa Ghana	Financial Services	Foreign	25
8. Ecobank Ghana	Financial Services	Foreign	25
9. Stanbic Bank	Financial Services	Foreign	25
10. Prudential Bank	Financial Services	Foreign	25
11. CAL Bank	Financial Services	Ghanaian	25
12. Fidelity Bank	Financial Services	Ghanaian	25
13. Melcom Ghana	Services/Retail	Foreign	25
14. Japan Motors	Service/Retail	Foreign	25
15. Unilever	Manufacturing	Foreign	25
16. B5Plus Ltd	Manufacturing	Foreign	25
17. AngloGold	Mining	Foreign	25
18. Newmont Ghana Ltd	Mining	Foreign	25
19. GOIL Ghana	Oil and Gas	Ghanaian	25
20. Total Energies	Oil and Gas	Foreign	25
Total			**500**

5.2.2 The Key Features of Brand Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This thesis advances the argument that brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic had some key features that made it distinct from existing brand crisis communication concepts. Recent scholarship has alluded to the shift in brand activities effected by the pandemic (He & Haris, 2020; Sobande, 2020; Gangathbatla, 2020; Yeboah-Banin, 2021). Yet, not much exists in the empirical scholarship as to the form this takes. This section catalogues elements in brands' messages deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand their subject matter, key themes, message appeal, as well as tone.

The findings suggest that brands presented a positive tone and generally sought to empathise with their targets by communicating care. The dominant message themes adopted in an attempt to demonstrate care included: solidarity, well-being promotion, and operational adjustment announcements. Besides these, brands also emphasized their corporate social responsibility activities and promoted their products/brands. These messages were differently deployed depending on the nature of the firms and their offerings. The ensuing sessions presents findings on the key messaging features.

5.2.2.1 Solidarity

The main messaging theme for brand communication during the pandemic was solidarity, an attempt by brand communicators to maintain the dialogue with their audience by projecting togetherness and commiserating with people, as shown in Figure 5.1 below. Out of the six categories tracked among the sampled data, 25 percent presented messages of solidarity to the general public. These solidarity messages included goodwill messages to employees, customers, front liners in the fight against COVID-19, government officials, and the general public. An example is a post by Ecobank Ghana during the period that boldly called on the public to "Let's fight Coronavirus together" (see Exhibit 1). Togetherness as a messaging platform was adopted and expressed in different ways by different brands as evidence of brands' resolve to stand with their stakeholders in the exigency of the pandemic.

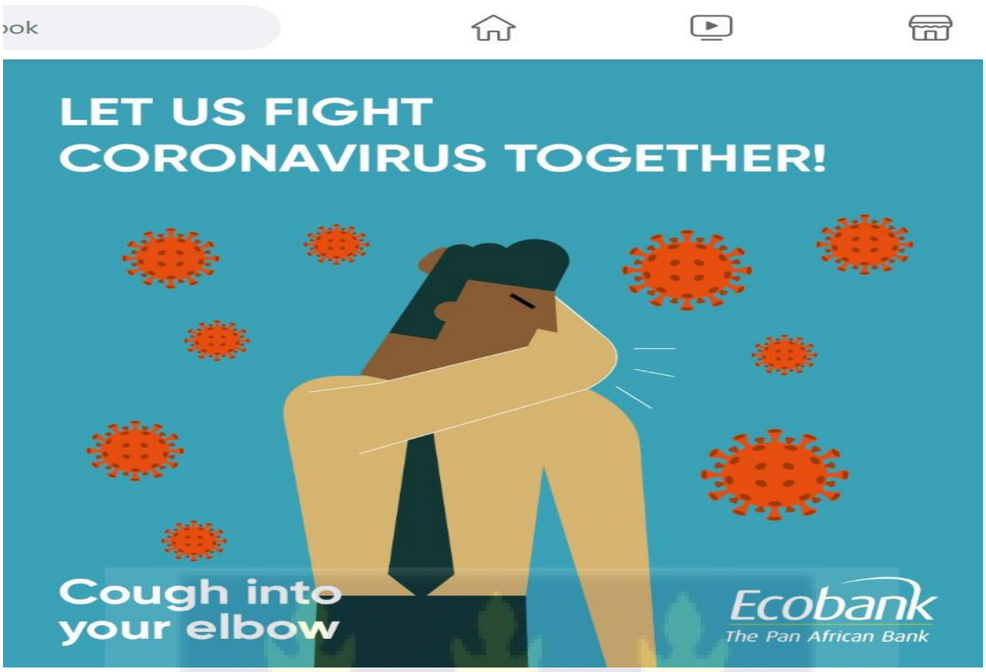


Exhibit 1: Sample Brand Solidarity Post

However, in contrast to what prevails in the literature that corporate communication supersedes brand/product communication during crises (Fox, 1986, Ho et al., 2017; Kim & Choi, 2018; Ma, 2020), brands equally presented brand-focused messages during the period. Brand-focused messaging refers to explicit brand-serving communication, which could be about product sales or brand promotion. Such messages were often contextualised to make products seem to offer solutions related to the pandemic. An example is the sale of pensions by IT Consortium using their USSD platform and playing on safety and security to gain relevance within the exigent context (see Exhibit 2, posted on July 3, 2020).

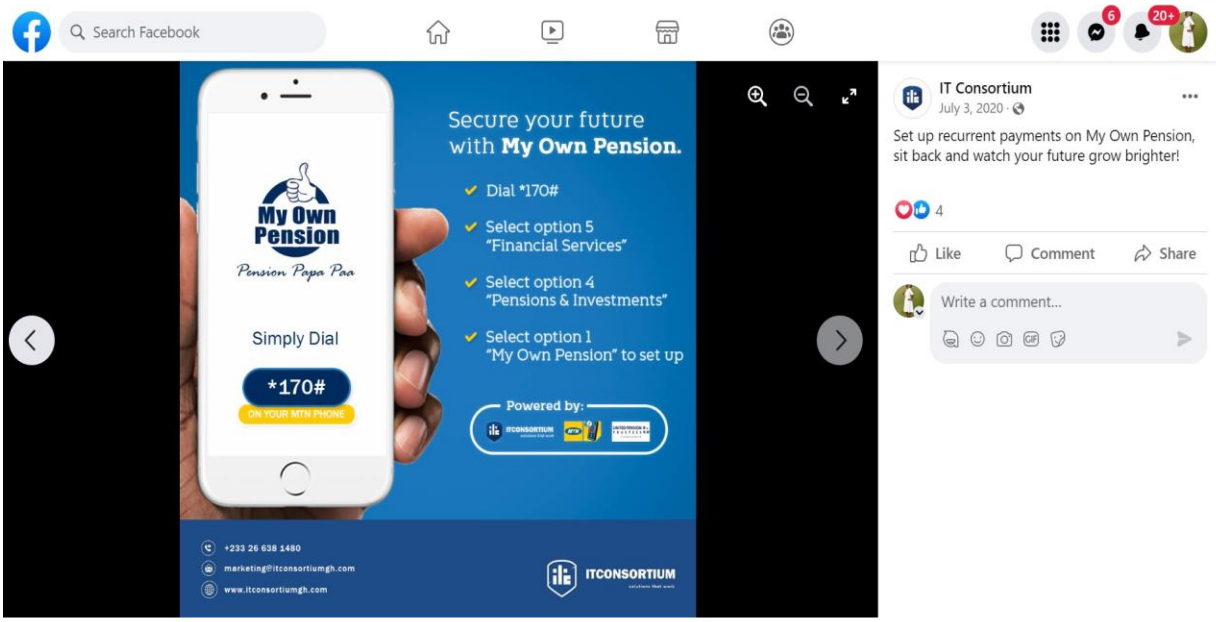


Exhibit 2: Screenshot of a Sample Brand-Focused Post with Captions

Brand-focused messaging surprisingly covered 22.6 percent of the total content analysed, only 2.6 percentage points behind solidarity messages. This statistic is an indication that, in addition to solidarising with consumers, brands equally sought to promote their brands or products within the permissible level of sensitivity to consumer plight.

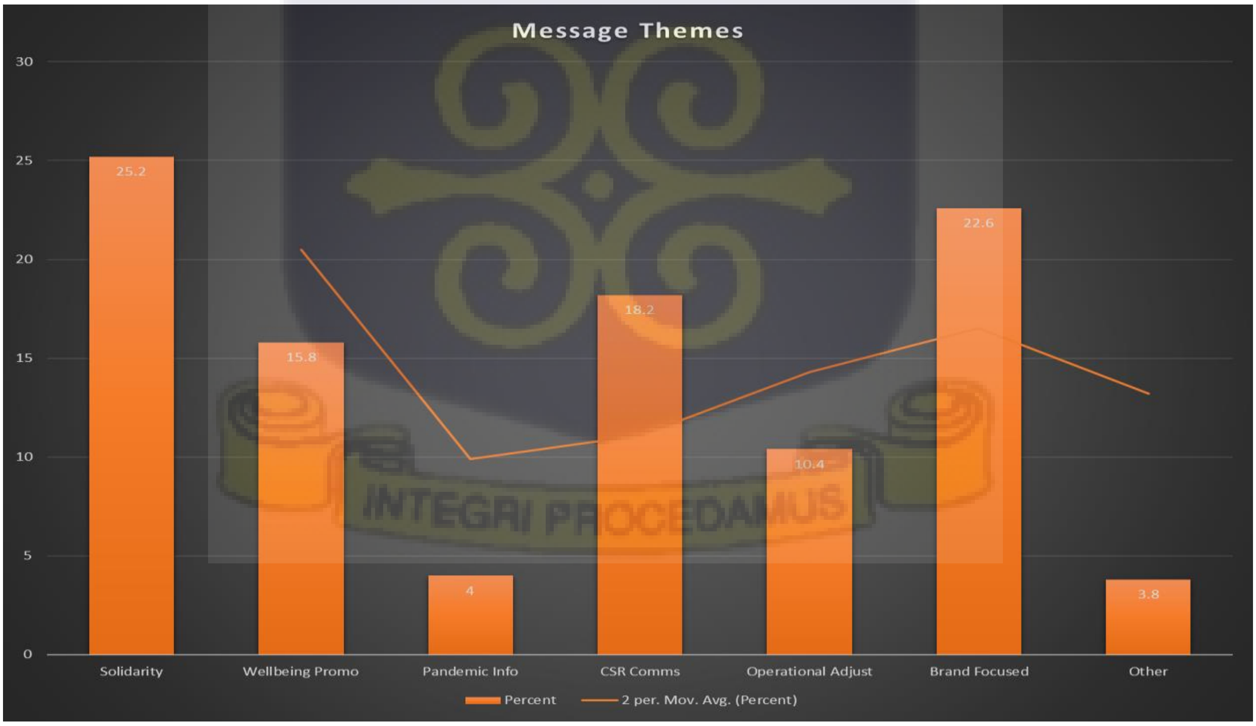


Figure 5.1: Key Themes for Brand Messaging During the Pandemic

Some of the brand-focused messages had elements of entertainment or came with announcements about operational changes, but they were not directly tied to resolving issues with the pandemic. One such brand that chose to entertain was Japan Motors, a vehicle assembling and retail brand, as seen in Exhibit 3. The brand conducted a trivia on the features of its vehicle models for people to guess and engage with their content. Usually, the goal of this brand-focused engagement is to increase top-of-mind awareness.

But for brands such as insurance companies, ICT companies, and some companies that manufacture household essentials, there were outright sales of products due to consumption patterns created by the pandemic. It is, however, noteworthy that regardless of how the brand/product messaging theme is presented, it is usually constructed within the context of the pandemic to avoid a lack of respect for consumers' lived experiences during the period.

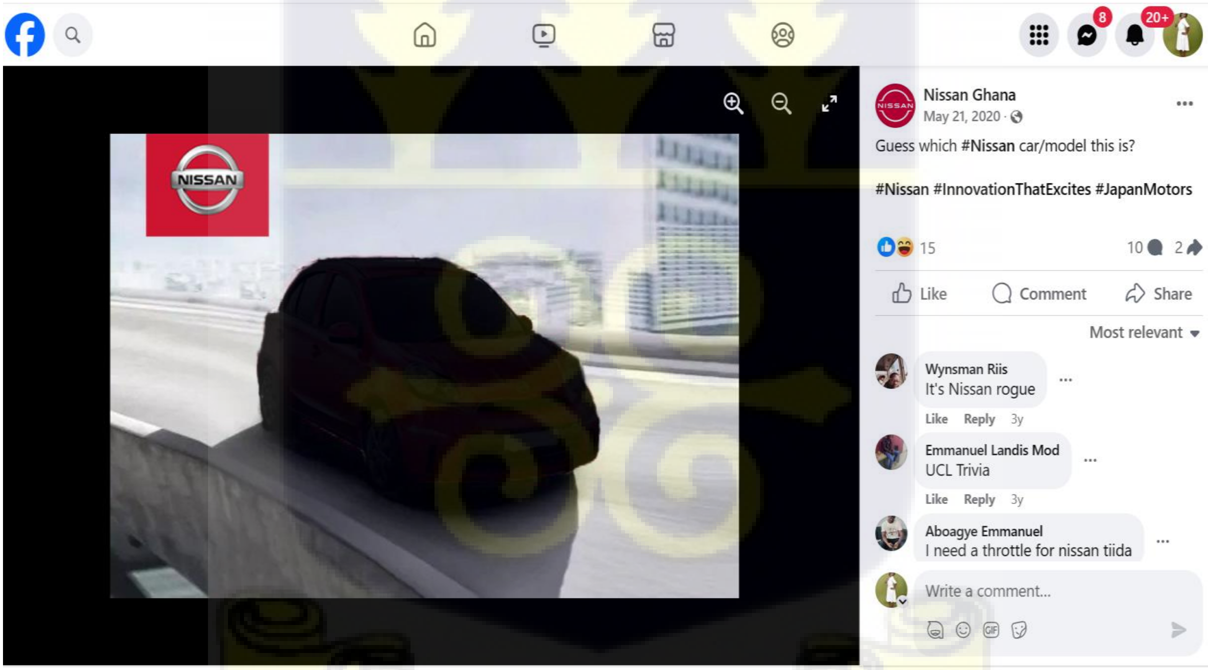


Exhibit 3: Sample Engagement Post for Brand-Focused Messaging

Also prominent among the messaging themes was well-being promotion, which was in line with WHO's measures to curb the spread of the pandemic. The theme hinged on educating people on how to protect themselves and their mental health during the pandemic. The well-being promotion theme covered a significant 15.8 percent of the sampled data. It presented itself as some form of risk communication, which suggests that during healthcare emergencies, the public needs to know and be empowered to do what they can to protect themselves (Savoia et al., 2017). Though risk communication could be described as the preserve of the government or public health officials in a pandemic, it served as a very salient messaging platform for brands to connect with their audience.

Messaging under the well-being promotion theme included encouraging consumers to; wear masks, stay home, wash their hands, or engage in gardening or physical exercises (yoga) in order to preserve their mental health and stay safe. AgroEcoms Ghana on April 23, 2020, as shown in Exhibit 4, shared stories on how Farmer Danso from Suhum washed his hands whenever he returned from his farm to encourage other farmers to adopt handwashing in order to stay safe during the period.

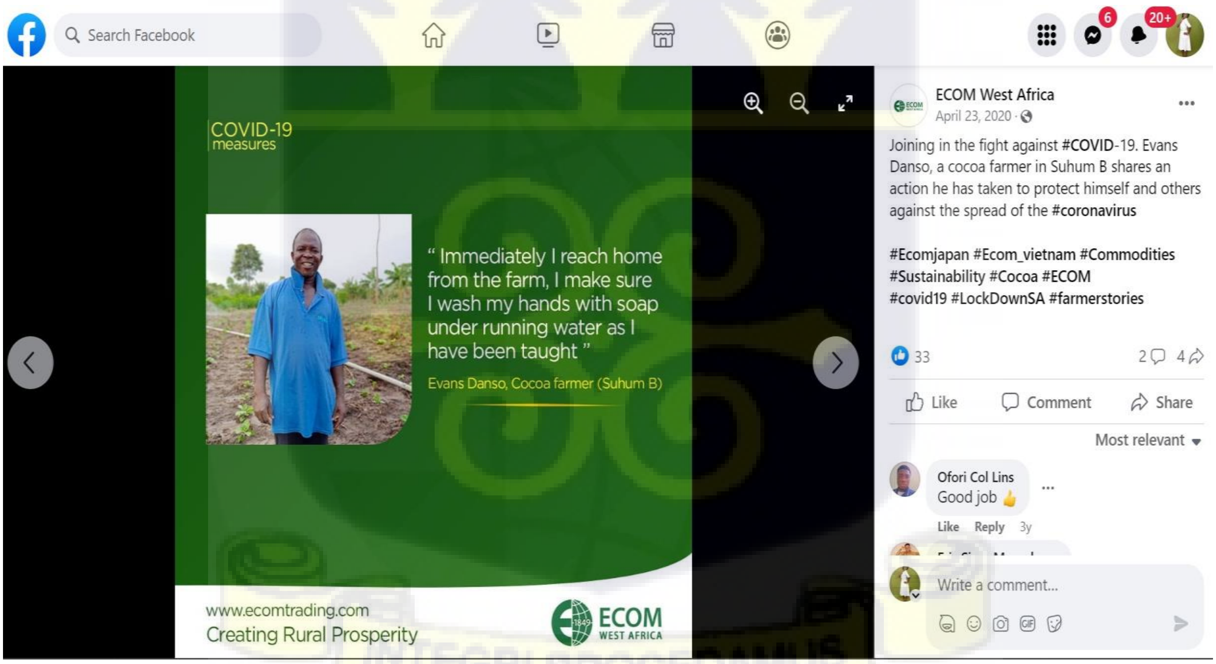


Exhibit 4: Well-Being Promotion Messaging Sample

In addition to well-being promotion, some brands, like Newmont Ghana, took the risk communication effort even further by providing consumers with accurate and timely information on the pandemic. Whereas the information on the pandemic theme did not gain as much traction as the other themes, it significantly enhanced the risk communication messaging and the efforts in the fight against the "infodemic" during the period. Newmont Ghana, for example, committed to providing daily updates on confirmed cases, recoveries, those responding to treatment, and deaths in Ghana and on other continents from March 18 to July 31, 2020 (see Exhibit 5).

With just four percent of the sampled text (see Figure 5.1), messages under this theme provided much-needed information on the pandemic in accordance with the risk communication literature (Glik, 2007). Its failure to gain prominence among brand messaging during the period, however, may be attributed to the generally positive posturing that brands adopted during the period.

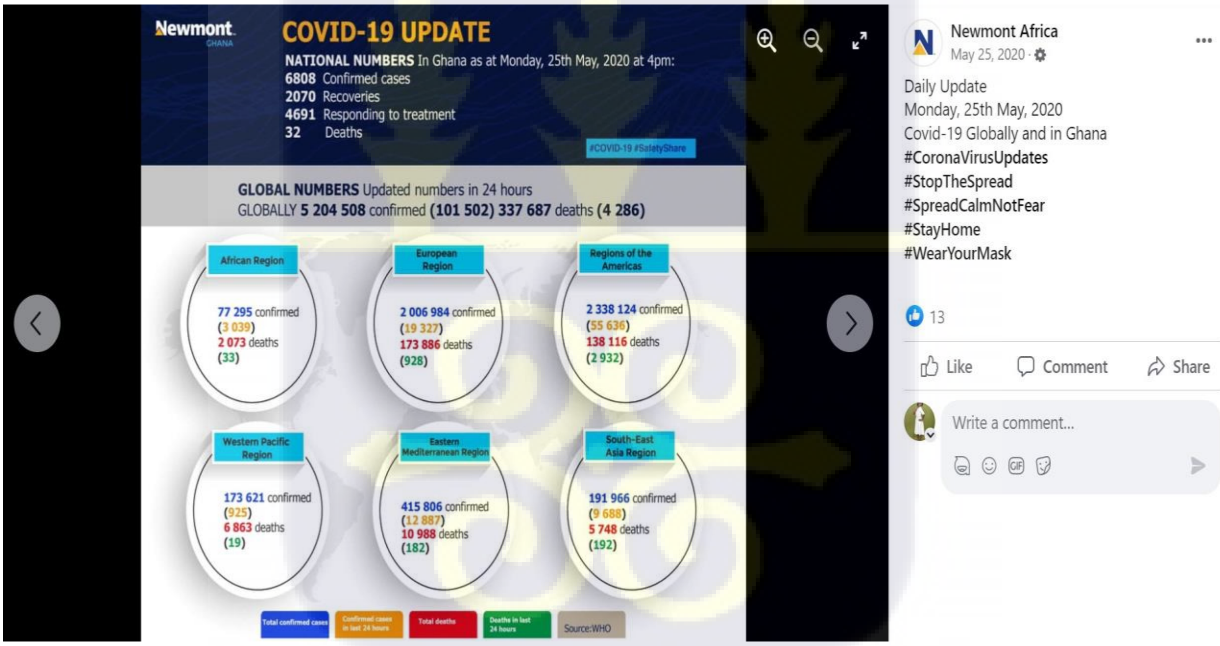


Exhibit 5: Pandemic Information Message Theme Post

Adding to the category of risk communication messages is the operational adjustments announcements messaging theme of brand communication during the pandemic. It was customary during the first few months of the pandemic to see brands redirecting consumers to access their services through digital channels. The communication also involved providing information on the closure of some physical premises and the announcement of fumigation exercises at some premises. These announcements were meant to empower consumers with information on how they could access brand services without putting themselves in harm's way in a public health emergency, a period of social distancing.

MTN posted on March 29, 2020, the closure of all its service centres from March 28th to 31st on its Facebook channel (see Exhibit 6). The announcement provided information on which service centres will be opened for operation from April 1, 2020, with the commensurate adjusted working hours. The announcement further provided information on phone numbers and digital platforms as alternative channels for consumer use. As a messaging theme, operational adjustment announcements offered brands an opportunity to engage consumers as well as demonstrate care for consumer safety. The messages further demonstrated efforts to reduce the mental burden of figuring out how to access brand services.

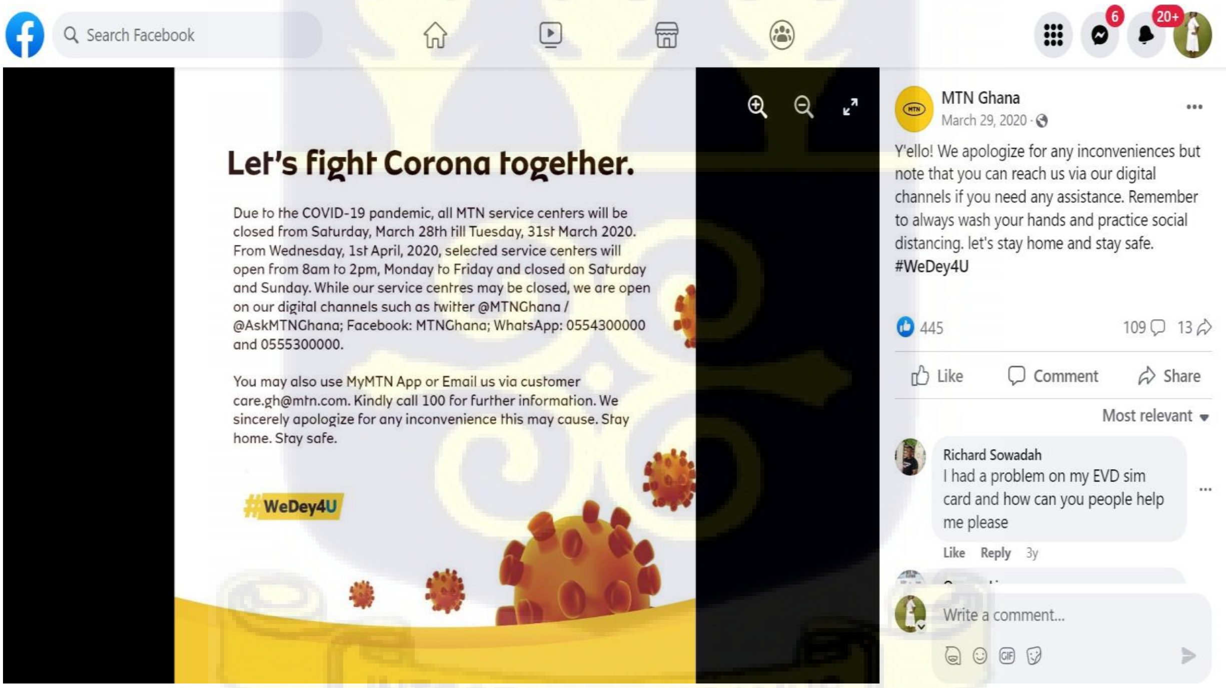


Exhibit 6: Operational Adjustment Announcement Message Sample

Brands also made efforts to announce their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities that tended to render support to the fight against the pandemic. Such content included announcements on donations to the COVID-19 fund set up by the government, the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) to some relevant institutions, providing very critical services (fumigation and water supply), as well as supporting communities with their facilities. AngloGold Ashanti provided fumigation services to the Obuasi Government Hospital (see Exhibit 7) and other social services to the entire Obuasi and in communities where their employees lived. For the mining brands, CSR communication was prominent. CSR communication captured 18.2 percent of the analysed text (see Figure 5.1) and was the third dominant messaging theme at the time. Providing social support gave brands an opportunity to tangibly demonstrate care and served brands the legitimacy they needed to sustain the dialogue with their public by announcing such deeds.

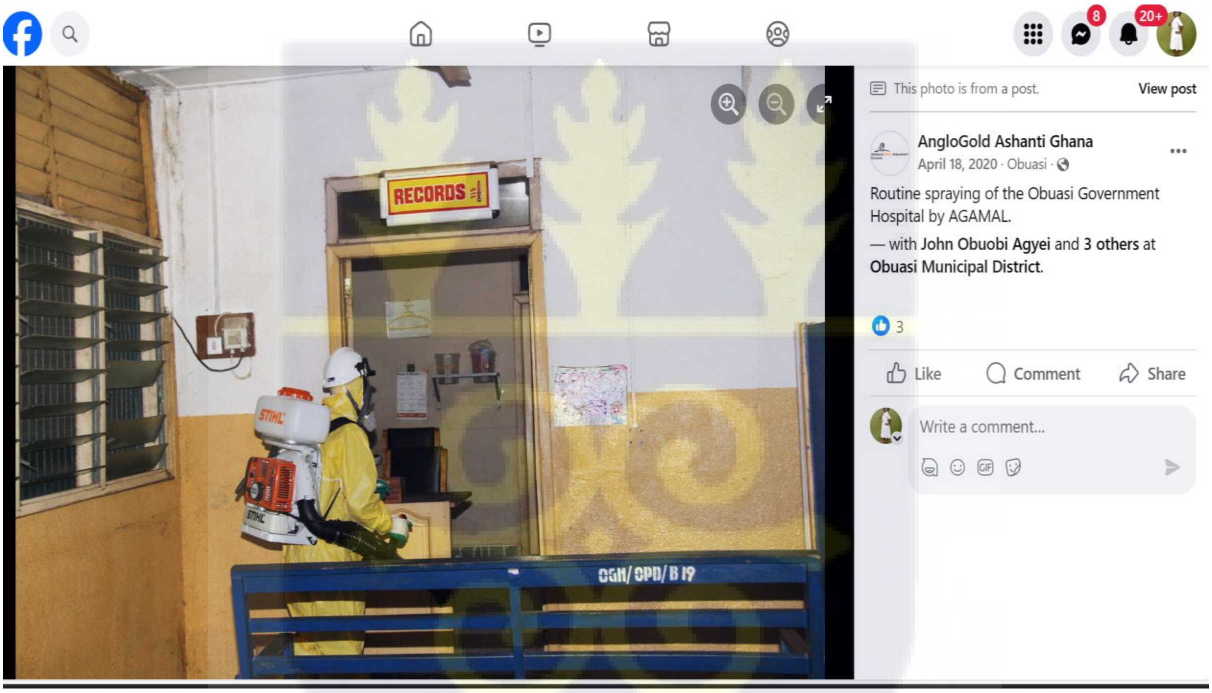


Exhibit 7: Sample Post on CSR Activity Communication

5.2.2.2 Message Appeal and Tone

Closely linked to the themes are the message tone and appeals. The content analysis sought to gauge the message appeal that was adopted during the period. The elaborative likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1980) presents different ways that consumers process stimuli and their best application for attitudinal change. The theory broadly classifies such stimuli for messaging into emotional and logical (rational), depending on context and expected outcome.

Generally, messages were emotional in appeal, as presented in Figure 5.2 below. Four hundred and one (401) counts, representing 80.2% of the sampled text adopted emotional appeals. An example is GCNet's post on April 17, 2020 (see exhibit 8), which sought to solidarise with health workers and other frontliners in the fight against the pandemic. The message played on the Akan word "Ayekoo" which translates as "well done" to deserving frontliners as motivation for the target group. This observation stands to suggest that brands spoke to the emotions of the public in an era of emotional distraught, anxiety, and fear.

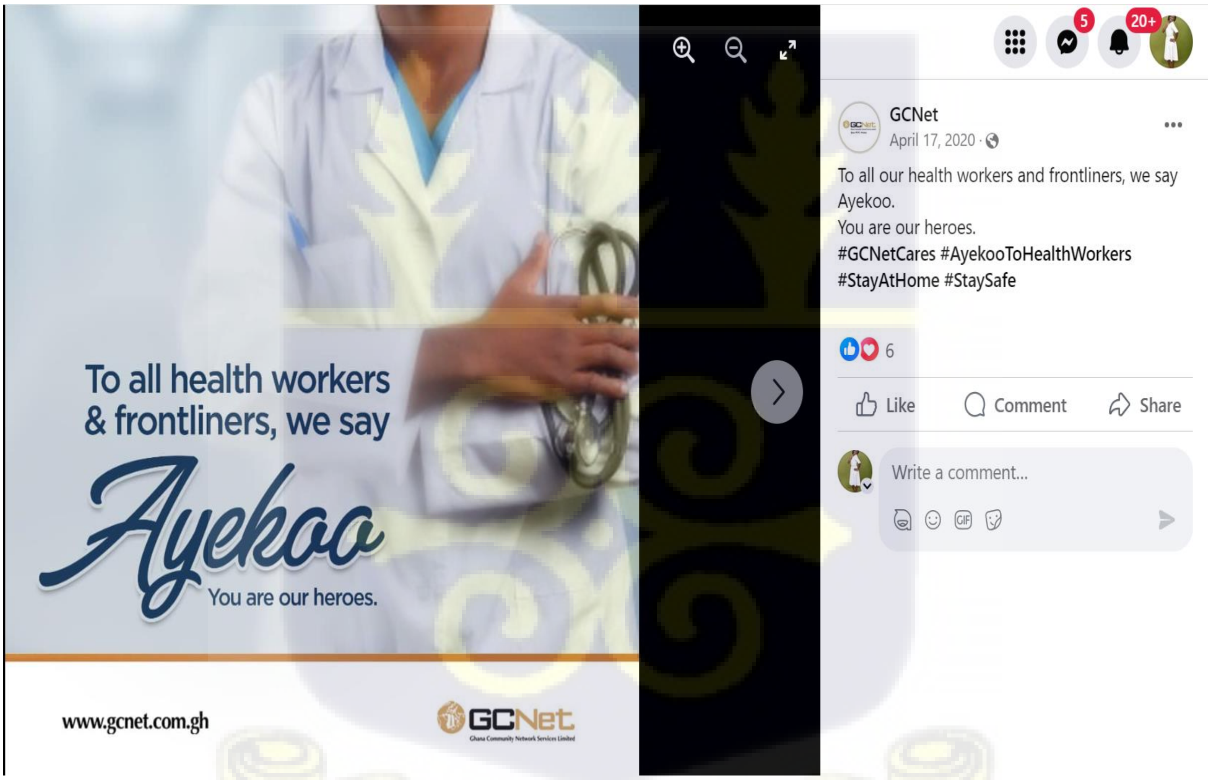


Exhibit 8: Brand Messages Presenting Emotional Appeals

Regardless of the dominance of emotional appeals in brand communication during the pandemic, one in every five messages (18.2%) applied reasoning and logical arguments (see Figure 5.2). Exhibit 9 provides an example of the application of rational appeals to logically engage consumers during the pandemic. Churches, and outfits that operate on donations were presented with reasons to accept a product/service that offered ease of use, and safety in receiving donations worldwide.

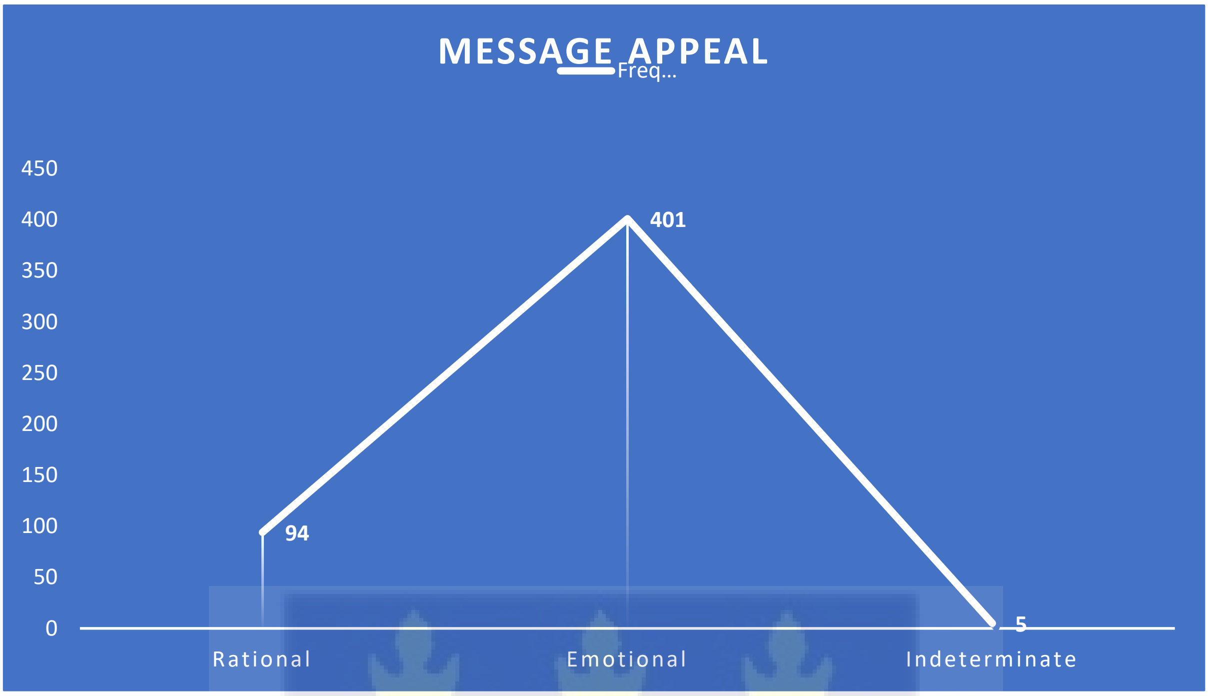


Figure 5.2: Message Appeals

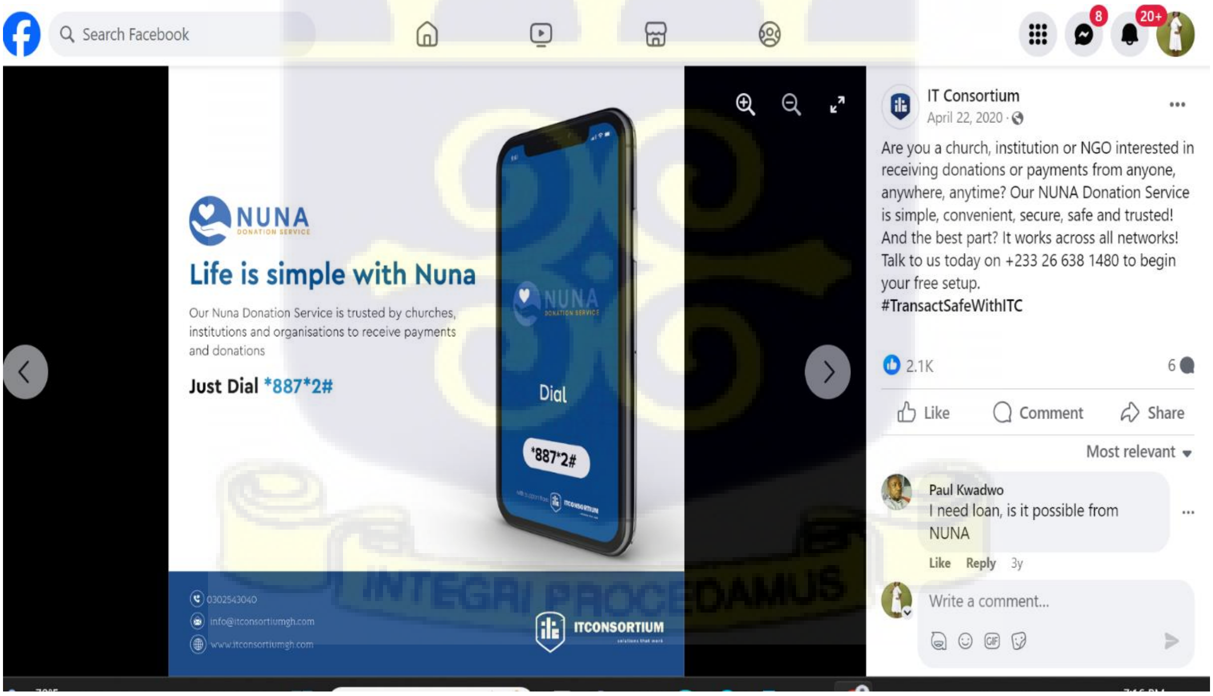


Exhibit 9: Sample Post Expressing a Rational Appeal

Additionally, a cross-tabulation of the message themes and the appeal systems used showed that whereas the use of emotional appeal dominated messages, it appears the messages took on a rational tone when brand communication was self-promotional (brand-focused). As shown in Figure 5.3 below, messages that emphasized product offerings, brands' CSR efforts, and operational adjustments were the most likely to deploy rational appeals. Exhibit 9 is a classical confirmation of the above claim that self-promotional messages are most likely to adopt rational appeals. In contrast, messages expressing solidarity with consumers, or providing information to aid their safety were the least likely to adopt the rational appeal.

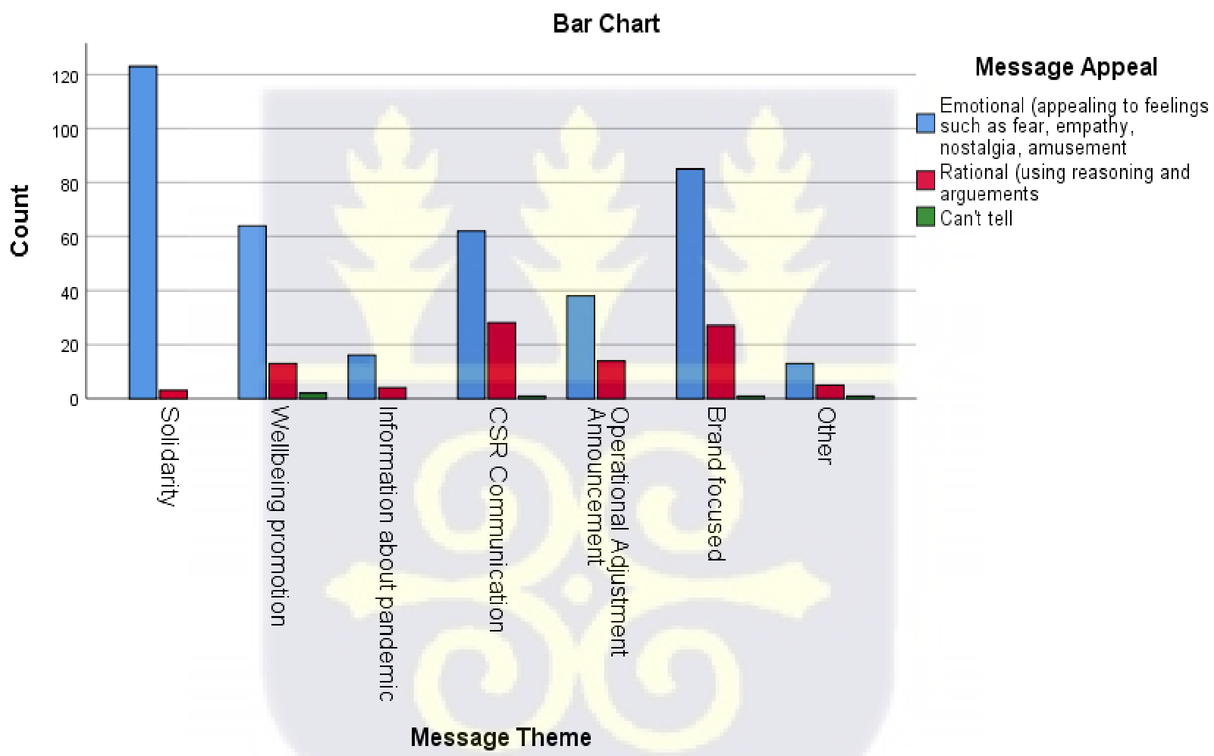


Figure 5.3: Message Appeal/Message Theme Crosstabulation

With respect to message tone, apart from a negligible 1%, almost all brand communication during the pandemic presented a positive tone in their messaging. Ninety-nine percent (99%) of the examined data presented a generally positive outlook on the situation. Exhibit 10 provides evidence of the positivity demonstrated by brands with the choice of image and copy that preaches togetherness and 'doing more' irrespective of the limitations of the pandemic.

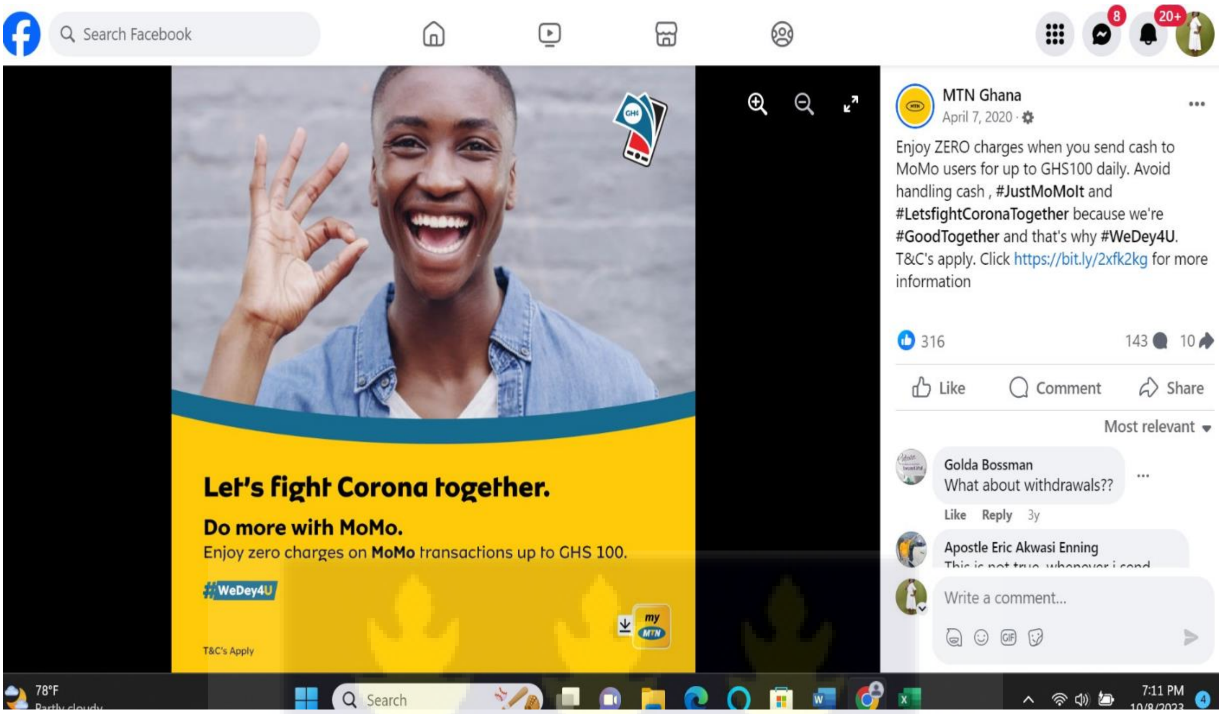


Exhibit 10: Sample Post on the Adoption of Positive Tones

The negative tones were mostly adopted when brands attempted to present information about the pandemic. However, there were other messaging themes that reflected negative tones. An example is displayed in Exhibit 11, a post by IT Consortium on May 17, a day dedicated to commemorating World Technology and Information Society's Day. The message adopted a negative tone in highlighting the heightened disadvantage of people who live without access to ICT in a time such as the pandemic. The post sought to promote the provision of digital infrastructure for all by painting a gloomy and dire situation for such persons, possibly to provoke policy action.

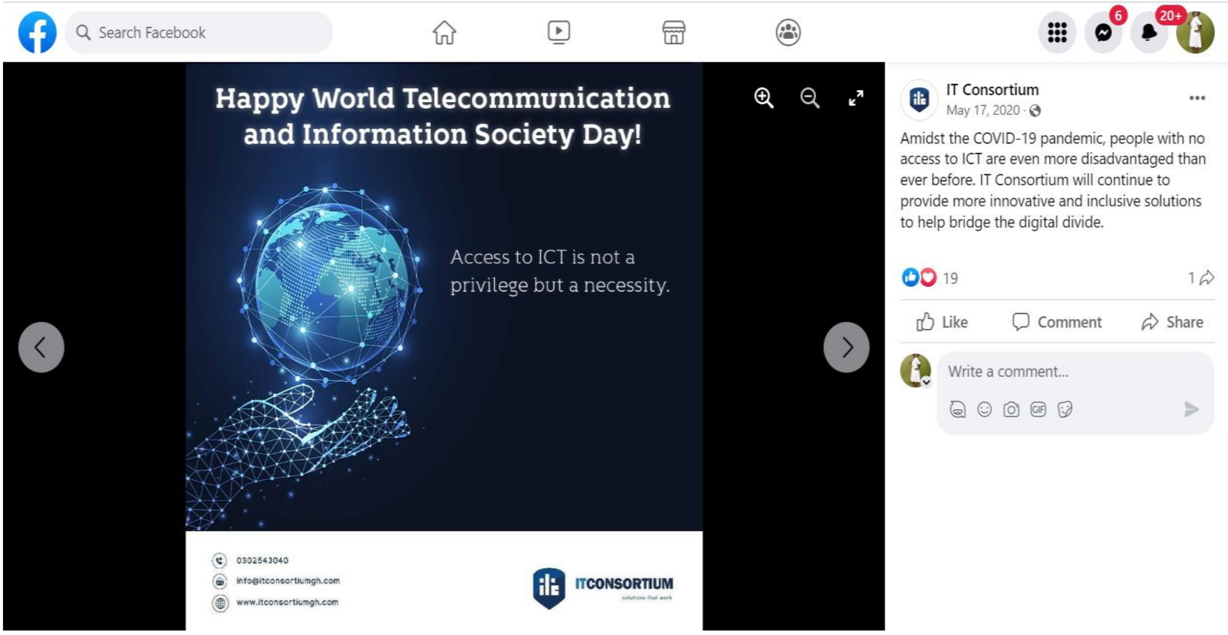


Exhibit 11: Sample Post on the Adoption of Negative Tones

Despite the aforementioned, a positive tone appealing to emotions predominated brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such communication features in a healthcare crisis can only connote care and compassion, aligning with the non-profit and healthcare communication literature (Kwame & Petrucka, 2021).

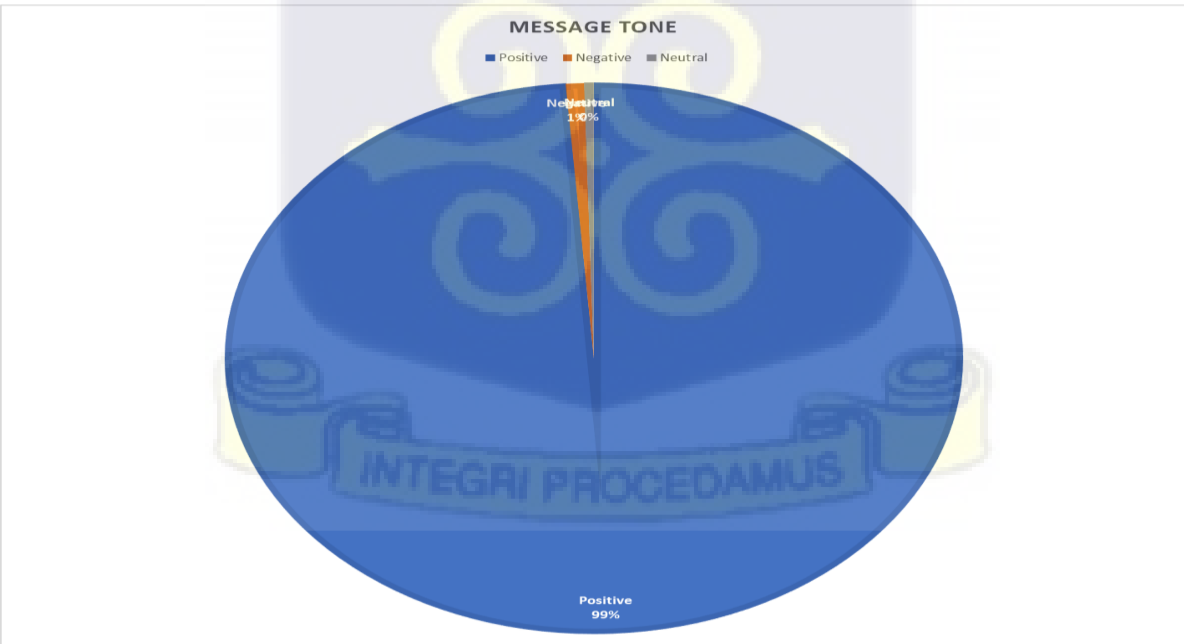


Figure 5.4: Message Tones

5.2.2.3 Subject Matter

Related to the concept of messaging theme and tone is the subject matter of brand communication. The subject matter serves as the collective summary of all communication elements presented, encompassing the setting, colours, and fonts and including captions and hashtags (synonymous with social media posts, as is the case for this study). The subject matter construct sought to examine the central idea or overall focus of the communication, whether to sell/promote a brand (extrinsic) or be non-profit-oriented and for the good of society (intrinsic).

Table 5.2: Subject Matter

Subject Matter	Frequency	Percentage
Intrinsic	297	59.4
Extrinsic	202	40.4
Both	1	0.2

As displayed in Table 5.2 above, almost 60 percent of brand messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic was intended to serve the interests of society, as against 40 percent that served brand purposes. Brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic primarily focused on people, as against the profit-orientation that usually characterizes communication from such commercial entities. The main focus of brand messaging was to support consumers in surviving the pandemic, which is in consonance with the prevalence of solidarity, well-being promotion, and operational adjustment messages.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the correlation between the prominence of brand-focused messages and the extrinsic motives of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 5.5). More than a third of the brand messages in the sampled text focused on promoting the brand for top-of-mind awareness or to sell products. A crosstabulation of the message themes and the subject matter in Figure 5.5 below illustrates that the business-as-usual themes, such as the brand-focused and CSR Communication themes, loaded highly on extrinsic motives more than the other themes.

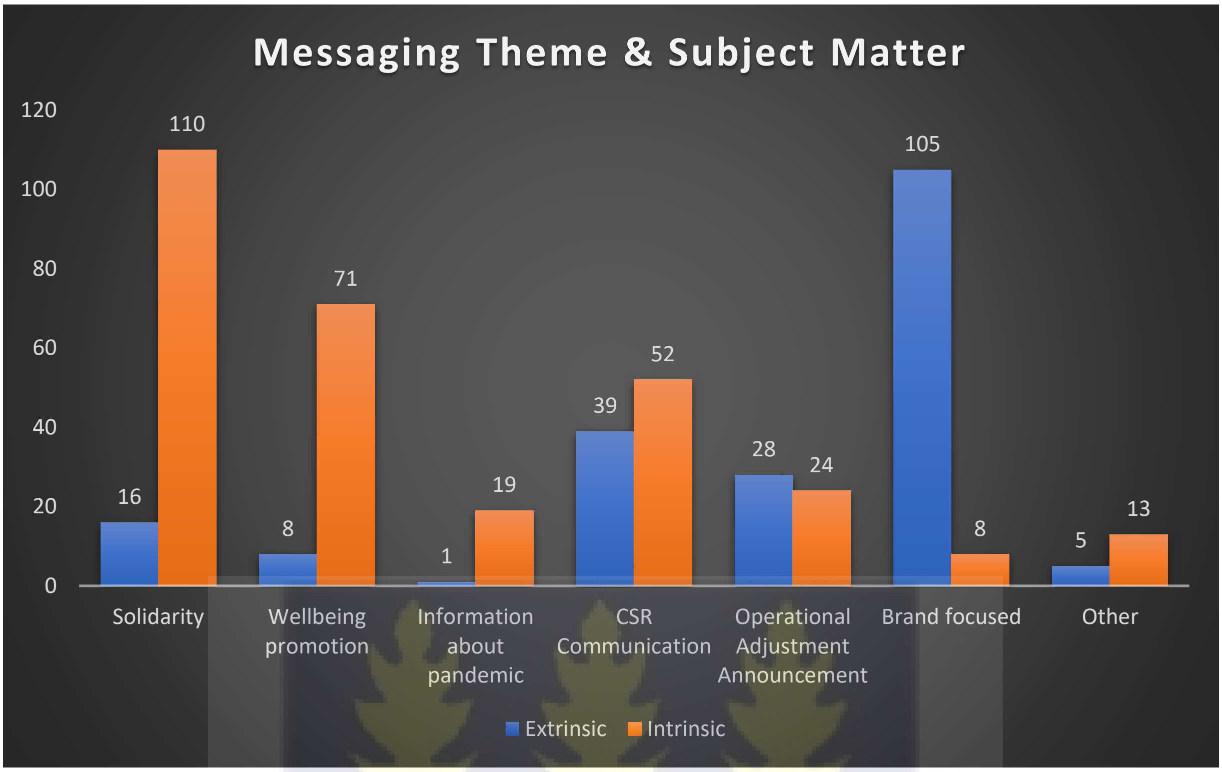


Figure 5.5: Message Theme and Subject Matter Crosstabulation

The cross-tabulation of the messaging themes and subject matter also reveals the spread of extrinsic motives across the messaging themes. One would assume that once a brand message seeks to solidarise with consumers, it would be devoid of any inclination towards self-promotion, yet all of the themes had counts of extrinsic motives as the central focus. An example is the IT Consortium post on May 17, 2020, commiserating with people on World Telecommunication and Information Society Day. The caption of the post eventually promoted IT Consortium as the ultimate provider in bridging the digital divide (see Exhibit 11).

This carefully crafted combination of people-focused messaging and extrinsic motives is what gives the nature of brand communication during the pandemic its uniqueness. Brands found the legitimacy of holding a self-promotion voice by adopting emotional and care appeals in a period of extreme emotional, social, and economic distress. A less mercantile and less combative message that called for togetherness in fighting the pandemic and showing empathy was adopted, yet extrinsic motives were not completely relegated.

5.2.2.4 Care Attributes in Brand Communications During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The examination of brand communication during the pandemic was further assessed in relation to attributes of care communication in the healthcare literature. Given that the pandemic constituted a public health emergency, it only raises the question of whether brands are likely to incorporate care attributes in their messaging. The study therefore explored the inclusion of care communication attributes as proposed by the healthcare communication literature (Bernacki et al., 2015; Kwame & Petrucka, 2021). Three attributes from the literature were adopted for this study: empathy, responsiveness, and respect. Empathy is constructed by compassion, emotional support, and understanding of the audience. Respect is reflected in the acknowledgment of beliefs, values, and support for the dignity of the audience. Responsiveness also represents prompt interactivity and shared decision-making within the context of events and time.

The findings, as exhibited in Figure 5.6, indicate a high majority (88.6% on average) of the sampled text adopted all three of the care attributes, indicating brands' overwhelming uptake of a care-for-you logic in their communication during the pandemic. However, contrary to the general assumption that brand communications are empathetic, empathy appears to be the least adopted care attribute. Responsiveness and respect scored 91.8 percent and 92 percent, respectively, ahead of empathy, which scored 82 percent.

The above essentially suggests that brand communication during the pandemic prioritized respect for the varying conditions of people, ensuring that the messaging was not offensive to audiences. Though care and compassion for consumers were the primary narratives during the pandemic, the findings indicate the significant prominence of brand communication that took cognisance of showing respect for the lived experiences of consumers. There hardly existed any kind of brand communication that went out without reference to the pandemic within the period.

Additionally, the findings suggest that brand communication evolved along the temporal and experiential dynamics of the pandemic. Topical issues that shaped the narratives as the pandemic unfolded, such as the different waves, lockdowns, "infodemic", and vaccine hesitancy, influenced brand messaging significantly. In essence, brand communication sought salience by dynamically reflecting the issues created by the pandemic, which is reflected in the high score in responsiveness - the assessment of the interactivity between brand messaging and the circumstances created by the pandemic.

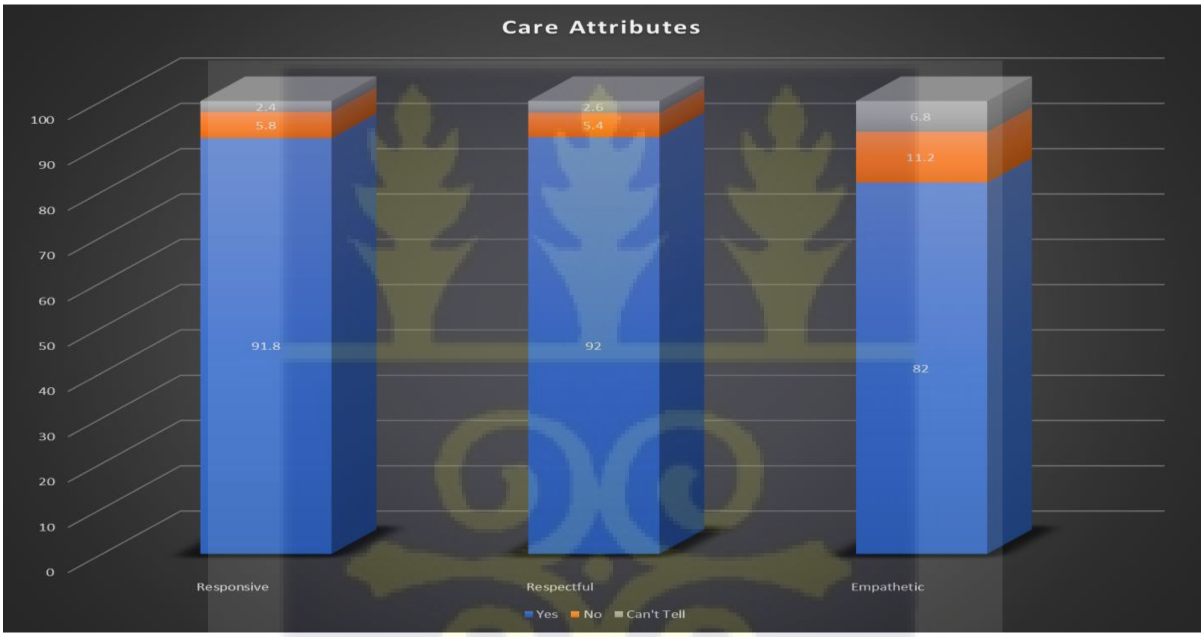


Figure 5.6: Adoption of Health Care Communication Attributes

Figure 5.6 further demonstrates that it was a lot easier to identify the attributes of respect and responsiveness in a text than it was in the case of empathy. About 7 percent of the sampled content could not be identified as communicating empathy or not. This figure is more than a combined 5 percent of content that could not be recognised for both responsiveness and respect. The above statistic reflects a stimulating indication of the use of the pandemic to advance the business motives of brands, such that some messages could not be easily identified as supporting consumers or advancing brand metrics.

In summary, the key features of brand communication during the pandemic can be described as primarily centred on demonstrating concern and support for consumers via solidarity messages that deploy emotional appeals. While the impulse to promote brands could not be relegated, brand messages demonstrated respect, empathy, and responsiveness (sensitivity) to the exigency of the pandemic, making them appear less mercantile.

5.2.3 Brand Ethos-Message Fit during the Pandemic

In addition to determining the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis also sought to identify the influence of message-ethos congruence on the potency of brand messaging. Consequently, Study 1 also explored the extent to which brands achieved message-ethos congruence in their communication during the pandemic. This assessment of message-ethos congruence was done by comparing the content with the inherent traits of the sampled brands, specifically their acclaimed ethos, using their vision statements as the benchmark.

The findings, as illustrated in Figure 5.7 below, indicate that 67 percent of brand messages during the pandemic were congruent with the brands' ethos to a large extent. For instance, Scancom's (MTN) vision is "to lead the delivery of a bold, new digital world to our consumers" and one of their flagship products is the MTN mobile money, which is the first to have been introduced and the largest fintech/financial inclusion platform in Ghana (Mane, 2023). It is typical of MTN to communicate its mobile money platform on an ordinary day. And to continue to deliver a bold new digital world to consumers during the pandemic, MTN's message on March 30, 2020, (see Exhibit 12) informed consumers of the increase in the limits on their accounts to allow for more digital transactions. Consumers were encouraged to do more with 'Momo' (a corrupted version of Mobile Money) in order to avoid handling cash.

This promoted financial inclusion, in keeping with the brand's ethos. It is also important to note the contextualisation of the increase in limits within the solidarity theme, "Let's fight Corona together."

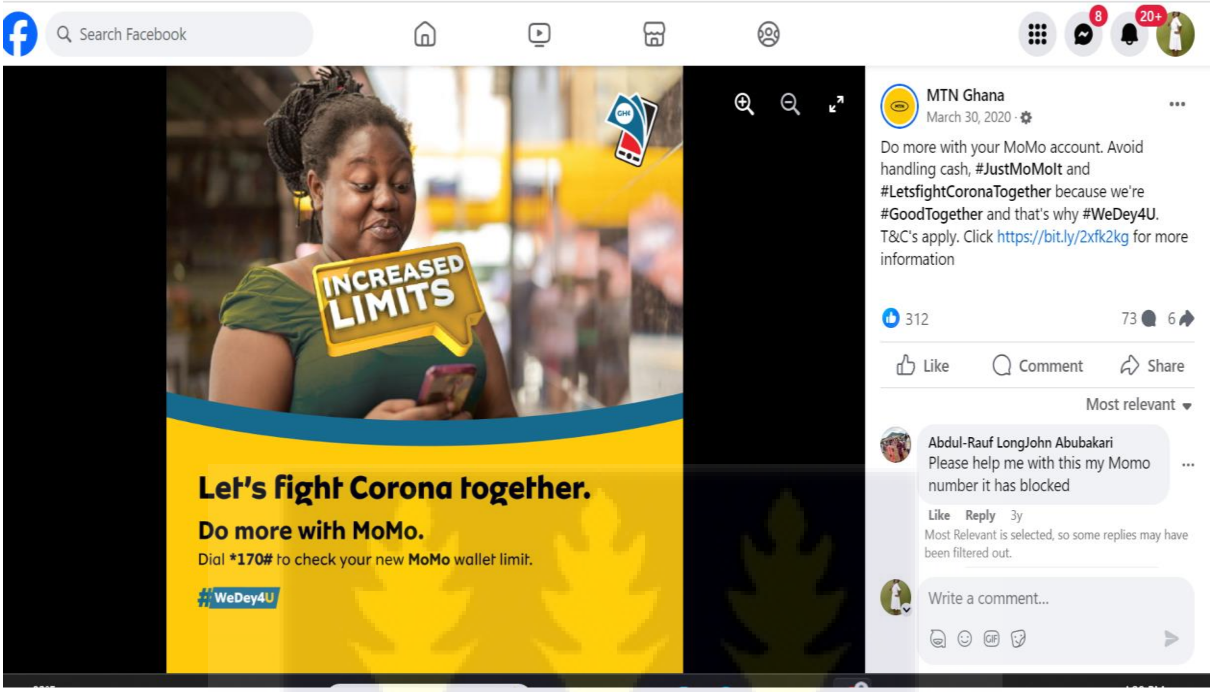


Exhibit 12: The Extent of Message-Congruence Sample Post

The same can be said of AGroEcoms, an agribusiness firm, and their message about handwashing upon return from the farm to stay safe. This suggests that regardless of the need to adjust scripts to gain relevance during the pandemic, the core businesses and vision of most brands influenced their messaging.

The extent to which brands achieved message/ethos congruence was further assessed using a crosstabulation of the message themes and message-ethos congruence as showcased in Figure 5.7. This assessment was to help determine the interplay of the messaging themes and the achievement of message/ethos congruence. Brand-focused and CSR communication themes provided the most opportunities for message/ethos congruence in brand communication during the pandemic. The themes' contribution to the achievement of message/ethos congruence can be largely attributable to the fact that they follow the usual brand communication schema.

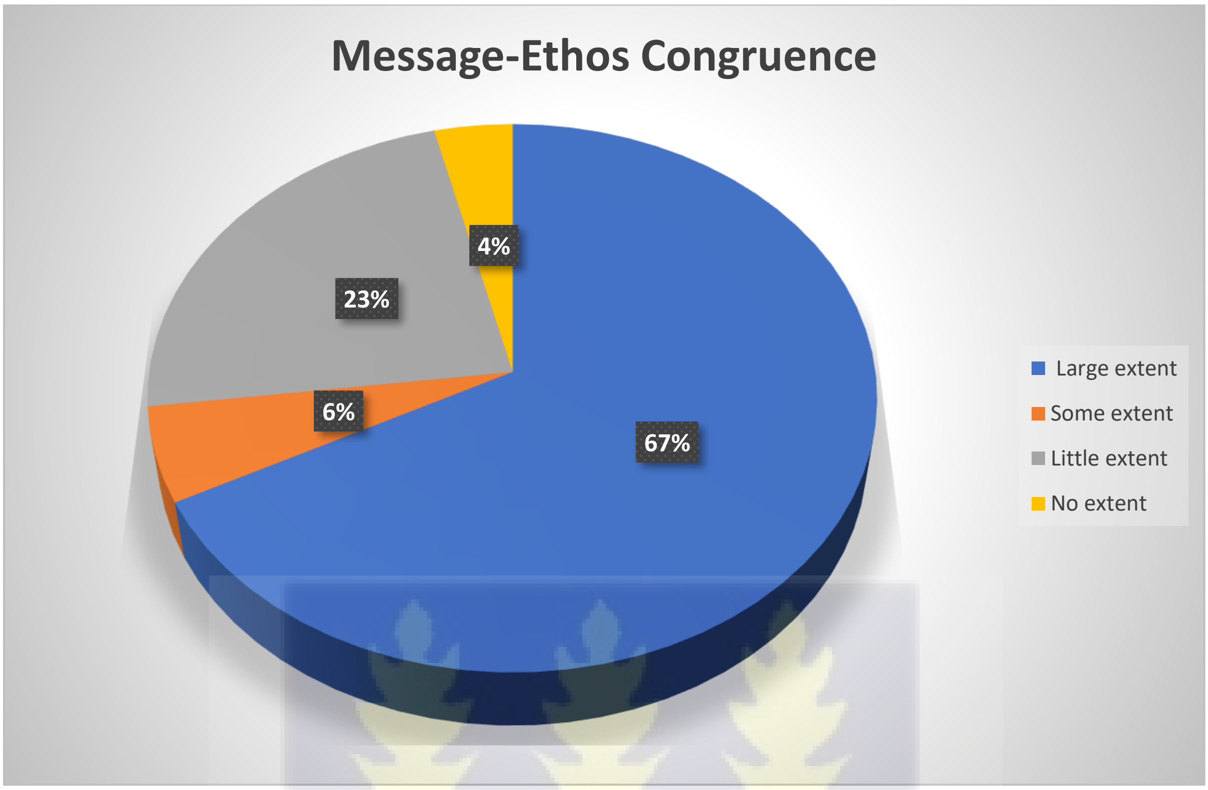


Figure 5.7: The Extent of Message-Ethos Congruence

In contrast to non-routine message themes such as solidarity, which focus on things not necessarily germane to brands, a brand-focused communication message is more likely to be consistent with the brand's ethos or mission.

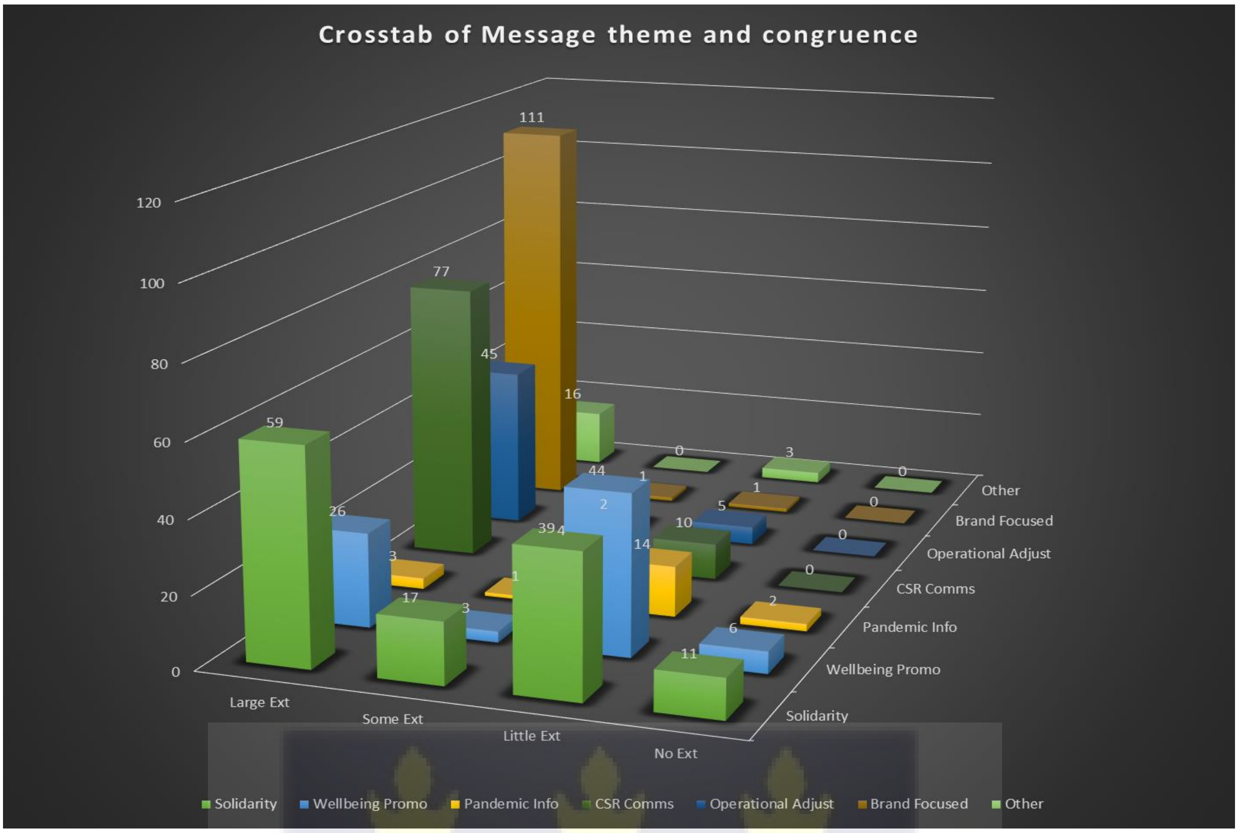


Figure 5.8: Messaging Themes and Congruence Crosstabulation

It can be concluded from the above that brands generally communicated in consonance with their vision, resulting in the achievement of message/ethos congruence. Additionally, the results show that the more altruistic (society or pandemic-focused) brand messaging is, the less congruent it is with brand ethos. However, whether it was to serve the people, purpose, or profit, the nature of brand communication during the pandemic was affected by the discursive ethos of the brand.

5.2.3.1 Industry-based Dynamics of Brand Messaging During the Pandemic

Strategic brand communication is said to be done within context (Wijaya, 2013). Thus, the study further sought to examine how industry nuances influenced brand communication during the pandemic (see Figure 5.9). The findings show that despite the predominance of expressions of solidarity, some industries focused on other messaging themes due to the peculiarities of their businesses. Four out of the seven industries: manufacturing, oil and gas, retail services, and mining showed a preference for other themes apart from solidarity. Additionally, financial services accounted for the highest percentage in every messaging theme, due to their volume. However, the industry's messages on operational adjustment announcements loaded higher than the general average, signifying that brands in this industry focused on service availability to their consumers during the pandemic.

Similarly, ICT brands, apart from solidarising with their consumers, mainly focused on product/brand promotion. However, the industry was practically mute on CSR, operational adjustments, and pandemic information. The ICT industry was accompanied by the retail services and manufacturing industries, whose major theme was the brand-focused messaging theme.

In contrast, agriculture and agribusinesses had no product-focused messages in their communication during the pandemic. And for brands with large human resources that operate in explorative services such as mining and the oil and gas industries, announcing CSR activities was the primary focus. Essentially, the assessment of industry influence on brand communication during the pandemic illustrates industry-based variations in messaging foci.

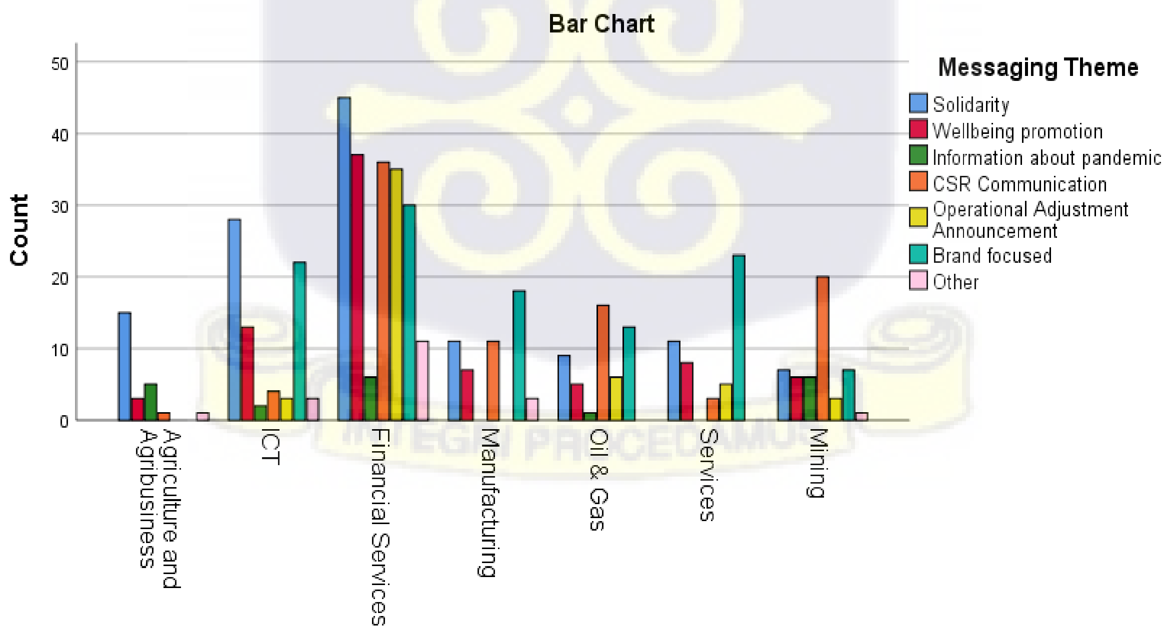
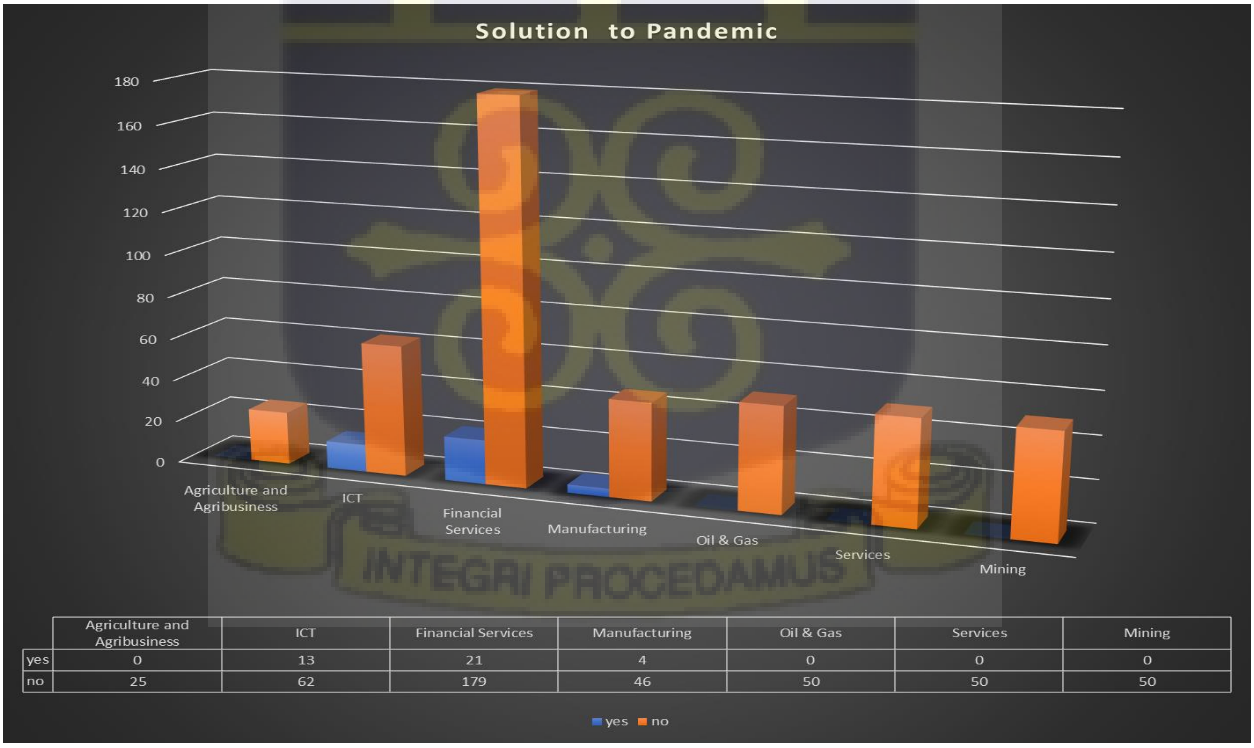


Figure 5.9: Cross Tabulation on Industry and Message Themes

Just as the assessment of messaging themes per industry demonstrated peculiarities in focus, the study identified further industry uniqueness by examining messages that were suggestive of brand repositioning in order to take advantage of opportunities presented by the pandemic. The findings as exhibited in Figure 5.9 indicate that brands in the ICT, manufacturing, and financial services (insurance) industries minimally proposed solutions to the public in their communication.

Unilever promoted Lifebuoy alcohol-based sanitizers that were not originally on the market prior to the pandemic. Insurance companies premised care on the provision of life insurance services. MTN as well as the IT Consortium promoted their technology, such as the internet and other digital platforms, as ways of navigating the restrictions created by the pandemic. Though there were no attempts at manipulative repositioning or quack selling, some industries took advantage of the pandemic to promote relevant products and services as their core businesses could.



	Agriculture and Agribusiness	ICT	Financial Services	Manufacturing	Oil & Gas	Services	Mining
yes	0	13	21	4	0	0	0
no	25	62	179	46	50	50	50

Figure 5.10: Industries Pitching Brands as a Solution to the Pandemic

Finally, the study took a look at references to the prior reputation of brands in their messaging during the pandemic. The findings, as displayed in Figure 5.10, reveal that brands leveraged their pre-pandemic reputation in their messaging. The findings also show that brands that operate within environmental regulations, such as the mining, oil and gas, and manufacturing industries, overwhelmingly sought to connect with their past reputation in their messaging. The above suggests that being perceived as safe, as they may have been perceived in the past, was crucial. On the contrary, services or retail brands were the least likely to refer to their past reputation, though they have huge customer-interfacing operations (see Figure 5.10).

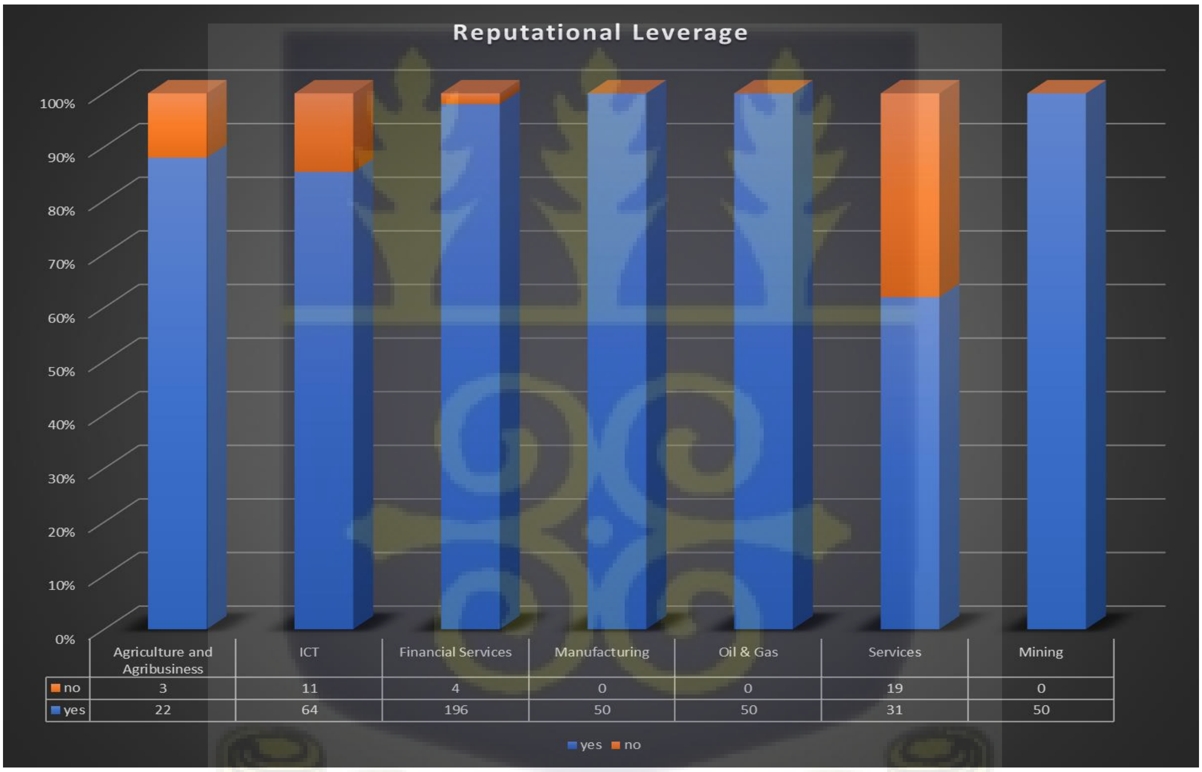


Figure 5.11: Reputation Leverage and Industry Crosstabulation

5.2.4 Summary: Toward a conceptualisation of Brand Care Communication

In conclusion, Study 1 of this thesis delved into the intricate landscape of brand communication during the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic, grounded on the assumption that the exigency of the pandemic would alter brand messaging during the period. What emerged from the investigation is a nuanced picture of how brands navigated the delicate balance between genuine empathy or care and their economic imperatives.

In the face of the global crisis, brands exhibited a remarkable shift in their communication strategies. The period saw the evolution of a trend in brand communication that is devoid of the usual competitiveness and adversarial tone in advertising. The communication encompassed grassroots organising, built around “togetherness” and collective support for stakeholders, including governments. Brand messaging also exuded positivity and exhibited care in sensitivity to the varying needs of consumers as the pandemic raged on. In essence, the exigency of the pandemic compelled brands to re-evaluate their priorities and recognize the imperative of solidarity with the public, resonating with the prevailing sentiment of uncertainty and fear.

However, the findings also illuminate the pragmatic aspect of brand communication during challenging times. Brands, while demonstrating empathy and support, remained acutely aware of the need to promote their products and services. This dual approach of carefully crafted messages to drive intrinsic and extrinsic motives is what gives brand communication during the pandemic its uniqueness. The delicate dance between altruism and self-promotion was simply a testament to the adaptability and resilience of brands in a crisis.

In view of the above, the study advances the notion of brand care communication as a bona fide strategy for brand communication in exigencies. Guided by the findings of the content analysis data, brand care communication is defined here as communication in which brands adopt a less mercantile approach in their messaging by demonstrating care for consumer well-being in order to legitimize promotional dialogue during a crisis. Its dimensions or sub-constructs are deduced from the various themes identified from the content analysis to include solidarity, well-being promotion, operational adjustment announcements, CSR communication, and brand/product promotion. Study 2 explores the factors that undergird the adoption of this strategy for communicating to brand audiences during a pandemic.

5.3 Drivers and Considerations for the Adoption of Brand Care Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section builds on findings from Study 1 to determine the motivations for the adoption of brand care during the pandemic. The study employs the exploratory affordances of inductive methods, in-depth interviews in this instance, informed by the claims of the SCCT. The SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2007) provides an evidence-based framework for crisis managers to optimally engage their audiences for reputational protection during and post-crisis. Though the COVID-19 pandemic is atypical of the crisis taxonomy originally envisaged by the SCCT, the theory presents a basis to vet the considerations and standards by which brand communicators arrived at their strategic communicative responses. Based on the SCCT's assumption that effective crisis communication does not happen out of context, this study sought to identify contextual factors that shaped brand care communication. In-depth interviews were conducted with brand communicators to ascertain these underlying factors.

5.3.1 Data Profile

Eight communication professionals from the manufacturing, agricultural, and various service industries, as well as two consultants, participated in the study. The scope and selection of interviewees provide a broad and nuanced perspective on brand motives for communication during the pandemic. ICT and financial services hold two slots apiece, as seen in Table 5.3 below, while all other industries have one spot. The reasons for the double spot for some industries are that financial industries dominate the Ghana Club 100, whereas ICT firms provide a rich avenue to study due to the pandemic's effect on digital transformation. The portfolios of the interviewees are also shown as proof of their capacity to provide the necessary information to answer the relevant research questions.

Table 5.3: Interviewee Portfolio

Brand/Label	***Interviewee Portfolio***	***Participant Code***
MTN	Snr Manager Brands & Communication	PC1M
ACTIVA Insurance	Social Media Manager	PC2M
Stanbic Bank	PR & Media Manager	PC3M
IT Consortium	Chief Information and Security Officer	PC4M
GOIL	Corporate Communications	PC5F
Unilever	Director, Customer Development	PC6M
AngloGold	Snr Sustainability Manager	PC7M
Agro Ecoms	Service Manager	PC8M
Interactive Digital	Chief Operating Officer	PC9M
Touchpoint Magna Carta (TPMC)	PR Head	PC10M

5.3.2 Brand-side Motivations for Care Communication During the Pandemic

In view of the significant shifts identified in the nature of brand communication as a result of the pandemic from Study 1, an opportunity was given to brand communicators to provide brand-side triggers for such shifts. The following were identified as motivators for the adoption of care communication by brands in the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.3.2.1 Providing Support to Stakeholders

Given, the prevailing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, brands took cognizance of the despondency that confronted consumers and responded with messaging that encouraged and assured their audiences to keep hope alive. All eight interviewees, without reference to practice or theory, acknowledged the need to primarily reassure and motivate stakeholders with the aim of protecting their mental health. Given that the essence of brand communication is to basically promote brands (Wijaya, 2013), one would have expected interviewee managers to primarily cite extrinsic motives for their communication. However, the communal fright observed among various stakeholders and the need to commiserate with them primarily motivated brand messaging. In contrast to their usual competitive and profit-driven nature, these communicators thought that, given the time, alleviating stress by providing assurance and hope served a better purpose. PC3M disclosed that:

> *The bigger challenge was how to deal with our customers because people were worried and apprehensive about what the situation was about. So, assurance messaging was what we were initially focusing on.*

Similar remarks were made by all other interviewees, signifying the strength and collective identification of the need to protect the mental health and emotional well-being of consumers. While some managers specifically mentioned the mental health challenge, others alluded to its implication on the kind of messages they adopted, which was to provide assurance of brand support. Ultimately, catering to the psychological needs of consumers to present a humanised side of brands was the motivation.

> *There was the need to still communicate with our customers as the pandemic hit hard across the country, we had to give people some assurance that we as a brand we still stand with them and are ever ready to meet their needs regardless* [PC2M]

> *The motivation for our communication are in two folds, one to help the consumers to keep hope alive and to also promote the health of our brand* [PCIM]

> *We also owe our community a duty of care to support them in times of need and emergency. And so, these are the key drivers, not only targeting our employees and then their mental and physical health and well-being but also in the entire communities that we work in Obuasi and beyond* [PC7M]

We needed to communicate to the consuming public that the brand cares about their health and was willing to protect them and show more empathy and responsibility. [PC5F]

As much as possible, we also found it very important that the mental health of the staff was an important part of working effectively and efficiently. [PC4M]

Because when lives are threatened, people are looking for "Genuity". If you're not bringing them hope…; and you're thinking about profit, short-term gain, market share; that is a very insensitive thing" [PC6M]

Given the above, there is enough evidence to suggest that the urgency of the pandemic appeared to have suppressed the competitive or combative motives that typically characterize brand communication (He & Harris, 2020), in favour of a more humanized presentation of brands. Overt business motives were subjected to compassion and empathy due to the survival threat presented by the pandemic. Though it is evinced that brand-building motives were not completely abandoned, all brand communicators prioritized concern for the mental health of consumers as a matter of morality and sensitivity to the plight of consumers.

The above observation affirms the dominance of care and empathy messages observed in the previous chapter and also by other scholars (Shoenberger et al., 2021). Protecting the mental health of stakeholders, demonstrating care, as well as providing assurance to consumers signal solidarity as a key component of brand care communication. The urgency to provide emotional relief for the distraught public translated to solidarity messaging that sought to provide hope, assurance, encouragement, and motivation; all pledging brands' commiseration with consumers.

Beyond the effects of the pandemic on consumers' mental health, SARS-CoV-2, the strain of coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, is deemed one of the most contagious disease-causing organisms (WHO, 2020). Given the high infectious rate, brand communicators were mindful of the threat of the spread of the disease and the likely devastation to both employees and customers. And for brands with large employees like GOIL

The challenge was how to protect the thousands of fuel attendants and other workers as well as consumers, from contracting COVID.

For such brands, leading to the efforts to engage in risk communication that empowered stakeholders to protect themselves was essential.

> *Lives were lost and the rate at which they were going was a bit scary. And here lies the case; we had walk-in clients; you, having face-to-face discussions with customers; they, presenting documents; let's say someone wants to make a claim or something; they walk in, speak to colleagues and all of that. And some also have very close relationships with customers as well. So, we also had to conscientize our customers that "hey this is what is happening". So you just have to be cautious or careful the way you present yourself when you walk into an institution.* [PC2M]

Brands also thought it wise to assure consumers that their premises or consumer touchpoints were safe. Brand communicators were remotely aware of the effects of;

> *Consumer abandonment of the brand should our stations be seen as a super spreader environment for the virus. There was therefore the need to initiate preventive measures to protect staff and consumers and help stay in business.* [PC5F]

While it was essential for brands to abandon short-term economic gains by focusing on consumer safety, the motive to promote the safety of consumers also harboured the need for brands to be perceived as safe to transact with. Essentially, even the motivation to promote employee and consumer safety unintentionally exhibited self-promotional objectives.

5.3.2.2 Keeping Top-of-Mind Awareness

Du et al. (2010) opined that when brand messages are predominantly altruistic or socially focused rather than about them, consumers are more likely to be skeptical due to the notion that such advertising does not fit their "schemer schema". The above assertion shows that, even in the eyes of consumers, brand-focused objectives cannot be entirely divorced from any type of brand communication or action. The study's findings on the drivers of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that in addition to the basic quest to demonstrate care, brand communicators also aimed to keep consumers aware of their brands.

PC1M explicitly expressed that their motives for communicating were in two folds; "*one to help the consumers to keep hope alive and to also promote the health of our brand*".

Thus, communication served as a vehicle to legitimize brand dialogue at the time. In the words of PC6M,

> *we didn't want to be seen as insensitive. We didn't want to be charting a course which was not in the benefit of our consumers in the particular state of mind that they were in.*

The findings above provide evidence of the existence of self-promotion motives by brands during the pandemic, though shrouded in audience sensitivity. Regardless of the general need to commiserate with consumers, brand communicators presented a combined messaging streak of both explicit and implicit brand-focused messages. In essence, brand care communication is a strategic, multidimensional communicative response that accommodates both brand-focused and people-focused communication within existential exigencies.

The disclosure of the motive to keep top-of-mind awareness can also account for the high frequency of brand promotion messages that were observed within the period, as manifested in the findings of Study 1. Most of such brand promotion content had the tag of the pandemic with the aim of avoiding being perceived as insensitive.

5.3.2.3 Service Delivery Obligation to Consumers/Business Continuity

Generally, brands owe a duty to consumers to ensure business continuity even during an exigency or crisis (Coombs, 2010). This motive, as is captioned, served a double purpose, especially for brands in the service industry. It offered a thread of sustenance for much-needed revenue/productivity for brands as well as the duty of fulfilling brand promises. As regards profitability or revenue generation, PC7M in response to why brands saw the need to communicate, hinted that:

> it makes *a strong business case for us to get involved in that fight against COVID for business reasons because employee productivity is hinged on their availability.*

As a mining outfit, business continuity was measured in production (employee productivity), which in turn informed the mine's communication effort; remotely motivated by having employees available to keep mining (the business running).

The business continuity and profitability motivation can also be extended to include brands' efforts to reposition some products to suit demands created by the pandemic. Despite the earlier assertion that brands made conscientious efforts not to be perceived as insensitive and that product sales communication was described as short-sighted in approach, some brands found ways to promote their products to ensure the continuity of their businesses. Whereas keeping top-of-mind awareness could be inoffensive in a pandemic, it takes extra effort to hard sell even in normal times. Selling is sometimes seen as disingenuous and could have been easily labelled as preposterous and too aggressive during a pandemic. Yet business continuity efforts motivated brands to sell in the heat of a pandemic by offering products/services as solutions to problems created by the pandemic.

> *We did an introspection and realized that some of the communication lines were no longer relevant. Because what people needed to hear was more about the pandemic and the corrective measures. Everybody was thinking of something in the form of an antibacterial, antigerm. And so we quickly went to assets that could speak to that kind of theme. A brand like Lifebouy who had for its mantra, hygiene, and a hygiene proposition was heroed.* [PC6M]

> *We looked at schools because we already had a student record management system that dealt with the life cycle of students from applications to admissions to the whole lifespan to graduation, okay, and placement. We also brought to bear the solution already used in Kenya; group contributions. Both private groups and public groups where people could contribute towards a project, especially churches. So, what we tried to do was provide a means through which people could just help, people could just contribute.* [PC4M]

Brands' ability to boldly sell within a pandemic with so many devastating consequences can only emphasize the power of messaging in brand communication. The point of relevance was achieved by tagging unto the prevalent and topical conversations at the time as well as identifying pressing consumer needs and meeting them.

The obligatory part of business continuity, where brands out of duty sought to keep consumers abreast with access to their services was beautifully captured by PC3M who indicated that:

> *We knew the bank will still run. People's monies were with us, transactions would happen. Now we needed to drive the behavioural change for people to decouple the branch aspect of the structure as against your (their) account and encourage them to use the digital channels which were safer. You could see people being very afraid. Now you didn't want to add to their stress points by also holding unto or making it difficult for them to access their money.*

An additional twist to the business continuity motive for brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was expressed by PC4M. As a provider of ICT services whose demand had soared within the period, technical support to ensure seamless service delivery was essential.

> *We set out to communicate to all our clients, the banks, individual companies, corporates that we worked with, to let them know of what our work schedule is and how we're going to work during the COVID period and how they can access our support team or our engineering team.*

The evidence above suggests that in honour of their contractual obligations and to ensure their businesses were still running, brands resorted to operational adjustment communication, product (solution) communication, and CSR communication (communication of brand efforts to fight the pandemic). Operational adjustment communications implied the provision of essential information on service delivery as well as driving behavioural change for consumers to adopt safer lifestyles when accessing services or products.

5.3.2.4 Supporting Solution Efforts

It is said that apart from the great depression, COVID-19 is the biggest disruption to have happened for both businesses and governments (Euronews, 2020; He & Harris, 2020). Whereas businesses faced profitability and survival challenges, governments had the greatest responsibility for ensuring the safety of the public (Savoia et al., 2017). Just as governments in the global North were overwhelmed in capacity to contain the spread and effects of the pandemic, the Ghanaian government was acutely constrained in terms of resources for handling the pandemic.

As may have been experienced elsewhere across the globe, the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), testing kits, quarantine facilities, vaccines, and even water for handwashing did not elude the attention of brands. Consequently, most brands saw the need to build salience by providing the much-needed support to help the government in fighting the pandemic. Brands perceive that protecting their premises alone may not stop the devastating spread of the virus, and so in assisting the collective effort in protecting the entire populace also lie the chances of lives returning to normalcy and thus the survival of their brands.

The need to provide resources to complement governments' efforts in fighting the pandemic offered relevance for brands to undertake and communicate some CSR activities. This motivation to support government efforts during the pandemic can be stretched to mean an opportunity for brands to legitimately engage their consumers.

> *We saw lockdowns in some cities in Ghana. So if we had experienced a lockdown in Obuasi, what would have happened to us? And so it made a strong business case for us to ensure continuous production and invest in the fight against COVID. We deployed what we call a mobile testing van. Now the mobile testing van was an innovation that actually became the stopgap between turnaround time for testing, not just for Obuasi but the entirety of Adansi*. [PC7M]

While the support provided by the mining firm was in the form of community aid or localised support systems, other brands whose operations are urban-centred provided support in other ways; presenting industry ramifications for CSR activities.

> *So you would realize that the establishment of the COVID trust fund was one of the things that was supported heavily by the corporate institutions in the country where people actually set aside funds to support the government in its fight against the pandemic. MTN dedicated as much as 10 million if I'm right; 5 million in two different tranches that was paid to the government. The MTN Ghana Foundation also has three focus areas; education, health, and economic empowerment. And this is well aligned with their corporate social investment (CSI).* [PC10M]

As demonstrated above, the CSR communication theme became the anchor as brands sought to connect with their audience by demonstrating care. The theme is well aligned with the motivation to provide support to the government in the fight against the pandemic. The evidence therefore supports the involvement of CSR communication in the construction of brand care communication as a bona fide brand response strategy in exigencies.

An additional motivation for brand support during the pandemic was to combat "Infodemic". The exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic came with it the iconic word "Infodemic". "Infodemic" is a word coined by the World Health Organisation (2020) and describes the "overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that occurs during an epidemic" (WHO Int, 2020, p. 9). Such information usually mimics the epidemic by spreading from person to person. An "Infodemic" poses a major threat to managing public health crises because it makes it difficult for people to find trustworthy and reliable information despite the growing need for accurate information to help them adapt their behaviour and protect themselves. In a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic which is noted for escalating the digital transformation, the threat of an "infodemic" was worsened due to the affordances of social media.

For some brands, working to fight the pandemic also required helping to combat the "infodemic" using communication. Using their equity and reputation built over the years (to warrant membership to the Ghana Club 100), brands were motivated to provide information that could be deemed accurate and reliable by the public. Given the circumstances where people were not sure of the veracity of information and how to verify, the MTN brand believed that their credibility could imply the authenticity of well-being promotion messages and information about the pandemic that they rendered.

> *We are brands people and we hoped to use our credibility to fight the infodemic. We tried to encourage people to go and get vaccinated. You see people were not sure about the Sputnik or some of the vaccines.* [PCIM]

The quote above shows brands' motive to use their credentials to provide credible information during the pandemic. As espoused in the pandemic information theme in Study 1, brands such as Newmont Ghana indeed dedicated efforts to combat the "infodemic" around the pandemic by providing daily updates on the total casualties. The lack of expansive evidence on combating "infodemic" may raise questions about its right to be considered a stand-alone motivation. However, for a qualitative study, evidence is not qualified by quantum but by people's expressed experiences.

5.3.3 Agency-side Motivations for Care Communication during the Pandemic

Interviews with personnel from agencies that craft and produce communication content were conducted to triangulate findings from the interviews with the brand side communicators. The findings corroborate the evidence from the content analysis and the interviews with communication/brand managers. However, though the agencies are the nexus between brand motives and communication output, their motivations and inspirations for crafting the messages appear to be slightly different. Further, it appears that their considerations were informed by their practice (whether PR, advertising, or digital agencies).

5.3.3.1 Appealing to Stakeholders

Just as the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic motivated brand communicators to anchor solidarity messages, the communication consultants also admit that the need to show care for stakeholders was essential for brands to maintain salience within the period. The consultants were of the view that stakeholders have expectations for brands to have a voice even in the heat of the pandemic and that brands that rise to the occasion stand to reap benefits including affinity and top-of-mind awareness.

From a PR perspective, having the total buy-in of all stakeholders or target audiences would serve as the most effective way to communicate during a crisis, signalling messaging that would appeal to stakeholders. As the safety and issues of mental health were observed as a matter of concern to both brands and their stakeholders, communication bordering on these themes was deemed a strategic response. Additionally, the government as a major stakeholder was identified as needing support in the fight against the pandemic, resulting in suggestions of some CSR activities and the communication of such. Generally, the consultants, regardless of their commercial relationship with the brands considered the need for brands, to substitute immediate profitability with purpose and demonstrate care.

> *So we went to clients and proposed that these are some of the benefits you could derive from adopting digital comms to show that you care. You are an actor in the 'economic whatever' and in the crisis or pandemic, everybody is taking precautionary measures. You should push your voice out there, appeal to some of your stakeholders, and just demonstrate that you care, suffice to say that people gravitate towards brands that have a purpose*. [PC9M]

> *Well, for the kind of crisis that COVID was, effective communication to me would be one that ensured total buy-in of all your stakeholders or the target audience of your message that you're sending through to. Also, give them that assurance that the business is there for them and these are the measures that had been put in place by the business itself to ensure business continuity and staff safety. Also, I think staff safety was really key and the other thing to the wider public was to assure them that we were all in this together.* [PC10M]

5.3.3.2 Business Continuity for Both Brands and Firms

The implication of clients ceasing to communicate during the pandemic is the lack of cash flow for brand communication consultancies. So, whether there was a pandemic or life was normal, the consultants needed to prove their worth by providing relevant communication services or consulting for their clients. By advising that brands communicate clearly to their consumers and staff on how to navigate the crisis, the agencies were practically making themselves indispensable to the brands. For the consultants, the disruption in life needed measures not only to keep people safe but also to keep their businesses running. However, this motive of business continuity, which translates to financial gain for the agencies, was overshadowed by the motive of ensuring business continuity for their clients.

> *Business continuity all of a sudden became a thing. I also remember the early days, the rush, and all of a sudden, the need to communicate certain essential things to clients, to even staff and everything else; measures that we needed to do to keep safe and also to keep our businesses running. People needed to see that their staff were safe. In the thick of all that; the good thing is that we also had the opportunity to show and play our role as communicators and everything in that space … to rework the annual plans that we had shared, the strategies and approach, I mean to cut back wasn't an option.*

> *We just wanted a way to actually push all out to show that we are standing with you in such a time because we knew that the end benefit was also there for the brand.* [PC10M]

> *Our COVID experience, from a digital perspective, I think we stood to benefit from all the chaos that the pandemic wreaked on businesses. During the pandemic, (a lot of corporate organizations) because of the lockdown there was not much of all the marketing activities that required people moving from place to place to get things done. On our part as a digital agency, there was how we could best leverage digital technology for our own benefit. So, you have heard of the saying by Satya Nadella the Microsoft guy that 'two years' worth of digital transformation, it took just two months to achieve… So, we went to clients and proposed that these are some of the benefits you could derive from adopting digital comms*. [PC9M]

5.3.3.3 Client Requests and Group Influences

It stands to reason that the key among all agency considerations for brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic would be client requests and attendant client factors such as group influence in the case of multinational brands. As agencies that act in fiduciary capacities for brands, there is heavy reliance on client requests, preferences, and sign-offs before the execution of communication projects. It is therefore expected that what brand managers preferred would motivate the crafting of brand communication messages, despite the expertise of the agencies.

MTN, as a brand had indicated in the interview that their approach was to 'keep top of mind awareness and to help consumers to keep hope alive' which was not lost in their communication. Findings from the content analysis indicated a significant dedication to content that promoted the MTN brand and its products. However, from the agencies' perspective, the brand needed to be presented as a valued partner in the ecosystem that wants to show that they mean well. While the agencies' perspective of effective communication was not lost, the brand's initial request was well reflected in their communication during the pandemic.

The client-related motive can also be stretched to include client politics from their global connections for brands with international ownership. In the case of MTN as a multinational brand, local strategies are highly subjected to group directives and strategies.

Subsequently, plans for a strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic had the potential to be influenced or overhauled by group strategic messaging.

> *So MTN Ghana came and asked us; 'Chale, you know about the pandemic. What can we do? What sort of comms can we put out to our internal and external stakeholders to show that we mean well? So they asked us for comms that pertained to precautionary measures that one could undertake to curb the spread. So we put out the typical ones, the ones that WHO had been advocating for all along; handwashing, social distancing, mask-wearing, don't go out until you have to, the protocol on handwashing with soap and so on. Once we were done, group then came and said we want a harmonized approach. At the end of the day, we are one brand and we want a similar kind of message across. So the 'Wear it for me' campaign' was birthed. The 'Wear it for me' was basically put together by TBWA South Africa.* [PC9M]

5.3.3.4 Clients' Strategy

Strongly linked to the client request motive is the desire by agencies to stick to the strategic plans drawn out for clients regardless of the disruption of the pandemic. Contrary to the notion that brands had to rework their communication strategies to confront the COVID-19 situation, some communicators saw the need to situate brand communication within existing strategic pillars. So, for brand strategic documents and content pillars, especially for digital, there was the need to identify which pillar offers the opportunity to communicate brand purpose or to achieve salience given the period.

The motive for strategic alignment resonates with some brand managers' resolve to promote relevant brands to anchor communication during the period, as well as the hidden business continuity motive for the agencies. It is also likely to account for the extent of congruence identified in Study 1 for most of the brands. In essence, brand communicators understood that in as much as they needed to avoid being insensitive, it was strategic and effective to locate legitimacy within existing messaging platforms.

> *You don't just get up and undertake a COVID campaign. You are doing the campaign because there is a certain strategic pillar that you're talking to. So, you first need to identify that strategic pillar and see how to deride the point as to where you're taking the campaign and then communicate at the back of it*. [PC9M]

> *The MTN Ghana Foundation has three focus areas; education, health, and economic empowerment. And this is well aligned to all their corporate social investment (CSI).*

For whatever reason, the pandemic that came actually was a strong public health issue and the focus of MTN CSI actually informed their decision to stay in the health sector. So you see that their support to Nogouchi for example to do PCR tests and all other institutions still lies directly within their focus areas of health. [PC10M]

5.3.3.5 Global Trends and Standards

Given the uncharted situation presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, brand communicators sought some reference points for messaging and strategic responses suitable for their clients. As was intimated by the Chief Operating Officer for Interactive Digital:

I think at that time globally WHO was aggressively pushing. So it was more in line with, you know, the challenges that we face, given the challenges that we have with infrastructure in Ghana, let's try and get ahead of this and take the precautionary measures to curtail the effects of the pandemic. You know that our facilities are already overstretched. So as a corporate entity, this is our contribution. We can help in the education; make sure people understand what it takes and let them take very good care of themselves. So we put out the typical ones, the ones that WHO had been advocating for all along.

So the key messages were the assurances, and that you ought to go by the rules that have been set by the local authorities, such as the WHO and the Ghana Health Service and any other authority that has been established to help put these things in check. [PC10M]

Essentially, the WHO's risk communication message was a key conversation starter for brand communicators during the pandemic. The observed stretch on health facilities and government capacity from the international media, motivated brand communicators to preach precautionary measures ahead of time, given the infrastructural constraints in the global south.

Additionally, global media sources like podcasts for the International Advertising Association and other brand communication Think Tanks became thought ignitions for brand communication consultants. Advertising content and messaging presented by brands in these foreign contexts were adapted as best practices for brand communication locally. Given that some countries had walked along the curve in having to deal with the virus ahead of Ghana, the agencies had the privilege of drawing inspiration from across the globe in dealing with messaging for their clients/brands.

The kind of comms, I mean just around that time we also had the opportunity to be working on a number of things with the IAA, especially with their brand comms. We *had the opportunity to be listening to some of the activations of these think tanks and participate in and listen to some of their podcasts.* [PC10M]

5.3.4 Summary

Study 2 provides valuable insights into the motivations behind the adoption of care messaging by brands, during the COVID-19 pandemic. A summary of these motivations indicates that brand communicators were driven primarily by the need to project themselves as interested in the well-being of their stakeholders, as well as the need to sustain their businesses. Though both brands and their agency communicators did not make direct references to the elements of brand care communication identified in Study 1, a decomposition of the findings would display expressions of these motivations into the various messaging themes.

Fundamentally, the above findings underscore the connection of brand communication during the pandemic to deeply rooted motivations that give justification for brand care communication as a bona fide crisis communication strategy for brands in exigencies. The findings also validate brand care communication as a multidimensional construct. Figure 5.12 below provides an illustration of the various elements of brand care communication (BCC).

Transitioning into the testing of hypotheses, one primary argument this study makes is that, context-sensitive brand communication (BCC in this case), can be incredibly impactful in an exigency like the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating empirical validation. The next section therefore proceeds to investigate the value of brand care communication in building healthier and more enduring brand-consumer relationships. The section begins with the testing of developed measured items for the various sub-constructs of BCC and then onward testing of the various hypotheses that this thesis advances.

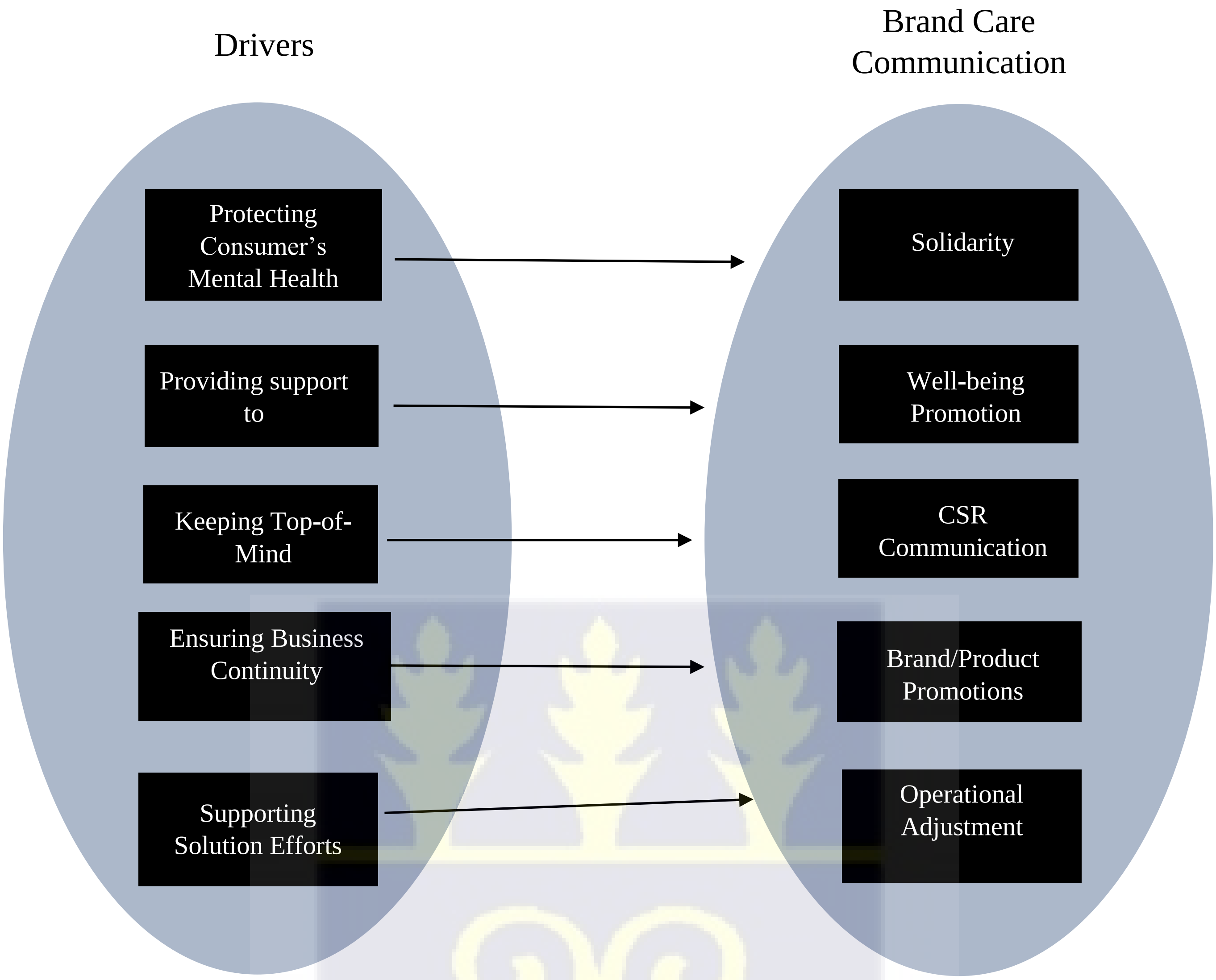


Figure 5.12: A model Proposing the Drivers and Elements of Brand Care Communication

5.4 Consumer Response to Brand Care Communication during the Pandemic

Study 3 examined the potency of Brand Care Communication (BCC) by assessing its influence on consumer response. The study first establishes the validity and reliability of the measures developed for BCC (arising out of the first two studies) to affirm their acceptability. Measure development was done using MTN (the number one brand of the GIPC's Ghana Club 100) as the flagship brand to gauge audience response to brand communication during the pandemic. However, audience response was curated from both user and non-users of the MTN brand.

Secondly, the model fit is measured to ascertain how the hypothesised models differ from the baseline (null) models. Thirdly, the statistical significance of the various hypotheses was thoroughly investigated using structural equation modelling on Smart PLS and R. Profiling of the data set, descriptive statistics of the examined variables, and the specific findings and insights are all included in the next section.

5.4.1 Data Profiling

A nationwide survey among literate Ghanaians was conducted using an online questionnaire. 295 respondents were involved in the study A fair representation of respondents from the Coastal, Forest, and Savannah belts of Ghana was achieved. The geographic distribution of respondents also captures urban, and peri-urban dwellers though there was an urban majority in consonance with trends in internet connectivity and adoption in Ghana (Hootsuite, 2023).

There was a reasonable gender balance of 51 percent male and 48 percent female with a 1 percent non-disclosed category. The majority of respondents (88%) had tertiary-level education. With respect to age, as it is with internet users in Ghana, respondents were generally young with more than 57 percent being under age thirty.

Table 5.4: Demographic Table

Variable		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	151	51.1
	Female	140	47.5
	Other	4	1.4
Age	20-25	108	36.6
	26-30	61	20.7
	31-35	34	11.5
	36-40	42	14.2
	41-45	21	7.1
	46-50	8	2.7
	Above 50	21	7.1
Level of education	JHS	5	1.7
	Other	24	8.1
	SHS	13	4.4
	Tertiary	253	85.8
Region of Residence	Forest Zone	87	29.5
	Coastal Zone	159	53.9
	Savannah Zone	47	15.9

5.4.2 Data Clean Up

By observation, there were no substantial volumes of missing data that could significantly affect the analysis. It was also observed that an insignificant number of respondents who had already indicated that their current network was MTN had also answered questions that were meant for non-MTN users. The researcher removed those answers holding to the assumption that, a respondent who had indicated MTN as their current network could not answer questions meant for non-MTN users only and vice-versa.

A regression analysis of the data revealed extreme multicollinearity among responses for MTN and non-MTN users with respect to purchase intention which led to the exclusion of non-MTN users from the model testing. Two hundred and seventy-six responses were therefore used for the analysis. Missing cases from other items such as region of respondence, gender, and age did not pose a challenge to the data and were, therefore, retained.

5.4.3 Measure Assessment and Purification

Once data is set, the next step is the use of structural equation modelling (SEM) to assess the relationships between latent variables and their various measurement items. However, due to the multiple variables used in multivariate analysis, it is expedient to use data reduction techniques before moving on to test hypotheses (Hair et al., 2013). The novelty of brand care communication implied the non-existence of scaled items for the construct. Consequently, twenty-seven items were developed for brand care communication and its elements informed by the observations from the content analysis and the interviews. There were 5 items each for solidarity, operational adjustment announcements, and brand/product promotion. Well-being promotion and CSR Communication had 6 items apiece.

Five items adapted from Johnson (1979) were used to measure for purchase intention. Welsh and Beatty's (2007)10 items were included to measure consumer perceptions of MTN's reputation while 7 items were developed to measure message-ethos congruence based on MTN's vision and mission. Exploratory Factor Analysis was employed to define underlying structures among variables (Hair et al., 2013), as well as discover the coherence of subsets using R and SmartPLS.

5.4.3.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is a data-driven method which is mostly employed as an investigative tool to examine relationships amongst variables. With regards to identify the relationships amongst the constructs and their relative measurement items, these will necessitate the screening and preparation the data for analysis, the extraction of eigenvalues, identifying the number of factors and rotation of the identified factors.

In order to conduct the exploratory factor analysis, the **Bartlett's test of sphericity** and the **Kaiser, Meyer, Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA)** were employed to assess the suitability/appropriateness of our datasets.

It can be observed that the Bartlett's test recorded a p-vale less than 0.05. Indicating that the probability that the correlation matrix has significant correlations among at least some of the variables in a dataset. Also, the KMO values recorded for the various measurement items are greater than 0.7; indicating that the sum of partial correlations is not large in comparison to the sum of correlations. Furthermore, the overall KMO recorded is 0.94 and hence factor analysis should produce unique and reliable factors.

The results garnered in Table 5.5 indicates that our dataset is appropriate to perform exploratory factor analysis. This study therefore employs parallel analysis statistical technique, a technique in exploratory factor analysis used in determining the number of factors from both the scree plot graphical and the eigenvalue value approaches (i.e., these which are traditional techniques used in determining the number of factors and scrutinising their reliability). The Parallel analysis technique uses random data simulation in the determination of the number of factors in exploratory factor analysis. The scree plot from Figure 1 indicates that there is a three-factor solution. Thus, the scree plot assumes that the individual items can be grouped into three factors.

Table 5.5: KMO and Bartlett's Values for Measurement Items

Items (BCC)	KMO Value	Items (CON)	KMO Value	Items (PR)	KMO Value	Items (PI)	KMO Value
SOL1	0.93	CON1	0.96	PR1	0.96	PI1	0.95
SOL2	0.94	CON2	0.94	PR2	0.96	PI2	0.95
SOL3	0.86	CON3	0.91	PR3	0.96	PI3	0.94
SOL4	0.96	CON4	0.94	PR4	0.95	PI4	0.94
SOL5	0.95	CON5	0.93	PR5	0.93	PI5	0.85
WBP1	0.96	CON6	0.94	PR6	0.96	----	----
WBP2	0.93	CON7	0.94	PR7	0.94	----	----
WBP3	0.93	----	----	PR8	0.96	----	----
WBP4	0.91	----	----	PR9	0.95	----	----
WBP5	0.96	----	----	PR10	0.96	----	----
WBP6	0.88	----	----	----	----	----	----
OAA1	0.95	----	----	----	----	----	----
OAA2	0.91	----	----	----	----	----	----
OAA3	0.91	----	----	----	----	----	----
OAA4	0.88	----	----	----	----	----	----
OAA5	0.95	----	----	----	----	----	----
CSRC1	0.97	----	----	----	----	----	----
CSRC2	0.96	----	----	----	----	----	----
CSRC3	0.95	----	----	----	----	----	----
CSRC4	0.95	----	----	----	----	----	----
CSRC5	0.94	----	----	----	----	----	----
CSRC6	0.85	----	----	----	----	----	----
PBP1	0.83	----	----	----	----	----	----
PBP2	0.9	----	----	----	----	----	----
PBP3	0.93	----	----	----	----	----	----
PBP4	0.95	----	----	----	----	----	----
PBP5	0.94	----	----	----	----	----	----
Overall KMO (MSA)	0.94	----	----	----	----	----	----
Bartlett's P-Value	0.00	----	----	----	----	----	----

Assuming the position of the scree plot (3 factors), the performance measures were not good. Even though the factor correlations of the three-factor (scree plot) solution were below the threshold of 0.75 (i.e., there is no divergent validity problem) and, the RMSEA and the TLI

(Tucker Lewis Index of factoring reliability) were very poor. Thus, the RMSEA and the TLI recorded fit values of 0.086 and 0.750 respectively. Since RMSEA values above 0.08 and TLI values below 0.9 indicates mediocre fit; hence, the three-factor solution generated by the scree plot will not produce a better fit for the measurement items. On the other hand, the eigen value approach suggested an 8-factor solution. The eigen value approach selects factors above 0.7. It can be seen from Table 5.6 that 5.7 that eigen values are greater than 0.7. Regarding the diagnostic measures of the eigen value method, the factor correlations, RMSEA and TLI were all good. For instance, all the corrections amongst the factors were below 0.75 (not highly corrected); indicating that there is no divergent validity problem. Also, the RMSEA and the TLI recorded values of 0.049 and 0.916 respectively (see Table 5.5). This also indicates a good fit; hence 8 factors are preferred in this analysis.

Table 5.6: Factor Correlation

Scree Plot-Factor Correlations (3-Factor)				Eigen Value-Factor Correlations (8-Factor)							
Factors	**ML1**	**ML3**	**ML2**	**ML 1**	**ML 3**	**ML 2**	**ML 4**	**ML 7**	**ML 5**	**ML 6**	**ML 8**
ML1	1	0.59	0.38	1	0.22	0.41	0.57	0.47	0.34	0.47	0.23
ML3	0.59	1	0.19	0.22	1	0.01	0.27	0.39	0.24	0	0.01
ML2	0.38	0.19	1	0.41	0.01	1	0.45	0.35	0.42	0.52	0.15
ML4	----	----	----	0.57	0.27	0.45	1	0.49	0.41	0.43	0.14
ML7	----	----	----	0.47	0.39	0.35	0.49	1	0.41	0.39	0.13
ML5	----	----	----	0.34	0.24	0.42	0.41	0.41	1	0.33	0.02
ML6	----	----	----	0.47	0	0.52	0.43	0.39	0.33	1	0.17
ML8	----	----	----	0.23	0.01	0.15	0.14	0.13	0.02	0.17	1

Table 5.7: Good Fit Measures

Performance Measures	Scree Plot-Factor Correlation (3-Factors)	Eigen Value-Factor Correlation (8-Factors)
TIL	0.75	0.916
RMSEA	0.086	0.049
RMSR	0.06	0.03

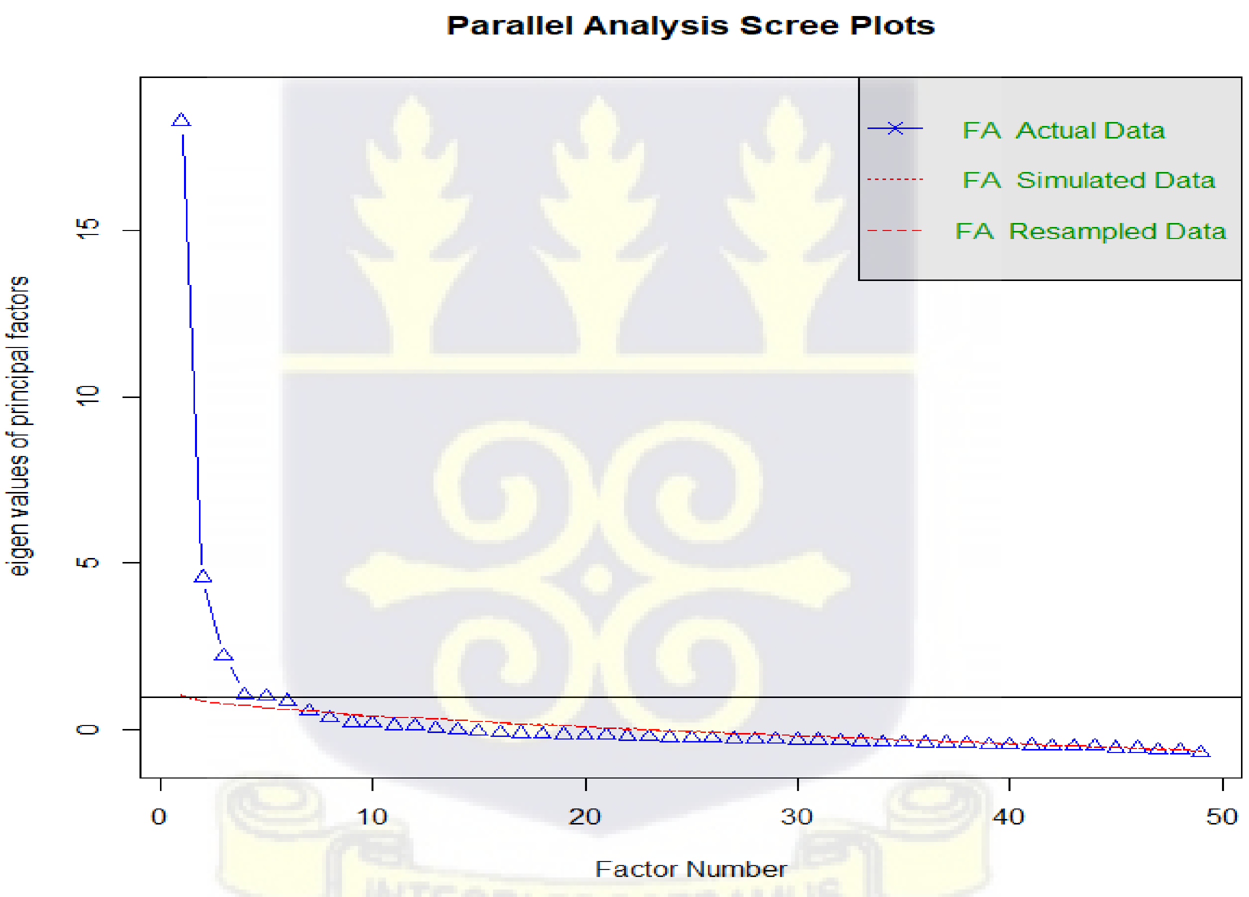


Figure 5.13: Scree Plot of the Factor Analysis.

Table 5.8: Eigen Values

18.25	**4.58**	**2.22**	**1.05**	**1.01**	**0.87**	0.57
0.37	0.23	0.20	0.14	0.11	0.05	0.01
-0.03	-0.09	-0.10	-0.12	-0.14	-0.15	-0.15
-0.17	-0.19	-0.22	-0.24	-0.25	-0.26	-0.28
-0.29	-0.30	-0.30	-0.33	-0.34	-0.35	-0.36
-0.38	-0.38	-0.41	-0.43	-0.44	-0.46	-0.47
-0.48	-0.49	-0.54	-0.55	-0.60	-0.61	-0.69

The standardised factor loadings in Table 5.9 indicates that **CSRC6, OAA4, PBP4, SOL3, WBP6, CON3, CON4 and PI5** cannot be used in this analysis; since they recorded standardized factor loadings that are lesser than 0.3 (Field, 2013) on their respective constructs.

Table 5.9: Factor Loadings (Exploratory Factor Analysis)

Measurement	Item	ML1	ML3	ML2	ML4	ML7	ML5	ML6	ML8
CSRC1	1					0.64			
CSRC2	2					0.34			
CSRC3	3					0.71			
CSRC4	4					0.67			
CSRC5	5					0.78			
CSRC6	6					**0.04**			
OAA1	7						0.77		
OAA2	8						0.75		
OAA3	9						0.8		
OAA4	10						**-0.12**		
OAA5	11						0.54		
PBP1	12		0.67						
PBP2	13		0.41						
PBP3	14		0.4						
PBP4	15		**0.15**						
PBP5	16		0.48						
SOL1	17							0.76	
SOL2	18							0.76	

SOL3	19							**-0.12**
SOL4	20							0.62
SOL5	21							0.52
WBP1	22			0.33				
WBP2	23			0.81				
WBP3	24			0.91				
WBP4	25			0.95				
WBP5	26			0.64				
WBP6	27			**0.06**				
CON1	28		0.51					
CON2	29		**0.11**					
CON3	30		0.63					
CON4	31		**0.03**					
CON5	32		0.61					
CON6	33		0.54					
CON7	34		0.69					
PI1	35				0.77			
PI2	36				0.87			
PI3	37				0.9			
PI4	38				0.83			
PI5	39				**-0.06**			
PR1	40	0.56						
PR10	41	0.6						
PR2	42	0.7						
PR3	43	0.72						
PR4	44	0.89						
PR5	45	0.82						
PR6	46	0.76						
PR7	47	0.53						
PR8	48	0.46						
PR9	49	0.61						

5.4.3.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis for Model Assessment

Confirmatory factor analysis or the measurement model assessment begins the structural equation modelling process by assessing the validity and reliability of the measurement model to affirm its acceptability (Kamis et al, 2020). It also investigates the model fit measures used in the study to ascertain how the hypothesised models differ from the baseline (null) models. Thirdly, the statistical aspect of the structural equation model (SEM) assesses the relationships between latent variables and their various measurement items: thus, assessing construct reliability and validity. The Smart PLS 4 and the R statistical software were used for this analysis using the following validity and reliability techniques (Hair et al., 2019; Kosiba et al., 2022)

- Internal consistency reliability
- Indicator reliability
- Convergent validity; and
- Discriminant validity.

The results garnered for the aforementioned measurement model indicators are presented in the following subsections.

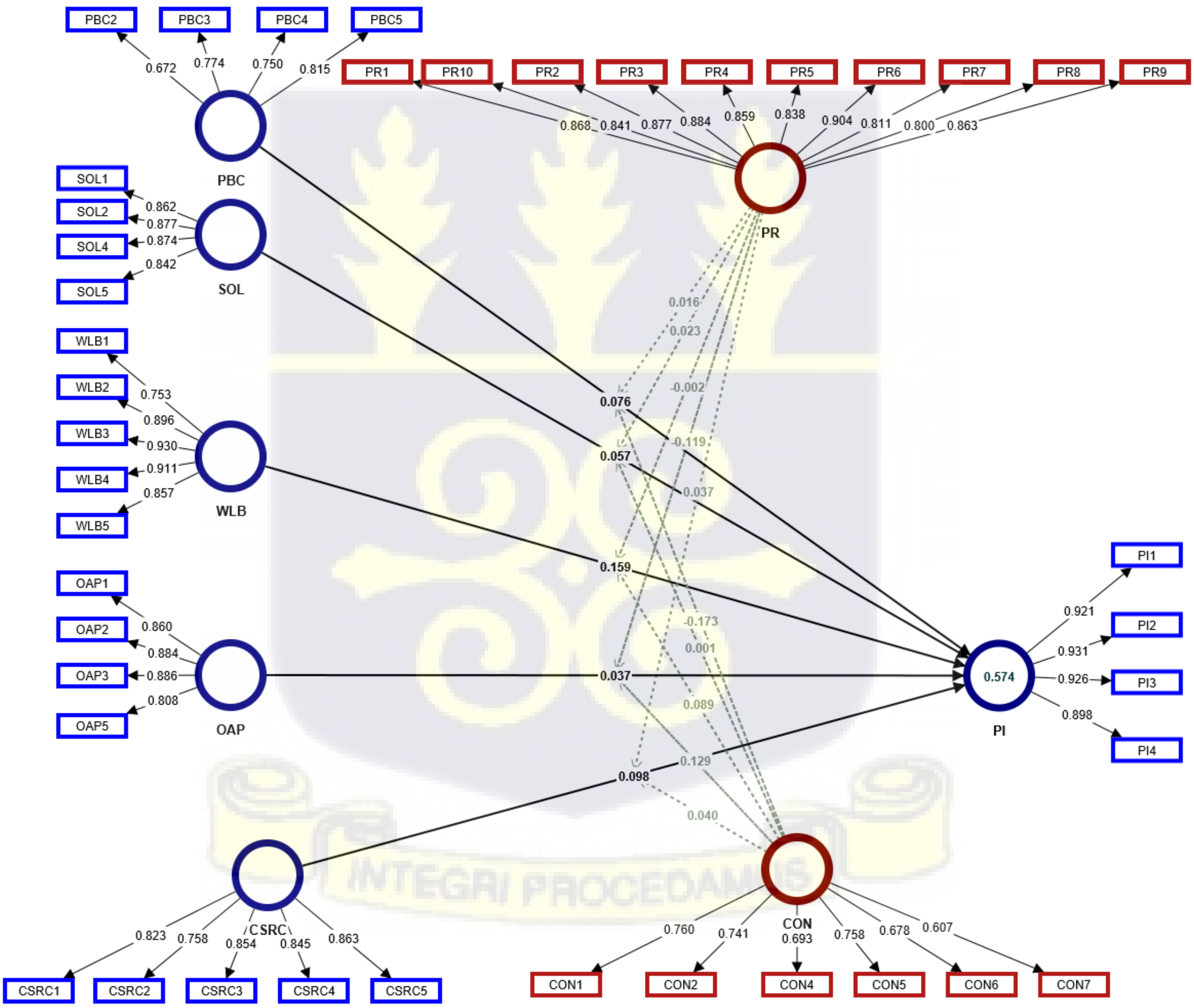


Figure 5.14: Structural Model with Sub-constructs as Independent Variables

a) Internal Consistency

The first step in the measurement model assessment process in the internal consistency which seeks to confirm the EFA output by assessing internal cohesion among the various items representing each construct in the model. The measurement model in this study can confirm satisfactory internal reliability. A measurement model is said to have a satisfactory internal consistency when the composite reliability (CR) of each construct exceeds the threshold value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). The evidence can be found in Table 5.10 which presents the values of Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability, and the AVE of each construct. The CR recorded for the various BCC dimensions, CON, PR, and PI are all above 0.7. These results imply that the measurement items used to represent the constructs pose satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 5.10: Constructs Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CON	0.803	0.857	0.502
CSRC	0.886	0.917	0.688
BCC	0.909	0.923	0.523
OAA	0.882	0.919	0.739
PBP	0.748	0.84	0.569
PI	0.939	0.956	0.845
PR	0.959	0.964	0.731
SOL	0.887	0.922	0.747
WBP	0.919	0.940	0.759

b) Indicator Reliability

When the internal consistency among measurement items for each construct in the model is confirmed the measurement model assessment then proceeds to item selection using indicator reliability analysis. The indicator reliability is the factor analysis component of SEM analysis using Smart PLS and R. Table 5.11 below displays the selection of factors from various items based on their loadings. The second, third and fourth columns show standardized factor loadings, standard error and the CFA model's p-values. It can be observed that all items that were not statistically significant (i.e., p-value >0.05), have been dropped which indicates that they did not reflect their underlying latent constructs.

The indicator reliability of a measurement model is assessed by examining the factor loadings of items. A measurement model is said to have satisfactory indicator reliability when factor loadings of items are 0.7 and above. Per the results displayed in the analysis, all items in the measurement model had factor loadings that met the threshold (0.70) with rounded figures for some items (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 5.11: Measurement Items and their VIF's

Measurement Items	Factor Loadings	Standard Error	P-Values	VIF
CON1	0.76	0.037	0.000	1.722
CON2	0.741	0.025	0.000	1.675
CON4	0.693	0.036	0.000	1.681
CON5	0.758	0.045	0.000	1.935
CON6	0.678	0.048	0.000	1.567
CON7	0.607	0.063	0.000	1.547
CSRC1	0.823	0.027	0.000	2.103
CSRC2	0.758	0.033	0.000	1.666
CSRC3	0.854	0.021	0.000	2.373
CSRC4	0.845	0.024	0.000	2.444
CSRC5	0.863	0.022	0.000	2.789
OAA1	0.86	0.02	0.000	2.325
OAA2	0.884	0.018	0.000	2.818
OAA3	0.886	0.017	0.000	2.762
OAA5	0.808	0.032	0.000	1.764
PBP2	0.672	0.067	0.000	1.405
PBP3	0.774	0.054	0.000	1.609
PBP4	0.75	0.037	0.000	1.391
PBP5	0.815	0.032	0.000	1.708

PI1	0.921	0.017	0.000	3.892
PI2	0.931	0.013	0.000	4.449
PI3	0.926	0.011	0.000	4.212
PI4	0.898	0.024	0.000	3.34
PR1	0.868	0.021	0.000	3.826
PR10	0.841	0.022	0.000	3.54
PR2	0.877	0.018	0.000	4.253
PR3	0.884	0.017	0.000	4.684
PR4	0.859	0.024	0.000	4.52
PR5	0.838	0.025	0.000	4.631
PR6	0.904	0.016	0.000	4.983
PR7	0.811	0.034	0.000	2.897
PR8	0.8	0.03	0.000	3.167
PR9	0.863	0.022	0.000	4.33
SOL1	0.862	0.018	0.000	2.582
SOL2	0.877	0.019	0.000	2.644
SOL4	0.874	0.019	0.000	2.559
SOL5	0.842	0.025	0.000	2.319
WBP1	0.753	0.041	0.000	1.749
WBP2	0.896	0.016	0.000	3.7
WBP3	0.93	0.011	0.000	6.413
WBP4	0.911	0.015	0.000	5.254
WBP5	0.857	0.025	0.000	2.54

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity demonstrates a positive correlation between measures of related constructs. The convergent validity of a measurement model is assessed by the average variance extracted (AVE) of the constructs. A measurement model is said to have adequate convergent validity when the AVE value of each construct is greater or equal to 0.50 (Kamis et al, 2020). It can be observed from Table 5.10 above that the AVE values of the constructs are all greater than the threshold (0.50). Thus, the AVE values recorded for the various dimensions of BCC, CON, PR, and PI mean there is adequate correlation among the various constructs in the measurement model.

It is noteworthy from the above that the aggregated AVE for BCC is lower than that of the individual subconstructs that make up BCC. This variation in AVE can be attributed to the stronger internal cohesion of the various dimensions as against that of the collective indicators that make up the BCC (mother) construct.

Discriminant Validity

Closely linked to the convergent validity is the discriminant validity which measures how constructs are completely different from each other instead of their relatedness (Hair et al., 2019). In this study, three discriminant validity criteria are used to assess the validity of the measurement model: the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), the Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion, and the cross loadings techniques. The Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) technique is one of the best approaches in determining discriminant validity between constructs (Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017). The HTMT technique compares the ratio of between-trait correlations to within-trait correlations of two constructs. Thus, it examines the correlations of indicators across constructs to the correlations of indicators within a construct. The formulators of the technique indicate that discriminant validity is established between two reflective constructs when the HTMT value is less than 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015).

In view of the above, the constructs of the study are deemed to have adequate discriminant validity using the HTMT technique. As evident in Table 5.12, all values in the multi-trait matrix are less than 0.90. The second discriminant validity measure to consider is Fornell and Larcker's criterion technique. This technique is centred on the AVE in relation to the correlation of the latent variable. Thus, for a measurement model to have adequate discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE of each latent variable must exceed its correlations with the other latent variables that are being measured. It is also clear from this criterion that the measurement model has sufficient validity.

As a confirmation of adequate discriminant validity of the measurement model, all off-diagonal values (inter-construct correlations) are less than the diagonal values (square root of the AVE of each construct) in their corresponding rows and columns (see Table 5.12). Thus, the square roots of the AVEs (diagonal elements) exceed the inter-correlation value between latent variables (see Table 5.13) indicating the non-existence of multicollinearity among the model constructs.

Table 5.12: Discriminant Validity using the Fornell and Larcker's Techniques

	CON	CSRC	OAA	PBP	PI	PR	SOL	WBP
CON	**0.708**							
CSRC	0.616	**0.83**						
OAA	0.538	0.592	**0.86**					
PBP	0.651	0.66	0.576	**0.754**				
PI	0.579	0.594	0.485	0.536	**0.919**			
PR	0.572	0.663	0.492	0.5	0.672	**0.855**		
SOL	0.423	0.535	0.47	0.366	0.516	0.609	**0.864**	
WBP	0.507	0.509	0.523	0.371	0.479	0.531	0.683	**0.871**

The last discriminant validity measure employed in the assessment of the measurement model is the cross-loadings. This technique examines all items and assesses the relationships (correlations) between all latent variables under study. For a measurement model to achieve adequate validity, items must have higher loadings on the latent variable they are measuring as compared to other latent variables in the study. On the other hand, if a particular item correlates more to other latent variable other than its latent variable (parent construct), then the measurement model is not valid. It can be seen clearly in Table 5.13 that all the measurement items correlate higher with their proposed latent constructs as compared to the other constructs.

This technique (cross loadings) also confirms that the measurement model has adequate validity. In a nutshell, the reliability and validity tests conducted on the measurement model indicate that measurement items used in measuring the latent constructs in this study are reliable and valid and, hence appropriate for estimating parameters in the structural model.

Table 5.13: Discriminant Validity using Cross Loadings

Measurement Items	CON	CSRC	OAA	PBP	PI	PR	SOL	WBP
CON1	**0.76**	0.458	0.337	0.505	0.433	0.394	0.258	0.296
CON2	**0.741**	0.487	0.495	0.43	0.518	0.5	0.469	0.569
CON4	**0.693**	0.448	0.436	0.384	0.448	0.422	0.397	0.504
CON5	**0.758**	0.404	0.312	0.508	0.373	0.4	0.223	0.274
CON6	**0.678**	0.475	0.385	0.503	0.318	0.377	0.194	0.22
CON7	**0.607**	0.327	0.265	0.489	0.301	0.29	0.142	0.146
CSRC1	0.488	**0.823**	0.527	0.532	0.474	0.539	0.502	0.487
CSRC2	0.497	**0.758**	0.564	0.52	0.488	0.579	0.444	0.393
CSRC3	0.502	**0.854**	0.459	0.553	0.527	0.529	0.425	0.463
CSRC4	0.573	**0.845**	0.446	0.601	0.479	0.573	0.432	0.367
CSRC5	0.497	**0.863**	0.46	0.528	0.491	0.53	0.419	0.398
OAA1	0.464	0.457	**0.86**	0.486	0.405	0.443	0.446	0.472
OAA2	0.475	0.509	**0.884**	0.52	0.418	0.418	0.377	0.455
OAA3	0.471	0.564	**0.886**	0.535	0.417	0.424	0.376	0.384
OAA5	0.437	0.502	**0.808**	0.44	0.424	0.406	0.418	0.486
PBP2	0.417	0.333	0.424	**0.672**	0.34	0.231	0.13	0.2
PBP3	0.473	0.519	0.44	**0.774**	0.378	0.312	0.199	0.234
PBP4	0.514	0.587	0.461	**0.75**	0.478	0.521	0.483	0.425
PBP5	0.546	0.513	0.409	**0.815**	0.396	0.391	0.225	0.218
PI1	0.573	0.595	0.488	0.509	**0.921**	0.671	0.535	0.481
PI2	0.525	0.535	0.438	0.463	**0.931**	0.63	0.458	0.454
PI3	0.512	0.553	0.447	0.513	**0.926**	0.583	0.447	0.405
PI4	0.516	0.495	0.404	0.484	**0.898**	0.58	0.449	0.416
PR1	0.48	0.57	0.441	0.395	0.599	**0.868**	0.616	0.511
PR10	0.456	0.553	0.412	0.401	0.549	**0.841**	0.577	0.478
PR2	0.475	0.512	0.424	0.394	0.607	**0.877**	0.536	0.47
PR3	0.479	0.555	0.388	0.4	0.613	**0.884**	0.493	0.461
PR4	0.473	0.559	0.408	0.415	0.526	**0.859**	0.488	0.443
PR5	0.477	0.537	0.503	0.428	0.549	**0.838**	0.517	0.437

PR6	0.492	0.593	0.513	0.455	0.624	**0.904**	0.532	0.457
PR7	0.467	0.586	0.329	0.44	0.556	**0.811**	0.471	0.403
PR8	0.567	0.607	0.366	0.486	0.534	**0.8**	0.462	0.419
PR9	0.532	0.605	0.413	0.466	0.576	**0.863**	0.511	0.459
SOL1	0.313	0.474	0.377	0.287	0.414	0.513	**0.862**	0.523
SOL2	0.381	0.515	0.417	0.374	0.485	0.599	**0.877**	0.57
SOL4	0.419	0.441	0.412	0.34	0.464	0.488	**0.874**	0.632
SOL5	0.34	0.414	0.418	0.252	0.413	0.501	**0.842**	0.635
WBP1	0.432	0.449	0.424	0.366	0.392	0.452	0.622	**0.753**
WBP2	0.387	0.44	0.425	0.298	0.422	0.47	0.634	**0.896**
WBP3	0.437	0.45	0.48	0.295	0.428	0.482	0.614	**0.93**
WBP4	0.459	0.411	0.445	0.302	0.424	0.451	0.576	**0.911**
WBP5	0.493	0.467	0.501	0.359	0.418	0.457	0.527	**0.857**

The above is indicative of the fact that when the various dimension of BCC are treated as independent variables (see Figure 5.14), all dimensions and their indicators after the EFA are valid, even in predicting purchase intention. However, for the structural model estimation. The study would proceed by treating BCC as an aggregated variable.

5.4.4 Structural Model Estimation

To investigate the hypothesised model in SEM which assesses the relationships between latent variables, it is prudent to check the model fit. Table 5.14 presents model fit statistics for the structural model. Six model fit measures were employed: the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Chi-Square, and R-squared. Though the analysis has so far been performed with the Smart PLS 4 statistical software, the RMSEA, the CFI, and TLI values were obtained by using the R software (i.e., the Smart PLS 4 does not generate the aforementioned model fit measures). The RMSEA is an absolute fit index; thus, it examines how different a hypothesized model is from a perfect model. On the other hand, the CFI and the TLI compare the fit of a substantive model to a null model. Thus, they are incremental fit indices that compare the fit of a hypothesised model to a baseline model.

All these model fit indicators show that the structural model is acceptable. The SRMR value was 0.061 (a value less than 0.08 is considered as a good fit) which is less than the threshold of 0.08 (Henseler et al., 2015). Also, a model is considered to fit well if its RMSEA is less or equal to 0.05. In this analysis, the RMSEA value is less than 0.05 (see Table 5.14). The 0.03 figure recorded represents the significant closeness of the study's model to a perfect model. The values recorded for the incremental indices of CFI and TLI (values closer to 1 better fit) also indicate a high level of acceptability of the model. It is therefore worth noting that the model is fit for SEM analysis because it is devoid of significant discrepancies between the observed and expected correlations among variables. Additionally, the VIF values recorded (with the exception of WBP3 and WBP4) for each item as observed in Table 5.11 are all less than 5, this indicates that the model is free from the problem of multicollinearity.

Table 5.14: Model Fit

Indicators	**Values**
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.061
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.03
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.901
Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI)	0.903
Chi-Square (P-Value)	0.000

Furthermore, the coefficient of determination, the R-squared, is one of the most important model fit measures (Hair et al., 2019). It examines the amount of variance in a dependent variable that is explained by the model. The higher the R-squared value the better the predictive ability of the structural model. It is worth noting that BCC explains 36% of the variance in PI (see Table 5.15). Thus, more than 36% of the variation in the dependent variable is explained by the model; hence the structural model has adequate predictive ability.

Table 5.15: R-Squared Values

Relationships	**R-Squared**
BCC -> PI	0.360
PR x BCC -> PI	0.558
CON x BCC -> PI	0.542
Residence x BCC -> PI	0.518
CON -> PI	0.507

As demonstrated in Table 5.15, the interaction between CON and BCC, explains 54 percent of the variations in PI. All other moderators also demonstrated significant interaction effects and are therefore fit to be included in the structural model testing.

Given that the structural model is acceptable, the study then proceeds to assess the various hypotheses. Below are the hypotheses that were investigated (replacing 'tailored brand messages with BCC).

- H1: BCC during a pandemic will increase the odds of PI among consumers
- H2: Perceived CON between brand messages and consumers' existing perceptions about brands' moderates the relationship between BCC and PI
- H3: PR of a brand moderates the relationship between BCC and PI during moderates a pandemic

Table 5.16: Regression Estimates

Paths	Estimates	Standard Error	|T-Statistics|	P-Values	Remarks
BCC -> PI	0.254	0.074	3.442	0.001	Supported
CON -> PI	0.186	0.076	2.455	0.016	Supported
PR -> PI	0.366	0.067	5.439	0	Supported
PR x BCC -> PI	0.065	0.065	0.528	0.037	Supported
CON x BCC -> PI	0.078	0.043	1.814	0.045	Supported

It can be noticed that the estimate recorded for BCC on PI is positive and statistically significant as seen in Table 5.16 above. This estimate also implies that the purchase intentions of customers are expected to increase by 0.36 percent when there is a percentage increase in brand care communication. Thus, all other things being equal, the purchasing intentions of consumers will upsurge if brands would take brand care communication a notch higher. Subsequently, an increase in consumer exposure to brand care messaging would effect an increase in consumer purchase intention. The study further assesses hypotheses 2 and 3 which deal with moderation analysis.

Hypothesis 2 seeks to examine the moderating effect of message-ethos congruence (CON) on the relationship between brand care communication and purchase intention. First, the R-squared values obtained with and without the inclusion of the interactive term (CON*BCC) was investigated. It must be noted from Table 5.15 that the R-squared value recorded without the inclusion of the interactive term was 0.507; on the other hand, the R-squared value recorded with the inclusion of the interactive term was 0.542. Thus, after the inclusion of the message-ethos congruence, the variation in purchase intention (PI) that is explained by the independent v (BCC) is approximately 54 percent.

This variation indicates that approximately 54% of the variability in the purchase intentions of a consumer is caused by the degree of brand care communication when message-ethos congruence is considered as a moderating variable. It was observed that with the inclusion of message-ethos congruence as a moderating variable, the level of model predictability has increased by approximately 3%. The interactive term in this case was statistically significant. Additionally, the estimate recorded for the interactive term (CON*BCC) is positive. This implies that message-ethos congruence positively moderates the relationship between brand care communication and the purchase intentions of consumers.

Furthermore, the p-value recorded for the interactive term was less than 0.05; implying that the moderating effect of message-ethos congruence is highly significant in the relationship between brand care communication and consumers' purchase intentions. The results garnered from the R-squared and the statistical significance analyses show that message-ethos congruence significantly moderates the relationship between brand care communication and purchase intentions of consumers (i.e., the moderating variable (CON) strongly strengthens the positive relationship between the dependent (PI) and independent variables (BCC).

The graphical evidence in Figure 5.15 clearly indicates that message-ethos congruence significantly moderates the positive relationship between brand care communication and the purchase intentions of consumers. It can be observed that the green line (high congruence) is steeper than the red line (low congruence); this indicates that high congruence strengthens the positive relationship between brand care communication and consumers’ purchase intentions.

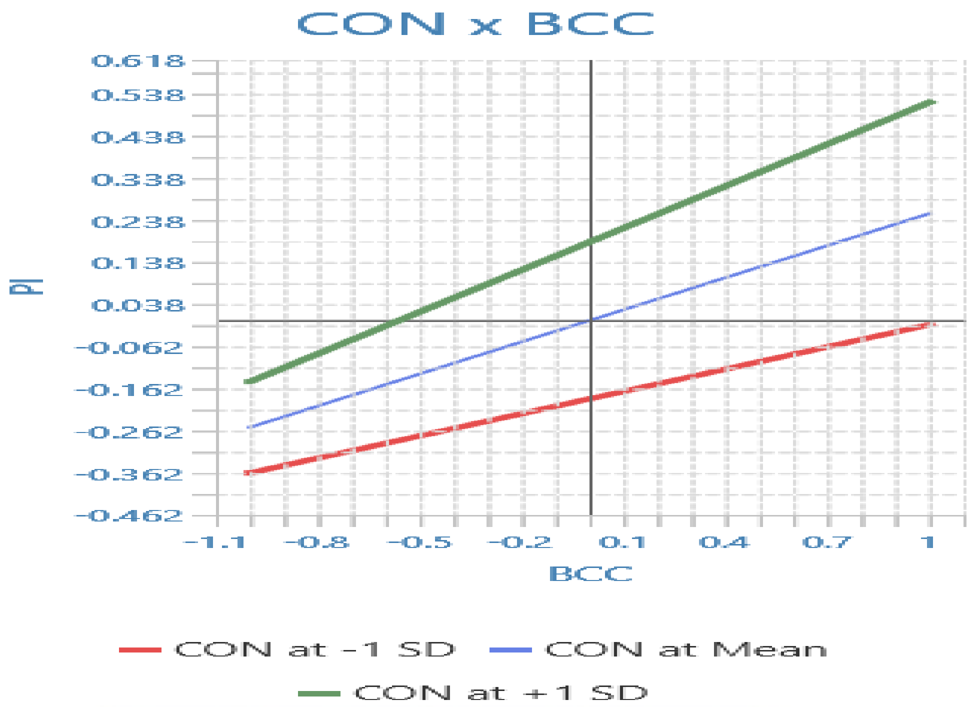


Figure 5.15: Simple Slope Analysis plots of Congruence

Hypothesis 3 also assesses the moderation role of the prior reputation (PR) of a brand on the relationship between brand care communication (BCC) and the purchase intentions (PI) of a consumer. Considering the R-squared value obtained with and without the inclusion of the interactive term (PR*BCC); the former produced a greater R-squared value than the latter. Without the inclusion of the moderating variable, the R-squared recorded was 0.507; on the other hand, the R-squared obtained was 0.558 when the moderating variable (PR) was included in the model.

Thus, after the inclusion of the moderating variable, the variation in the dependent variable (PI) explained by the independent variable (BCC) is approximately 56 percent. This result indicates that approximately 56% of the variability in the purchase intentions of a consumer is caused by the degree of brand care communication when the prior reputation of a brand is considered as a moderating variable. With the inclusion of the prior reputation of a brand as a moderating variable the level of model predictability has increased by approximately

5 percent. The interactive term in this case was statistically significant. The estimate recorded for the interactive term (PR*BCC) is positive. This statistic implies that the prior reputation of a brand positively moderates the relationship between brand care communication and the purchase intentions of consumers.

Furthermore, the p-value (see Table 5.16) recorded for the interactive term was less than 0.05; implying that the moderating role of prior reputation is highly significant in the relationship between brand care communication and consumers' purchase intentions. The results garnered from the R-squared and the statistical significance analyses show that the prior reputation of a brand significantly moderates the relationship between brand care communication and purchase intentions of consumers (i.e., the moderating variable PR strongly strengthens the positive relationship between the dependent (PI) and independent variables (BCC).

The pictorial evidence in Figure 5.16 finally affirms the significant role of the prior reputation of a brand on the relationship between brand care communication and the purchase intentions of consumers. The blue line which is the mean (average) has an upward slope. This upward slope indicates that the prior reputation of a brand positively moderates the relationship between BCC and PI. Again, it can be noticed that the green line (high prior reputation) has a steeper slope as compared to the red line (low prior reputation). Thus, the positive relationship between brand care communication and the purchase intentions of consumers is strengthened when the prior reputation of company is high.

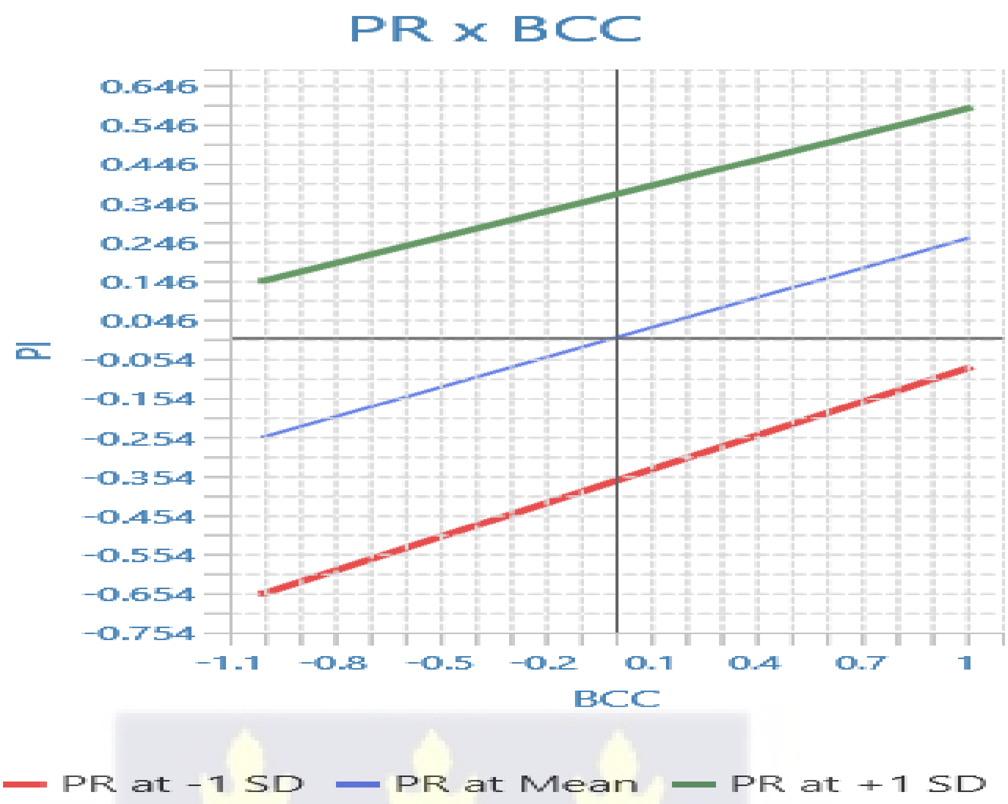


Figure 5.16: Simple Slope Analysis plots of Prior Reputation

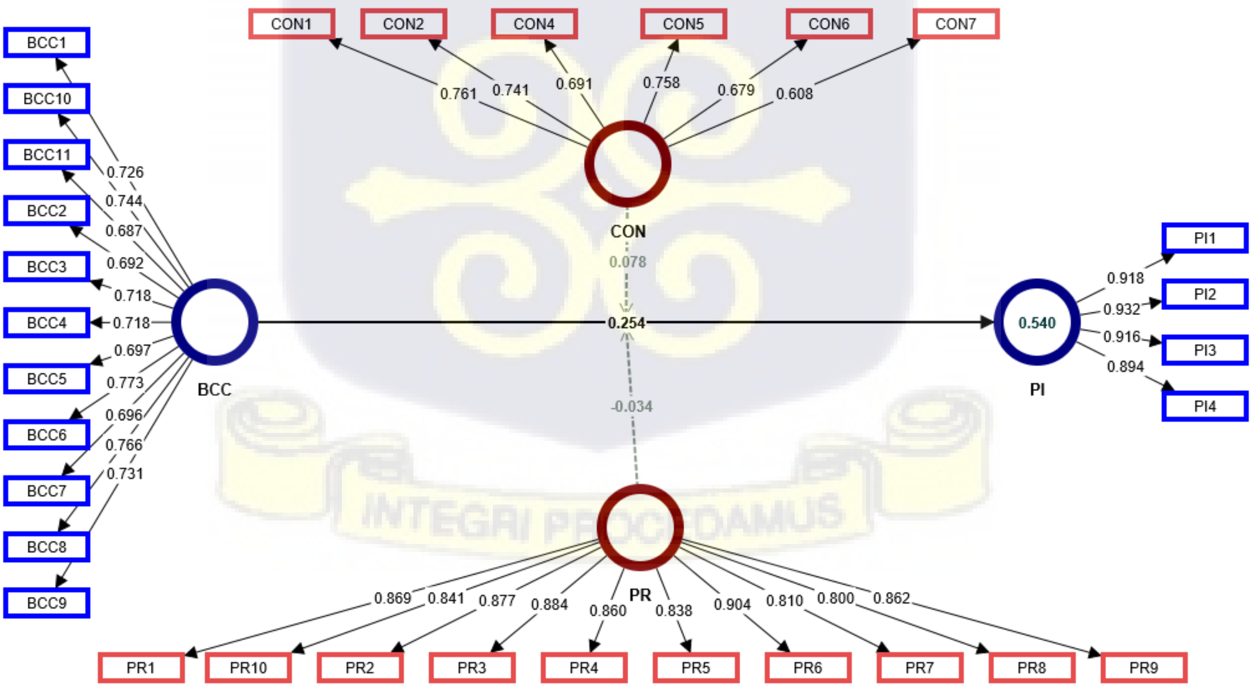


Figure 5.17: Structural Equation Model Plot of the Study

As earlier explained, BCC as a composite variable within our data set was reduced to 11 indicators in predicting purchase intentions. The compression of an eight-factor model into a four-factor model would logically result in the elimination of several indicators as well as a low AVE which measures correlations within constructs. BCC which was represented by 5 sub-constructs has consequently been reduced to 3: Solidarity, Wellbeing promotion, and CSR communication. This finding indicates that though Studies 1 and 2 and even the EFA supported the 5-dimensional BCC construct, the structural model assessment based on the current data confirmed only 3 in predicting purchase intention (see Figure 5.14). The variables and indicators are as displayed in Table 5.17 below. By implication, consumers considered only the 'do good' sub-constructs as constituting care. Brand and product promotion as well as operational adjustment announcement may have appeared business as usual and distinct from the other indicators that presented 'do good' items.

Table 5.17: Measurement Items, their Reliability, and VIF's

Constructs and their Respective Items	Factor Loadings	P-Values	VIF
BCC [Alpha (0.909); CR (0.923)]			
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts made me feel, they had my back as a consumer [BCC1]	0.729	0.000	2.104
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts made me feel motivated to strive harder to fight the pandemic [BCC2]	0.698	0.000	2.115
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts encouraged me to stay home and be safe [BCC3]	0.729	0.000	3.892
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts encouraged me to wash my hands often [BCC4]	0.729	0.000	4.254
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts told me what to do if I felt unwell [BCC5]	0.704	0.000	2.276
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts informed me of what the company was doing to support the fight against COVID-19 [BCC6]	0.77	0.000	2.291

During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts informed me of offers such as free calls and data from MTN to support customers [BCC7]	0.693	0.000	1.755
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts informed me of some donations MTN had made during the pandemic [BCC8]	0.757	0.000	2.476
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts announced free training or seminars for the public [BCC9]	0.721	0.000	2.562
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts communicated on some of the company's sponsorship activities [BCC10]	0.735	0.000	2.885
During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts demonstrated care rather than serving company interest [BCC11]	0.686	0.000	1.681

5.5 Variations in Consumer Response to Brand Communication Depending on their Demography and Geography

Study 3 further investigated the variations in consumer response based on demographics. The study therefore proposed that differences in age, gender, and residence of consumers would vary the influence BCC on P1.

These last two propositions introduce a multigroup analysis to the study (post hoc). It must be noted that multigroup analyses require the establishment of measurement invariance to validate outcomes and conclusions. This study uses a well-established and efficient technique for assessing measurement invariance in a model, the measurement invariance of composite models (MICOM) procedure, developed by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016). The MICOM procedure encompasses three steps as illustrated in Figure 5.18 below.

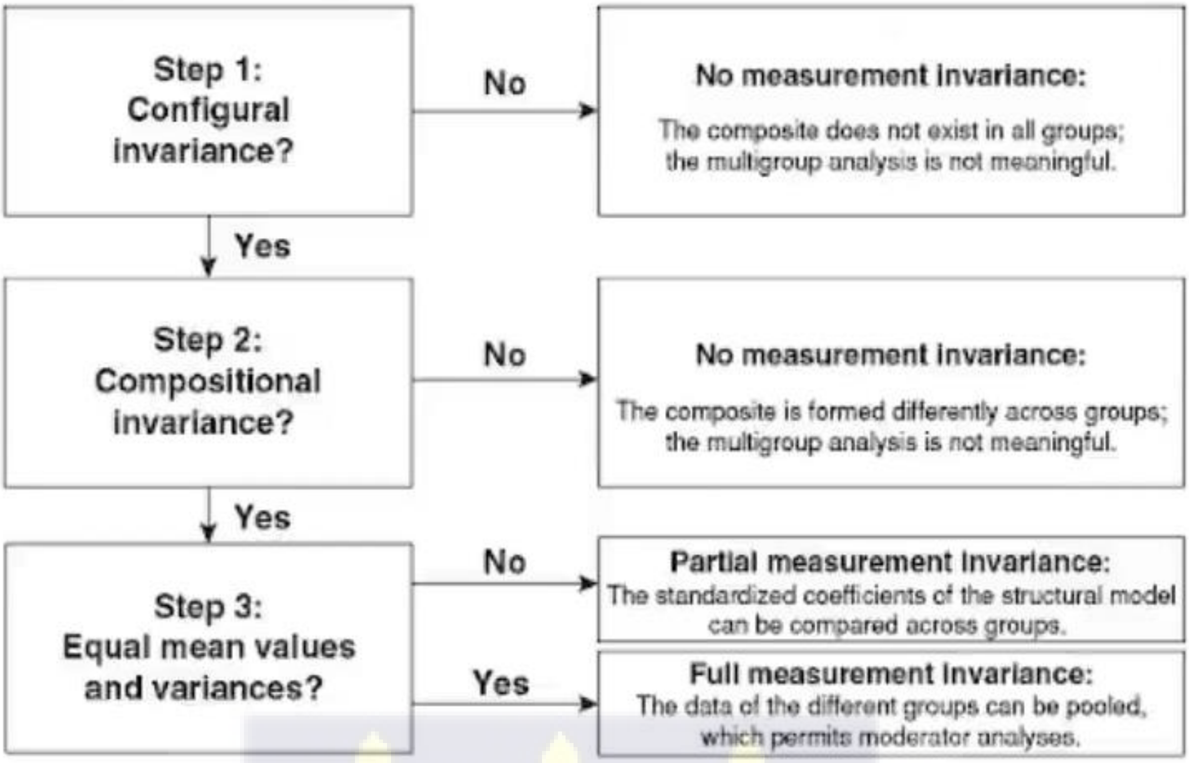


Figure 5.18: Multigroup Analysis, the MICOM procedure

- Configural Invariance: The configural invariance (Step 1) is established when each latent variable in the PLS path model is equal for all the groups. Thus, this step is achieved when constructs are equally parameterized and estimated across groups.

- Compositional Invariance: The compositional invariance (Step 2) is also established when composite scores for groups are equal, in spite of possible differences in the group-specific weights used in computing the scores.

- Equality of composite mean values and variances: In this step (Step 3) the MICOM procedure is established when the composite means and variances of the groups are the same. The aforementioned steps are procedurally interrelated (see Figure 5.18) and signify that the equality of composite mean values and variances is conditioned on compositional invariance, which is also conditioned on the configural invariance.

Given that configural invariance (Step 1) and compositional invariance (Step 2) are established, partial measurement invariance is confirmed. When partial measurement invariance is confirmed for all latent variables in the PLS path model, researchers can compare the path coefficients by means of a multigroup analysis. If partial measurement invariance is established and, additionally, the composites have equal mean values and variances across the groups, full measurement invariance is confirmed.

As stated earlier the study seeks to examine how the relationships between brand care communication and purchase intentions differ across gender of consumers. In applying the MICOM procedure for the gender variable (see Table 5.18), the first step (configural invariance) is not found. Thus, the two groups (male and female) have the same conceptual understanding; hence testing for configural invariance is not needed.

However, the other two steps (compositional invariance and equality of composite means and variances) were supported. Regarding the compositional invariance, the p-values of all the permutations were more than 0.05. This confirms that a compositional invariance is established. Regarding the equality of composite means (Step 3a), the permutation p-value for the PI construct was less than 0.05. This also implies that the mean difference for both groups is not the same; hence equality of composite means is not achieved. However, the equality of composite variance was established.

Thus, the variance difference for both groups is the same (i.e., since the p-values of the permutations are the same). Although equality of composite variance (Step 3b) was established, it cannot be established in the Step 3 (equality of composite means and variances) of the MICOM procedure since the Step 3a (equality of composite means) was not established. In view of this, full invariance is not established but partial measurement invariance (see Figure 5.18).

Table 5.18: MICOM Procedure for Gender

Variables	*Compositional Invariance (Step 2)*		
	Original Correlation	Correlation Permutation Mean	Permutation P-Value
BCC	0.999	0.998	0.874
PI	1	1	0.985
	Equal Means (Step 3a)		
	Original Difference	Permutation Mean Difference	Permutation P-Value
BCC	0.135	-0.005	0.134
PI	0.237	-0.004	0.026
	Equal Variance (Step 3b)		
	Original Difference	Permutation Mean Difference	Permutation P-Value
BCC	-0.082	0.012	0.298
PI	-0.151	0.014	0.179

Table 5.19: MICOM Procedure for Residence

	Compositional Invariance (Step 2)		
	Original Correlation	Correlation Permutation Mean	Permutation P-Value
BCC	0.997	0.998	0.160
PI	0.999	1	0.038
	Equal Means (Step 3a)		
	Original Difference	Permutation Mean Difference	Permutation P-Value
BCC	0.587	-0.001	0.000
PI	0.632	0.001	0.000
	Equal Variance (Step 3b)		
	Original Difference	Permutation Mean Difference	Permutation P-Value
BCC	0.22	0.013	0.139
PI	0.346	0.005	0.017

Since partial measurement invariance is established, multigroup analysis of the effect of gender on the paths of the model can be performed by comparing the standardised coefficients across both groups. Thus, all the paths/relationships are statistically significant for both males and females. Additionally, it was revealed that the impact of brand care communication on purchase intention of consumers is higher for females as compared to males (i.e., females recorded higher estimates than males regarding the relationship between BCC and PI).

The last argument seeks to examine effect of residence of consumers (urban/peri-urban) on all the relationships/paths in the model. Since this proposition also require a multigroup analysis, the MICOM procedure will be applied. The Step 1 (configural invariance) of the procedure will again be ignored since the groups have the same kind of conceptual framework. It must be noticed however, that compositional invariance was not established; the permutation p-value for purchasing intentions (PI) is less than 0.05 (see Table 5.19). In view of this phenomenon, the categorical variable, "residence", is not suitable for performing a multigroup analysis in the model.

A multigroup analysis is an advanced form of moderation where examination is performed to assess the effect of a categorical variable of all paths of the model. Due to this, there is the need to moderate the relationship between BCC and PI by region residence of consumers. As already outlined in this section, the assessment of an effective moderating variable is based on the amount of variability (R-squared) in the dependent variable when a moderator is introduced in the model, the impact of an interactive term (statistical significance), and a simple slop analysis plot.

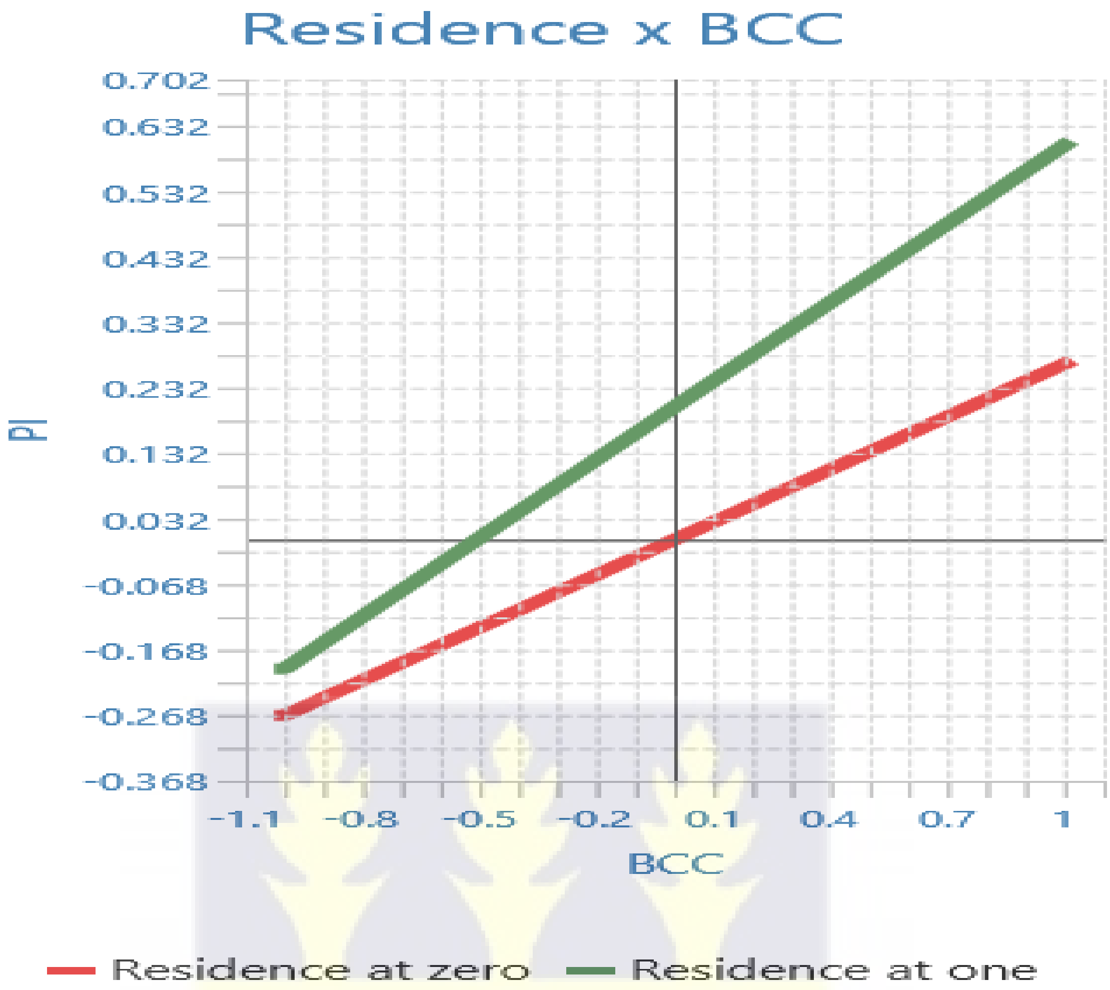


Figure 5.19: Simple Slope Analysis plots of Residence

It must be noticed that the amount of variability in the dependent variable increased from 0.507 to 0.518 (see Table 5.15). Again, the p-value recorded for the interactive term (Residence*BCC) is 0.07. This p-value (0.07) is more than the threshold of 0.05, however, 0.07 is very close to the threshold (0.05) as compared to 0.1. Hence, it can be concluded that the interactive term (Residence*BCC) is partially significant in the model. It can also be noticed that the estimate recorded for the interactive term (Residence*BCC) is positive. This implies that the residence of a customer positively moderates the relationship between brand care communication and purchasing intentions of consumers.

The graphical evidence in Figure 5.19 also indicates that the residence of a customer positively moderates the relationship between brand care communication and purchasing intentions of customers. The two lines (green line indicates customers residing peri-urban areas whilst the red line also indicates customers not residing peri-urban areas) in Figure 5.19 had upward slops (positive slope). Notice that the green line is steeper as compared to the red line. This implies that the effect of brand care communication on purchasing intentions of customers is more strengthened by customers residing in the peri-urban areas as compared to those in urban areas.

5.6 Summary

In conclusion, brand care communication was discovered as a strategic marketing communication tool in the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic, largely motivated by the circumstantial effects of the pandemic on consumers. Its ability to predict purchase intention beats the attribution theory's assumption of inferential attribution that consumers make during exigencies. Thus, the power BCC to elicit favourable consumer responses happens regardless of consumer-held perceptions of a brand. However, the existence of message-ethos congruence, and perceptions held about a brand strengthens the positive relationship between brand care communication and consumers’ purchase intentions. Additional males are more likely to engage in attributions in the relationship between BCC and purchase intention.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

6.1 Chapter Overview

The previous chapter presented the empirical analysis and findings of the study in relation to the research framework and questions. This chapter also delves into the explanations and interpretations of the study findings. The chapter illuminates the profound shifts in brand communication messages brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the considerations, and then the effects of such communication on audience response (purchase intention). Discussions that create linkages between the findings and the theoretical framework for the study, as well as the brand crisis communication literature, are presented. The chapter further provides a synthesis of the findings and the implications in the context of the research questions.

6.2 Discussion of Findings

The key objectives of this thesis were to conceptualise the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, identify the motivations behind such communication, and to examine the outcomes thereof. Driven by the theoretical lenses of attribution theory and the SCCT, the research sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the key features of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. To what extent did brands achieve message/brand ethos congruence in their messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What are the key drivers that motivated brands' adoption of different messages during the pandemic?

4. To what extent did the nature of brand messages during the exigency of the pandemic influence consumers' responses?
5. What factors conditioned consumer perceptions and behavioural responses to brand messages during the pandemic?

Specifically, this section affords a synthesis of the emergent results in relation to the five research questions espoused above. The discussions are held within the context and scholarship of the COVID-19 pandemic as a precursor to the propositions made by this study. Dennis (2020) opines that the COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest phenomenon to have altered the history of marketing communication apart from the Great Depression. This assertion is supported by Euro News (2020), which elucidates the economic implications. Gangadharbatla (2021) also highlights its effects on advertising, and He and Harris (2020), acknowledge the changes in marketing philosophy instigated by the pandemic.

Other scholars also reiterate Satya Nadella's anecdotal statement on the digital drive acceleration caused by the pandemic (Bara et al., 2021; Mejova & Kalimeri, 2020). The United Nations (2020) further outlines the effects of the pandemic on the socioeconomic experiences of people, especially minority groups such as women, and the achievement of the strategic development goals generally.

The above signifies the extent of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in diverse disciplines with no exception to marketing and brand communication (Sobande, 2020; Ma, 2020; Mejova & Kalimeri, 2020). These assertions support the major claim this research makes that the COVID-19 pandemic cascaded a shift in brand communication that is unaccounted for in the crisis and brand communication literature with respect to messaging and purpose. The ensuing interrogates the key findings, in alignment with the thesis' theoretical framework and research questions within the context of the existing scholarship.

6.2.1 The Key Features of Brand Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The primary aim of rigorously assessing and documenting brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was to empirically understand its nature during this period. The research findings suggest that as brands grappled with an unprecedented crisis, traditional brand communication strategies were challenged. With shifts in consumer expectations and media habits, the Covid-19 pandemic shown a clear need for brands to adapt to an environment that has dramatically changed overnight (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2022).

In its wake, a new form of communication, conceptualised here as Brand Care Communication (BCC), emerged as a testament to the adaptability of brand communication (Coombs, 2010). Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2022, pp.1) conceptualises it as "positive and resilient messages". BCC entails brands adopting a less commercial tone in their messaging, prioritizing consumer well-being to legitimize promotional efforts during a crisis. This strategic shift underscores brands' genuine concern for stakeholders while capitalizing on opportunities for business sustainability presented by the exigencies of the situation (Coombs, 2010).

BCC exhibits a nuanced form of brand messaging that is very emotive with a positive tone and presents a proposition of brand care, yet it allows for brands to actively self-promote in a crisis. The concept enveloped sub-constructs or messaging themes to include ***solidarity***, ***CSR communication***, ***well-being promotion***, ***operational adjustment announcements***, and ***product/band promotion***. Given the psycho-socioeconomic challenges posed by the pandemic (Dennis, 2020; UN, 2020), the nature of brand communication during the period embodied elements (above sub-constructs) meant to address critical needs at the time (Beer, 2.

The above evidence supports the proposition made by this study that brand communication due to the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic morphed and birthed a new concept, brand care communication, instrumentalised by brands' quest for salience in an existential exigency. This notion that brand messaging experienced an adjustment during the pandemic, as indicated above, is hinted by scholars such as He and Harris (2020), Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2022), Sobande (2020), and Mejova and Kalimeri (2020). Despite the ability to spot the shift, these works did not directly contend with its nature and repercussions.

As regards works with empirical evidence, Shoenberger et al. (2021) focused on consumer perceptions of the authenticity of brand messages and identified empathy as a messaging attribute that resonated with consumers. Yeboah-Banin (2021), in an assessment of consumer expectations of brand messaging during the pandemic, also proposed six thematic messaging constructs, which seeded the sub-constructs of BCC. It included solidarity, CSR communication, well-being promotion, information about the pandemic, operational adjustment announcements, and brand promotion. The thesis contrasts her findings only on the adoption of five out of the six themes due to the lack of traction for the information about the pandemic element.

Though the above studies do not attempt to comprehensively document brand communication during the pandemic, they suggest two key implications that are relevant to this study. One is the pervasive nature and uniqueness of brand messaging during the pandemic, which cut across the global divide. Evidence from both western and emerging markets indicates a significant shift in brand communication, which justifies the conceptualisation of the phenomenon together with its elements and dimensions, regardless of similarities to existing constructs.

Additionally, the distinct features that set BCC apart, such as the various themes of solidarity, well-being promotion, operational adjustment announcement, CSR communication, and product/brand promotion, and other care attributes such as empathy do not appear to be exclusive to this study. Sobande (2020) as well as He and Harris (2020) herald the adoption of both solidarity and CSR communication within their contexts, while Shoenberger et al. (2021) emphasized the empathetic nature of the messages that brands adopted. Shrestha (2023) also highlights consumer accommodation of brand promotion due to the messaging during the period. Essentially, findings on the key elements of brand communication are supported by other studies that attempted to assess brand communication during the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evidence above also depicts the audacity and freedom with which marketing communicators could carve and enact new ways of sustaining dialogue with their audiences in exigencies. Without reference to theory or any form of precedence, brand communicators, driven by the sheer need to appeal to stakeholders and save their businesses in an exigency, enacted messaging that is to become the new kid on the block for marketing communication strategies. What brands had in common was the practical reality of a pandemic, which resulted in one form of communication. This is suggestive of the fact that for existential exigencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, brand care communication is the go-to strategy for brand communication.

Regardless of the uniqueness of brand care communication, one would argue if there could not have been any existing strategy in the extant literature for brands in exigencies. And indeed, scholars have proposed possible strategies for brand crisis response. From the marketing communication literature, McLaughlin et al. (1983), Greyser (2009), Keller (1993), and Votolato and Unnava (2006) have made propositions with different nomenclature and categorization. Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2007) from PR and corporate communication have also made some enduring propositions. But regardless of the labelling, these strategies are primarily based on crisis responsibility, with responses ranging between denial and apology. Evidently, none of the above strategies neither featured nor could have been an appropriate response for brands in the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic. BCC therefore stands out as a novelty and an apt response strategy for brand communication in such exigencies.

Beyond the crisis response strategies, brand communication during the pandemic could have also been identified as any other existing concept within the marketing communication mix that purports to care about consumers. Concepts such as corporate sponsorship, cause marketing, CSR, and even brand benevolence appear as contenders for brand care communication. However, brand care communication is primarily a messaging construct rather than an activity, philanthropy-oriented, or resource-based construct that the others are (Keller, 2001). Additionally, whereas CSR is stakeholder-focused and sponsorship is profit-driven, brand care communication potentially allowed brands to pursue both agendas in the exigency of the pandemic. Brand benevolence, on the other hand, exists as a dimension of customer relations management (Coyle et al., 2012) and has a very minimal connection to brand response to exigencies without consumer backlash.

Brand care communication, as identified by this thesis, is a communicative effort that borrows extensively from the healthcare communication literature (Höglander et al., 2020; Bernacki et al., 2015), possibly because of the near-death connotation that the pandemic presented. As the findings demonstrate, BCC mimics the transactional relationship between the aged/terminally ill persons and their caregivers or clinicians. The clinicians and caregivers are responsive, respectful, and empathetic in their communication with such persons, yet the delivery of care services is purely transactional. Similarly, brand care communication was meant to both empathise as well as legitimize brand self-promotional dialogue.

6.2.2 Brand Care Message-Ethos Congruence During the Pandemic

Related to the key features of brand communication during the pandemic, is the extent to which brands achieved message-ethos congruence in their communication. Message-ethos congruence is achieved when a brand's self-claimed or discursive character (Lynn, 2015) is in alignment with its messaging. The findings in the analysis of communication content from brands during the pandemic found that message-ethos congruence was achieved to a large extent. Inherent in this finding is the positive correlation between self-promotion messages and the extent to which brands achieved message-ethos congruence. Either by the messaging themes or by the communication motif, there was evidence to suggest that brands overtly promoted their products. Thus, the more brands promulgated brand and product messages during the pandemic, in consonance with their "schema schemer", the greater the achievement of a fit between their messaging and ethos.

The evidence above suggests that brands deliberately advanced communication that promoted their brands or products, which is in contrast to what the corporate communication scholarship proposes (Fox, 1986; Kim & Choi, 2018; Ma, 2020). According to Ho et al. (2017), corporate communication substitutes brand or product communication during a crisis. However, as this thesis has identified, there is significant evidence to suggest that brands promoted their products and achieved message-ethos congruence to a large extent.

Two arguments can be advanced from the above findings. The first is the nature or type of crisis which placed no culpability on brands and allowed for creative means of survival. This argument is translated in the strategic enactment of brand care communication to position some products as offering solutions to the pandemic without the dent of negative sentiments. O'Hagan (2021) discovered many years after the Spanish Flu that brand communication during that time had elements of quack selling, where brands repositioned themselves as offering solutions to the pandemic. Brands, with the adoption of care communication, however, navigated the "quack-selling" tag and rather proposed care by selling products that were relevant for use during the pandemic.

The second argument is the equally strategic ability of brand care communication to legitimise self-promotion in an existential exigency. As has been defined by this thesis, the uniqueness of brand care communication is derived from its capacity to drive messages of both people (stakeholders) and profit centricity. This heuristic attribute is also manifested in its adaptability in addressing diverse challenges for different brands throughout the pandemic. Socially and environmentally focused brands such as mining outfits found their voices in demonstrating care and yet communicated their social responsibility interests effectively. Brands that provide daily necessities and need to keep their factories running also had the opportunity to show sensitivity to the plight of people by selling relevant products.

Brand care communication therefore lends itself as a strategic tool for brand communication in exigencies due to its ability to give a legitimate voice to brands to genuinely demonstrate care to their stakeholders as well as protect their businesses. The heuristic nature of brand care communication gains validation from Coombs and Holladay (2008; 2010), who passively proposed care messaging as the baseline strategy for crisis response. Providing messages to promote stakeholder wellbeing paves the way for further engagement, including self-promotion.

6.2.3 Motivations for the Adoption of the Brand Care Messaging During the Pandemic

Another key objective of this thesis was to identify factors that motivated brand communicators to adopt their approaches to communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal that brand managers took cognizance of the need to protect the mental health of their stakeholders, which served as the major driver for their messaging. Additionally, brand managers were not ready to shelve brand objectives for the year; thus, business continuity, service delivery obligations, and keeping top-of-mind awareness were also key factors. Beyond the above drivers, brands were also motivated by the safety of staff and consumers; supporting government/solution efforts, as well as combating ‘infodemic’.

The findings suggest that, brands were motivated primarily by the need to help protect the mental health of stakeholders. This evidence is in consonance with Coombs and Holladay's (2008, 2010) and Coombs et al.'s (2010) proposition of adjusting information, which acknowledges the need to address stakeholder psychology in crisis communication. Taylor (2022), from a psychology perspective, opines that pandemics are not just instances of an infectious disease spreading over the globe but situations where the psychological responses of the populace to the infection have a vital part in the disease's containment. Inadvertently, the more people were mentally prepared to keep hope alive, the better the chances of navigating the pandemic and staying alive for continuous business.

However, the general brand crisis communication literature practically omits crisis response targeted at the mental health of consumers (Li & Wei, 2016; Dawar & Lee, 2009; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014, 2012). Previous researchers that have looked at how consumer emotions affect crisis communication have primarily emphasized anger and pity (Grappi & Romani, 2015; Jin, 2014); as well as trust (Shoenberger et al., 2021). The closest has been attention to audience panic (Ghiuță & Prelipcean, 2014), though not in a brand situation. This seeming lack of consideration for consumer mental health may be attributed to the type of crisis that is accounted for in the brand crisis communication literature, which primarily considers reputational defence. In such communication, the motive and focus are to defend the brand using psychological techniques and strategies.

The consideration for consumer mental health may be non-existent in the literature due to context variations, however, recent studies on brand communication during the pandemic, hint at the embedded consideration for such in their findings (Shoenberger et al., 2021; He & Harris 2020; Sobande, 2020) in brand messaging. The above signifies the peculiarity of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the shifting logic around brand communication, which is more people and impact-focused (Gangadharbatla, 2021; Eisend, 2015; Dahlen & Rosengen, 2016; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

But the above notwithstanding, keeping top-of-mind awareness and business continuity stood out as equally important drivers for brand communication during the pandemic. These are brand-focused or profit-centric motives that provide the two legs of brand care communication, together with the people-centric motive. Essentially, brand communication during the pandemic was not a haphazard occurrence but a well-corroborated effort with clear motives that manifested as brand care communication.

Additionally, the drivers for brand communication that is meant to self-promote resonate with the most with the existing literature (Avery et al., 2010; O'Hagan, 2021). Kim et al. (2010) found that for most brands dealing with Avian and Swine Flu epidemics in the United States, advertising to keep "top-of-mind" awareness has been the practice. Business continuity as brand motivation for communicating during an exigency is also not an entirely new phenomenon (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Seele & Lock, 2015). Indeed, some scholars argue in favour of the moral responsibility of brands to sustain their businesses, with further responsibility towards stakeholders such as employees and governments (Brin & Nehme, 2019).

However, of great significance to this study is the influence of the need to address stakeholder well-being before gaining the legitimacy to engage them about offerings. And this is what grants brand care communication its uniqueness and prowess as the brand communication strategy for exigencies.

Another interesting observation is the discovery of a form of brand advocacy exhibited in the motivation to help combat misinformation, or "infodemic". Previous studies have elucidated brand involvement in risk communication and humanitarian efforts to support governments in curbing the spread of the pandemic, apart from advertising (He & Harris, 2020;

Pieri, 2018). However, the peculiarities of the COVID-19 pandemic in a digitally advanced world presented an infectious information system that needed as much attention as the pandemic. Though earlier arguments advanced by this thesis delineated BCC from activism/advocacy, the desire to fight the infodemic mimics brand advocacy, which is contrary to the profit maximization philosophy (Lirtsman, 2017). Essentially, brand care communication was also meant to promote credible information verification sources for the general populace, which is not reflected in the brand crisis response literature.

6.2.4 The Influence of Brand Care Communication on Consumer Response

This study and the claims it makes about brand care communication, would not be complete without an examination of its influence on consumer behaviour. Thus, the thesis examined audience response to brand care communication during the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic, using purchase intention as the dependent variable. The findings proved the significant ability of brand care communication to predict consumer purchase intention. The hypothesis that there exists a significantly positive relationship between BCC and purchase intention (PI) was held true; in that, a percentage increase in consumer exposure to BCC would cause a 0.36 percent increase in their purchase intention.

The finding is indicative of the fact that in an exigency such as the pandemic, 36 percent of consumers' intension to purchase a particular brand would be accounted for by their exposure to care communication by a brand, holding all other factors constant. While this outcome may be significant, Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005), and Greyser (2009) argue that if a crisis is not fundamental to the essence of a brand, the challenge of crisis communication is made easier. Given the likelihood that the aforementioned assertion has enhanced the communicative effectiveness of Brand Care Communication (BCC) during crises, BCC is signposted as the preferred strategy for brand communication in such circumstances. It therefore does not come as a surprise that there is evidence of its adoption by brands across the globe (Gangadharbatla, 2021; He & Harris, 2020; Yeboah-Banin, 2021).

Additionally, it is worthy to note BCC's ability to elicit favourable consumer responses even when the communication is explicitly brand-focused (Shrestha, 2023; Du et al., 2010). This ability is largely explained by the embedded care logic and empathetic nature of BCC. The above argument puts BCC ahead of concepts such as CEO/brand activism, corporate socio-political involvement, and other corporate communication concepts such as CSR, which are likely to receive consumer backlash for being commercially driven (Costigan & Hughes, 2021; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

6.2.5 Factors Conditioning the BCC-Purchase Intention Relationship

This thesis, in addition to determining the influence of BCC on consumer behaviour, also sought to identify factors that could influence the relationship between BCC and PI. In answer to that, findings indicate that message-ethos congruenceis able to enhance BCC's ability to predict purchase intention among consumers in exigencies. Apart from message-ethos congruence, the findings also validate prior reputation as a key moderator in the ability of BCC to predict purchase intention. Whereas BCC could predict consumer purchase intention of a brand by itself, the introduction of message-ethos congruence increased the effect by 3%, while prior reputation raised it by 5%.

Whereas message-ethos congruence serves as a key moderator for corporate/brand communication, in alignment with the brand communication literature (Kim & Choi, 2018; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006), prior reputation proved to be an exceptionally effective moderator in this study. This evidence aligns with Coombs' (2010) and Greyser's (2009) proposition that prior reputation intensifies consumer evaluations and effectiveness of crises communication.

Thus, as the findings of this thesis confirm, message-ethos congruence moderates the effectiveness of brand care communication in exigencies. But more importantly, the prior reputation of a crisis brand enhances BCC's ability to predict purchase intention in exigencies. Consequently, despite the ability of BCC to predict purchase intention by itself, how well a brand has viewed its stakeholders in the past positively influences the ability of BCC to predict purchase intentions, in exigencies.

As regards demographic implications for consumer response for brand crisis communication, scholarship agrees that audience response to crisis communication varies based on consumer dispositions and the broad assumption that people adopt different means of filtering and processing information (Dawar & Pullutla, 2000; Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Consequently, variables such as consumers' age and gender and their impact on audience response to brand communication have been tested in a number of studies (Liu et al., 2006; Diehl et al., 2012; Ansu-Mensah & Asuamah, 2013; Keshari & Jain., 2014, 2016).

The study found that BCC's ability to predict purchase intention was a lot more significant in females than it was in males. Keshari and Jain's (2014) explorations shows that while females tend to be comprehensive information processors, paying attention to all the available information, males tend to be selective information processors and use heuristic cues. Essentially, there are greater levels of brand message evaluation and involvement (rational/central processing) among men, than there are among women (peripheral/emotional). Thus, for BCC messages that are dominantly emotional in appeal, it is expected to find such gender variations in response. The above context of how males and females process information also supports apparently high coefficient for males in skepticism towards brand messages.

6.3 Summary

In conclusion, the major findings of this thesis, as reported in chapter five are analysed and discussed within the context of claims made by existing scholarship and in answer to the five research questions that this study espouses. The notable arguments are that brand care communication erupted out of the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic and derives its uniqueness from its ability to serve to both stakeholder and brand needs. Such uniqueness sets it apart from other care logic constructs that would receive consumer backlash if both extrinsic and intrinsic motives were overtly communicated.

Whereas the main driver for the adoption of BCC is the protection of stakeholders' mental health and safety, brand managers were equally motivated by the desire to keep top-of-mind awareness as well as the sustain their businesses which is in consonance with the nature of the communication. And as a crisis communication strategy in exigencies, brand care communication proved to be significant in predicting purchase intention among consumers in an exigency; a relationship that is enhanced by fit between BCC messages and previously held views about brands. In the next chapter of this thesis, conclusions and implications of the discussed findings will be drawn to make contributions to the broader scholarly field of brand and crisis communication.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

This thesis was motivated by the observation of brand voices and the genre it took in the conversations around the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher therefore set out to investigate the nature of brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, the brand motivations for adopting such communication, and finally its impact on audience response (purchase intention). Consequently, a mixed-method approach involving a quantitative content analysis, in-depth interviews, and a survey was adopted deriving answers to the research questions of the study. This chapter therefore revisits the focal arguments of this thesis and provides a summary of the research findings and how they adequately answer the research questions; implications or contributions of the thesis, the limitations, and then makes recommendations for future research.

7.2 Summary of Findings

This section is intended to construct a summary of the major findings of this thesis in juxtaposition with the research questions. The questions are aligned to the various studies involved in this thesis; Study 1 for the content analysis, Study 2 for the interviews, and Study 3 for the survey.

One key finding of Study 1 is the discovery that brands adopted and exploited a care-for-you logic as a means to legitimise their voice in the heat of the pandemic. Based on features of their pandemic-era messages, the study introduced Brand Care Communication and its various dimensions in the quest to illuminate how brands should communicate during the pandemic. The key themes of brand messaging, which also serve as the elements/dimensions of brand care communication, include solidarity, well-being promotion, operational adjustment announcements, CSR communication, and brand/product promotion.

Though BCC is less mercantile, its agility offered brands the opportunity to strategically craft messages that aligned with their visions and to address brand-specific schemas or peculiar brand challenges during the pandemic.

Study 2 further established that, as both brands and consumers grappled with the uncertainty, fear, and stress induced by the pandemic, brand communicators recognized the need to primarily protect the well-being of stakeholders: both psychological and physical safety. Additionally, business sustenance goals such as ‘keeping top-of-mind’ awareness and business continuity, as typical of brands, served as motivations. Finally, fighting “infodemic” served as an add-on finding, instigated by the exigency of the pandemic. These drivers perceptibly reflected brand care messaging, which was meant to commiserate with consumers as well as advance the self-promotion agenda; further endorsing the proposed working definition for brand care communication.

Findings for Study 3 also affirm the ability of brand care communication to predict purchase intention among consumers in exigencies, indicating the positive and robust relationship between the two constructs. The substantial ability of brand care communication to predict purchase intention among consumers was further enhanced by the attributive moderating roles of message ethos, congruence, and prior reputation. In essence, whether attributions are positive or negative, and even skepticism towards advertising, could not serve as a significant moderator.

While Study 3 confirms the outcomes of brand communication during the pandemic, it also identified the ability of brand care communication to predict purchase intentions among females more than it does among males in exigencies. However, males recorded higher standardised coefficients than females regarding the interaction between skepticism towards advertising and purchase intention. This means that purchase intention for males involves a lot of inferences and mental processes of brand messages than it is for females in exigencies. These findings suggest that the genuine communication of care by brands might be a more pivotal factor in driving positive audience responses than its alignment with a brand's pre-existing image.

7.3 Implications of the Study

This section provides a reflection on the entire thesis production process and the research approach adopted in providing answers to the research problem, with the aim of drawing on their significance. The thesis problematized that the existing literature on the crisis and brand communication does not cater adequately for brand communication in exigencies that have survival implications for both brands and consumers. The process involved in solving this problem has made original discoveries that have implications for theory, brand and crisis communication literature, methods and industry, which will be elucidated below.

7.3.1 Implications for Theory

This study has several theoretical implications for the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; 2014) as well as Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity that has shaped the classification for brand crises and the commensurate responses (Li & Wei, 2016). The unearthing of BCC makes a significant contribution to the SCCT by identifying a suitable and well-articulated crisis response strategy for force majeure and "Faux pas" types of crises that are external to brands. This thesis therefore provides a bona fide argument for the inclusion of exigencies in the classification of brand crises.

Brand care communication, as an extension of the SCCT, adequately replaces denial as a strategy for non-culpable types of brand crises. In an exigency such as the COVID-19 pandemic and even for sustainability and security crises, denial currently assumes an irrelevant brand response due to stakeholder demands for impact in brand communication (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Eisend, 2015).

Additionally, the development of the measure for BCC and its dimensions also extends SCCT and other research by presenting a tool for further explorations into unexplored angles and extensions to the theory. Further, by testing its nomology, the study enables scholars to make predictions about drivers of and outcomes of BCC.

This research also has implications for theory with the adoption of the attribution theory and the SCCT. The attribution theory suggests the adoption of mediators and moderators to mitigate consumer skepticism during crisis communication. The significant finding that the moderating effect of consumer skepticism towards brand messages on purchase intention was not supported during the pandemic highlights contextual variation in the attribution theory claims. In an exigency with heightened emotional distress and devoid of brand culpability, coupled with care messaging, some claims of the attribution theory may be reversed and contested, which invites further studies for clarity.

7.3.2 Implications for Brand Crisis and Communication Literature

A core contribution of this research, is the conceptualisation of brand care communication, providing opportunity for its adoption as valid knowledge in the brand and crisis communication literature. As already highlighted in earlier chapters of this thesis, the discovery of BCC challenges claims that crisis communication research is a mature field. On the contrary, the applied nature of crisis communication allowed a construction between praxis, theory, and practice (Coombs, 2010; Smith, 1990) to unearth brand care communication. Out of the exigency of the COVID-19 pandemic, brands uniquely employed BCC informed by brand, risk, and care communication praxis. The COVID-19 pandemic has obviously unlocked a new stream of brand crisis communication and audience response scholarship centred on exigencies, which this thesis attests to.

An additional scholarly contribution of this research is the development of the care communication framework, which illustrates the drivers for the adoption of care messaging and how they are reflected in the message construction. The thesis provides a baseline framework for adoption by future researchers in the area of brand communication in exigencies. Coupled to the development of the BCC framework is the composition of measurement items for the various dimensions of the construct. BCC was measured by five dimensions solidarity with 4 items, well-being promotion with 5, operational adjustment announcement with 5, another 5 for CSR communication, and 4 for brand/product promotion. An additional 3 were developed for causal attribution which was constructed on consumer ethos perception of brands. These measures provide scholars with a head start in instrument development for future studies in brand messaging in exigencies.

7.3.4 Implications for Practice

Exigencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupt lives and, subsequently, the entire stakeholder spectrum of businesses. As may have been mentioned earlier in this thesis, the COVID-19 pandemic is projected to have long-lasting, profound economic, social, political, and cultural impacts (He & Harris, 2020), which spell significant survival challenges for brands and consumers. However, inherent in these exigencies are opportunities for business growth that can be harnessed through brand communication. This thesis therefore has great implications for brand managers and communicators, who otherwise would have been left to figure out how best to communicate during exigencies.

The research provided a toolbox for adoption as well as a reference point to apply tight advertising budgets for brand communication during exigencies. These claims are supported by the findings of this research, which underscore the pragmatic decision by brand communicators to embrace care messaging not only as a response to the mental health challenges faced by consumers but also as a strategic move to ensure business continuity. As the world navigates an increasingly complex and unpredictable environmental and socio-cultural landscape, the significance of having a well-defined brand response strategy for exigencies cannot be overstated. Essentially, this thesis proposes that, in existential exigencies, brands have the option to demonstrate genuine concern for their customers' well-being; which not only contributes to societal welfare but also helps to forge stronger connections with target audiences for business sustainability.

The capacity of BCC to influence purchase intention, which is crucial for a crisis brand, further underscores the significance of this thesis and its implications for practice. In times of crisis, brands prioritize protecting their assets and increasing their equity. Therefore, the study's findings about the beneficial correlation between BCC and PI and the impact of boundary conditions such as congruence and prior-reputation are crucial.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Though the nature of brand communication during the pandemic can be inferred from studies from around the globe that provide justification for its conceptualisation, evidence on audience response primarily involved consumers from the Ghanaian context. A wider audience spread with cultural and racial variations would have provided a higher grounding for the generalizability of the study findings.

Another point to note in connection with the audience response aspect of the study is the likelihood for the audience to have lost their immediate reactions to brand stimuli due to the time lapse between the pandemic’s intensity and the data collection. Consumer responses may have been adjusted or completely lost their genuine responses to brand communication during the pandemic.

Finally, under reflections on limitations, the researcher considers the effects of brand care communication on audience response in other exigencies beyond the healthcare emergency that COVID-19 was. This thesis claims to have discovered BCC as a bona fide response strategy for brands in exigencies. However, its impact in other exigencies apart from the COVID-19 pandemic is not known. Further research is therefore needed to test the heuristic nature of BCC.

7.5 Summary

In summary, this thesis conceptualises a new brand crisis communication strategy for brand crisis communication brought to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic. The confirmation of **H1** which assumes that brand communication during the pandemic was distinct, provides adequate ground for the conceptualization of BCC. The study thus contributes to the crisis response literature by proposing a working definition for brand care communication to refer to: communication in which brands adopt a less mercantile approach in their messaging by demonstrating care for consumer wellbeing in order to legitimise promotional dialogue during the crisis. In brand care communication, the mercantile and adversarial approach to brand promotion is diffused into the demonstration of care for consumer well-being.

Future research could delve deeper into the long-term effects of care messaging, exploring how it influences brand loyalty and consumer behaviour over extended periods. There is also the need for comparative studies/analysis to explore the endurance of BCC in and out of exigencies to ascertain any variations. Additionally, investigations into the role of specific industries and cultural factors in shaping the effectiveness of brand care communication may provide further insights. The use of consumer responses such as comments, reactions, and likes to the various social media posts to juxtapose results from the survey is also recommended for future research.

In conclusion, this study underscores the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on brand communication and demonstrates the enduring power of brand care communication to illicit positive audience response. Brands that genuinely prioritize the well-being of their consumers can forge stronger bonds and secure a more resilient future in an ever-evolving marketplace. These dual motivations for people and profit amid concerns of being sensitive to consumer plight provide further grounding for the conceptualization of brand care communication.

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APPENDICES

CODING GUIDE (STUDY 1)

Objective: To ascertain the nature of brand care communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INSTRUCTIONS

Gather all communication content of randomly sampled companies in the Ghana Club100 ranking published on the facebook pages between March to August 2020. That is to identify brand communication spread across the first year of the pandemic. Watch/listen/read the communication material and identify the mechanics of the brand communication. This could be an advertisement or a PR communication. For every brand communication identified, code for all variables by providing answers to the queries labelled Q1 to Q18.

Q1. Date of publication: Please write out the date

Q2 Name of the brand (Open for stringed input)

Q3 Sector

1) Service
2) Manufacturing
3) Agriculture
4) Other

Q4 Type of communication material

1) Audio
2) Video
3) Press release
4) Flier
5) Other

Q5 Messaging content emphasis

1) Solidarising with people
2) Stay-safe/Wellbeing promotion

3) Information about the pandemic
4) Information on donation or support action
5) Brand focused (merely promotional of brand and not including anything about COVID)
6) Other

Q6 Message appeal (How does the communication seek to convince the audience to buy into the message?

1) Emotional (Appealing to feelings such as fear, empathy, nostalgia, amusement)
2) Rational appeal (using reasoning or arguments)
3) Can't tell

Q7 Is the message sensitive to the varying plight of consumers and victims (acknowledging their beliefs, values, differences, and support dignity)?

1) Yes
2) No
3) Can't tell

Q8 Does the communication appear adapted to consumer needs based on the changing circumstance?

1) Yes
2) No
3) Can't tell

Q9 Is the message empathetic (i.e. displaying compassion, emotional support, and understanding)

1) Yes
2) No
3) Can't tell

Q10 Tones: Generally, what potential perceptions does the message invoke in the listener's mind about the COVID-19 situation?

1) Positive (Hope, tenacity, self-efficacy)

2) Negative (panic, despair)
3) Can’t tell

Q11 What is the subject matter of the communication (Overall, what would you say the story is about?)

1) Sales of products/Extrinsic (firm focused)
2) Care for people/Intrinsic (socially focused)
3) Both
4) Other

Q12 Does the communication mention some products for sale?

1) Yes
2) No
3) Not clear

Q13 Does the brand attempt to position itself as a solution to some aspect of the pandemic?

1) Yes
2) No
3) Not clear

Q14 Is there any attempt by brands to capitalize on previous good-will or reputation to sell their products or gain acceptance?

1) Yes
2) No
3) Not clear

Q15 Denial: does the communication suggest that someone else is responsible for the COVID-19 situation or try to defend the brand?

1) Yes
2) No
3) Not clear

Q16 What is the mission statement of the brand? (Write it out from their website please)

Q17 What is the current tag line or mantra of the brand (write out from website)?

Q18 Is there a connection between the communication/messaging and the mission statement/the tagline of the brand?

1) To a large extent
2) To some extent
3) Slightly
4) To a little extent
5) Not at all
6) Can’t tell

INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview guide seeks to determine the efforts brand managers made in order to get their communication right during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is being undertaken as part of academic requirements for PhD in Communications Studies at the University of Ghana.

Please provide answers to the questions below as you deem appropriate. Any other information that you consider useful could also be added. The information you provide will be confidentially managed under the Data Protection Act, 2012 (Act 843) of Ghana. For further clarification, please contact jabaah@st.ug.edu.gh.

Kindly indicate your willingness to participate by ticking in the space below: 'I agree to participate …………'

Thank you.

1) What has generally been your COVID-19 experience as a brand communications practitioner?
2) What do you consider as effective crisis response as a brand if you had all the resources?
3) Why did you think you needed to communicate regardless of the socioeconomic devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic?
4) What informed the type of communication and messages you chose to put out there during the pandemic?
5) What was the main focus and purpose of your communication, to sell/keep corporate brand, etc.?
6) Did it matter how consumers would perceive your message/communication?
7) What is the essence or ethos of your brand?
8) Was it necessary to frame your messages to align with your brand ethos or you did not think that was too necessary given the exigency of the moment?
9) Were there any constraints beyond the threats of life and livelihood?
10) Was there any reference point from either practice or theory as to the kind of strategy you adopted for your communication during the pandemic?
11) How would you call or describe the kind of communication you and your colleague marketers engaged in during the pandemic?

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Survey instrument to ascertain the influence of brand ethos/message congruence on consumer response to brand care communication.

Dear respondent,

This questionnaire seeks information on your perception on MTN communication and engagement with consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is being undertaken as part of academic requirement for PhD in Communications Studies at the University of Ghana.

Please tick/write in the appropriate box/space that corresponds to your choice(s) of answer(s). The information you provide will be confidentially managed under the Data Protection Act, 2012 (Act 843) of Ghana. For further clarification, please contact jabaah@st.ug.edu.gh. Please note: You must be 18 or older to participate in this study.

Kindly indicate your willingness to participate by ticking in the space below: 'I agree to participate ………….'

Thank you.

1. Kindly indicate your current network.

a) MTN b) Airtel-Tigo c) Vodafone d) Glo e) Multiple networks

2. Network prior to the pandemic

a) MTN b) Airtel-Tigo c) Vodafone d) Glo e) Multiple networks

3. Brand care communication (Solidarity)

(Please rate your response on the scale of 1 to 5, where 5 corresponds to Strongly Agree, 4: Agree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2: Disagree, 1: Strongly Disagree and 0: Don't Know)

During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts …..

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
made me feel the company stood together with Ghanaians in the crisis						
made me feel, they had my back as a consumer						
made me feel they were only interested in their business						

made me feel motivated to strive harder to fight the pandemic						
made me feel we can fight the pandemic together						

4. Brand care communication (Well-being promotion)

(Please rate your response on the scale of 1 to 5, where 5 corresponds to Strongly Agree, 4: Agree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2: Disagree, 1: Strongly Disagree and 0: Don't Know)

During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts ….

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
taught me how to boost my immunity						
encouraged me to protect myself from COVID-19						
encouraged me to wash my hands often						
encouraged me to observe the COVID-19 protocols						
told me what to do if I felt unwell						
failed to consider the wellbeing of consumers						

5. Brand care communication (Operational adjustment announcement)

(Please rate your response on the scale of 1 to 5, where 5 corresponds to Strongly Agree, 4: Agree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2: Disagree, 1: Strongly Disagree and 0: Don't Know)

During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts …..

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
taught me how to access MTN services online						
informed me on branches that were open to customers						

announced adjustment in operating hours						
left consumers to figure out where they can access MTN services						
announced the availability of customer self-help services online						

6. Brand care communication (CSR Communication)

(Please rate your response on the scale of 1 to 5, where 5 corresponds to Strongly Agree, 4: Agree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2: Disagree, 1: Strongly Disagree and 0: Don't Know)

MTN adverts during the pandemic …..

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
informed me of what the company was doing to support the fight against COVID-19						
informed me of offers such as free calls and data from MTN to support customers						
informed me of some donations MTN had made during the pandemic						
announced free training or seminars for the public						
announced some of the company's sponsorship activities						
were rather focused on making profit for the firm						

7. Brand care communication (Product/service promotion)

(Please rate your response on the scale of 1 to 5, where 5 corresponds to Strongly Agree, 4: Agree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2: Disagree, 1: Strongly Disagree and 0: Don't Know)

During the pandemic, I observed that MTN adverts …..

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
were completely focused on selling their products						
mostly encouraged consumers to use more MTN products						

informed me about new product offers the company had created to take advantage of the pandemic						
demonstrated care rather than serve company interest						
projected the company and its products as a solution to the pandemic						

8. Customer-based brand ethos perception

(Please rate your response on the scale of 1 to 5, where 5 corresponds to Strongly Agree, 4: Agree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2: Disagree, 1: Strongly Disagree and 0: Don't Know)

As a consumer of telecommunication services, I see MTN as ….

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
striving to make customers' lives better						
providing consumers with relevant services						
providing the best high speed internet service in the country						
lacking commitment to delight customers						
having the widest network coverage in the country						
providing services that put consumers in control with varying product options						

9. Perceived brand ethos and message congruence

(Indicate your response where 5 is strongly agree, 1 is strongly disagree and 0 is don't know)

Given my understanding of what MTN stands for ….

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
It felt out of touch when MTN adverts tried to connect with people during the pandemic						
I liked MTN messages that were low-key and identified with people						
MTN had no business telling me to stay safe during the pandemic						
It felt alright to hear of what the company was doing to support the fight against COVID-19						

I was skeptical about MTN adverts that announced their CSR activities during the pandemic						
I liked MTN messages that informed me of how to access MTN services online in order to stay safe						
It felt alright for MTN adverts to focus on profit making						
It felt offensive for MTN adverts to focus on sales						

10. Customer-Based Brand reputation (Customer orientation & CSR)

On a scale of 1 to 7 where 7 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, and 0 means don't know, indicate your general perception of MTN as a brand.

Item	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
MTN is concerned about customers								
MTN takes customer rights seriously								
MTN seems to care about all of its customers regardless of how much money they spend with them								
MTN employees who are concerned about customer needs								
MTN has employees who treat customers courteously								
MTN treats its customers fairly								
MTN seems to make an effort to create new jobs								
MTN would reduce its profits to ensure a clean environment								
MTN seems to be environmentally responsible								
MTN appears to support good courses								

11. Customer-Brand Identification

On a scale of 1 to 5 kindly describe your connection with MTN as a customer (where 5 is strongly agree and 1 is strongly disagree)

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
I see MTN's character as projecting how I see myself						

Everything about MTN's success represents how I see myself						
MTN reflects who I am						
I think MTN helps me become the type of person I want to be						
I can identify with MTN						
I feel a personal connection to MTN						
MTN suits me well						
MTN is attractive mainly because of its wider coverage						

12. Causal attribution/Skepticism towards advertising

On a scale of 5 to 1 (where 5 means strongly agree and 1, strongly disagree, and 0 means don't know) indicate your general disposition towards brand communication

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
I believe adverts are informative						
Adverts are generally truthful						
Most adverts provide consumers with essential information						
I can depend on getting the truth in most adverts						
I believe adverts are truth well told.						
Adverts aim to misinform the consumer						
In general adverts presents a true picture of the brand being advertised						

13. Communication satisfaction (Down & Hazen, 1977; Media Quality & Communication climate dimensions)

On a scale of 7 to 1 (where 7 means very satisfied and 1, very dissatisfied, and 0 means don't know) indicate your satisfaction with MTN communication during the pandemic

Item	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
The extent to which MTN adverts motivated me to press on during the pandemic								

The extent to which I perceived MTN's attitude toward its adverts to be basically healthy								
The extent to which MTN demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the problems faced by consumers								
The forms of media MTN used for its adverts								
The extent to which information from MTN adverts were well organized, clear, and helpful								
The amount of adverts and engagements by MTN during the pandemic								

14. Audience behavioural response (MTN user)

Given MTN's communication during the pandemic…

(Indicate your response on a scale of 5 to 1 where 5 means strongly agree and 1, strongly disagree, and 0 means don't know)

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
I intend to purchase more from MTN						
I predict that I should purchase products I have never used from MTN in the future						
it is likely that I will increase how much I spend on products from MTN in the near future						
I expect to purchase extensively from MTN in the near future						
I may stop using MTN services completely						

15. Audience behavioural response (Non-MTN user)

Given MTN's communication during the pandemic…

(Indicate your response on a scale of 5 to 1 where 5 means strongly agree and 1, strongly disagree, and 0 means don't know)

Item	5	4	3	2	1	0
I intend to purchase from MTN						
I predict that I should purchase from MTN in the future						

it is likely that I will buy products from MTN in the near future						
I expect to purchase from MTN in the near future						
I may never use MTN services regardless of the circumstance						

Demographic items

1. Gender

a) Male b) Female c) Would rather not disclose

2. Age

a) 20 - 25 b) 26 – 30 c) 31 – 35 d) 36 – 40 e) Above 40 ………….. (Please specify)

3. Level of Education

a) JHS b) SHS c) Tertiary d) Other

4. Employment status

a) Unemployed 2) Employed; formal sector 3) employed; informal sector 4) self-employed 5) Other ……………………

5. Annual Income (GHS)

a) 100 -1000 2) 1000 -10000 3)10000 -100000 4) Above 100000

6. Region of residence (Please indicate)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1nqkj4tMaOJuzRLKk3ji6UM-y_BqCYQ8XUPxCb6ENJL4/edit?usp=sharing

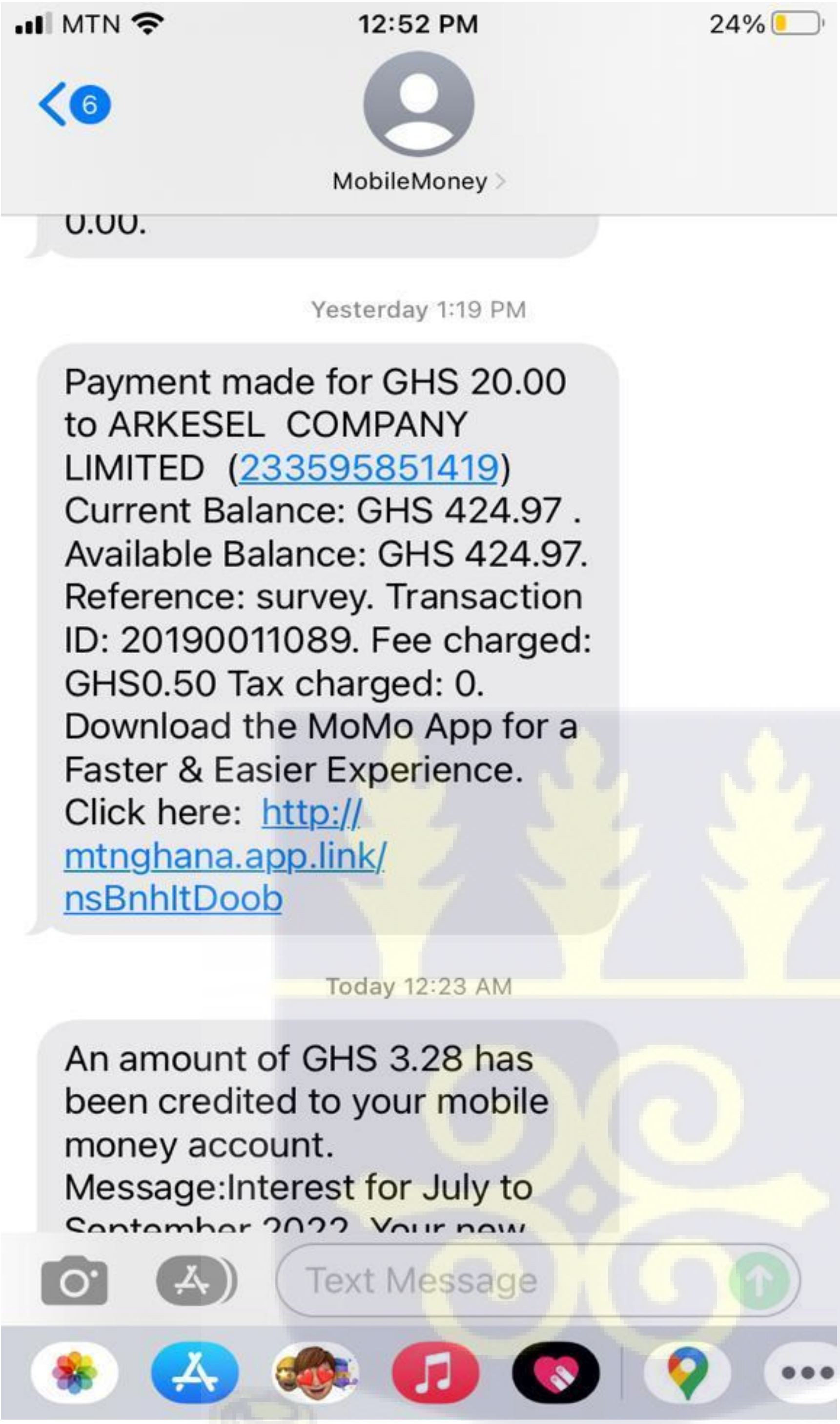

Exhibit 13: Screenshot of first transaction with Arkesel Limited (SMS company)

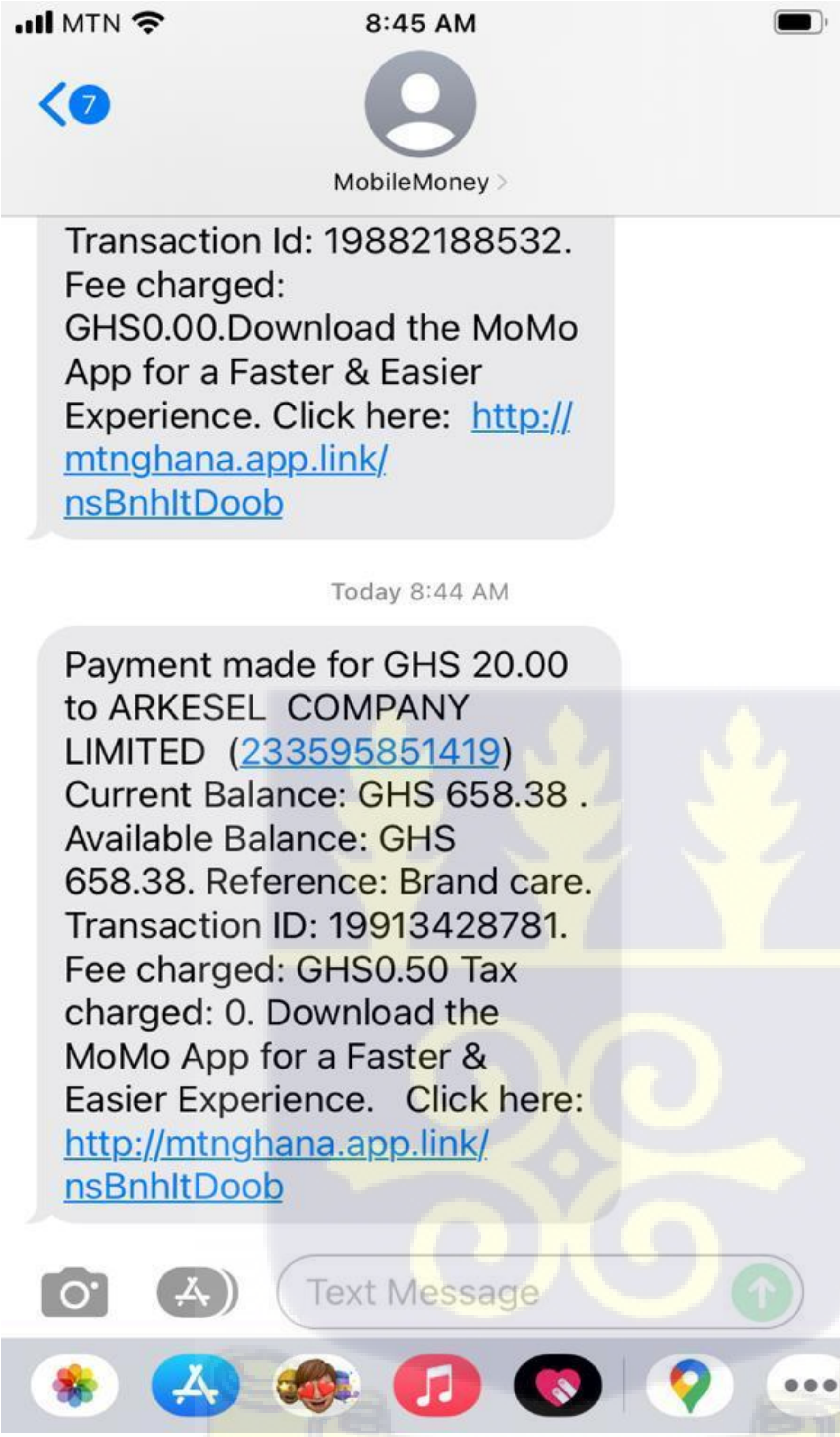

Exhibit 14: Screenshot of additional transaction with Arkesel Ltd (SMS company)