

INFORMATION NEEDS AND SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF SELECTED SME OWNERS IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN PORT HARCOURT METROPOLIS

Albert O. Elejene

Federal Polytechnic of Oil and Gas, Bonny, Rivers State Nigeria

Clever H. K. Nwiedoo

Ken Sato Wiwa Polytechnie, Bori
Clevhay34552@gmail.com

Abstract

The study investigated information needs and seeking behaviour of Selected SME owners in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic in Port Harcourt metropolis. Descriptive research survey was adopted. The population of the study comprised small and medium businesses which are generally classified under, service providers, manufacturing and traders, Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the SMEs then simple random technique was employed to select the respondents. A total of 58 SMEs were selected for the study. Interview was used 58 SME owner responses were used for the study. The data was analyzed using mean scores and simple percentages. The study ascertained that SME owners demanded information on loan grant business opportunities, sales, goods and services on high demand, current issues environment, suppliers, innovation technology, customer preference digital marketing government policies and exchange rate Social media internet radio, colleagues and customers were consulted by SME owners during the COVID 19 lockdown. SME owners used information sought it make decision, enhance their business, invest, outsmart competitors, obtain loan/grants and personal development. The challenges SME, owners faced when seeking for their information nest are information overload, inadequate information attitude of information providers and inadequate information searching skills. It is, therefore, recommended that A "Business Solution Centre" be established for SMEs to support reliable market information, better access to information about their rights and entitlements, as well as about best practice models for them in causing their businesses.

Keywords: Information needs, Seeking behaviour COVID-19, SME, Port Harcourt metropolis

Introduction

The widespread of COVID-19 has reshaped the global business landscape As a result, today's business environment is fraught with uncertainty, diverse global players, rapid technological change, price wars and seemingly endless reorganization, all of which exert pressure on the business environment. In short, the business environment is variable or volatile. Against this scenario, information has quickly assumed centre-stage statue as an extremely valuable resource. Information has been seen as an essential commodity for development. As processed data to which meaning may be attached, information is useful for planning, decision making and reduction of uncertainty. The present atmosphere of Information is influential and

characterized by several information sources made available on systems through both human and computer interfaces, a multiplicity of methods for accessing information, and a redundancy of content from multiple sources. Information is vital in survival and decision-making at every stage of human endeavour because it furnishes an individual with facts, experiences, procedures and processes to follow in actualizing a plan.

Every human, therefore needs information for progress, decision making, professionalism, expertise, practices and effective service delivery. Information need is an individual or group's desire to locate and obtain information to satisfy both conscious and unconscious needs. (Adebayo Michael & Akole, 2017). In locating one's information needs, one consults different sources indicating one's information seeking behaviour. Information-seeking behaviour is the process of recognizing the need for information, searching for, using, and sharing it. Information seeking behaviour is usually associated with information search behaviour, information retrieval behaviour and information literacy skills.

Ebeklar and Hayati (2016) observed that Information-seeking behaviours exhibited by Information users are derived from users information needs when they have the urge for information. Business information, which is commonly understood as essential information related to a company's operations, activities and business environment, is an essential resource for managers. Managers make decisions relying on the information they receive from different sources inside and outside their organization. The widespread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) is increasing rapidly, leaving many small and medium-scale business enterprise owners uncertain about their future. It has become even more worrisome as the evolution of the disease and its economic impact is highly uncertain, which makes it difficult for policymakers to formulate an appropriate macroeconomic policy response (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020).

COVID-19 is a disease caused by (SARS- CoV-2) and labeled "coronavirus" or "novel coronavirus". On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) described global spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic. This is as a result of its Infectious effect on large proportion of people over a wide geographical area. COVID-19 was first reported to WHO on the 31st of December, 2019 in Wulkan, China (NCDC, 2020). Nigeria recorded its first case on Friday, February 27, 2020 (In Lagos 2020). In Rivers State the first case was recorded the 25 March 2020 (www.premiumtimes.com.ng). Covid-19 virus as opined by Surico & Galeotti (2020) is not just a big shock on real economic fundamentals but also on the frictionless of the market. Also COVID-19 brought a wall between demand and supply having strong feedback in the economy, contraction in supply, leading to a contraction in demand, to contraction in supply thereby causing a big destruction of economic surplus. Bachman (2020) opined that COVID-19 could affect the global economy in three main ways: by direct effect on production, by creation of supply chain and market disruptions, and by its financial effect on firms and markets. It was further stated that a great deal will depend on the public's reaction to the disease. This could mean that businesses despite the pandemic can flourish depending on the nature of business.

A business irrespective of the size, whether medium, big, simple, complex, private or public is created usually to provide competitive prices (Lywela & Nairim 2020). Business in Nigeria can be classified as small, medium and large scale. However, Small and Medium Enterprises is a productive activity either to produce or distribute goods and/or services, mostly undertaken in the informal sector (Momba, 2013). The Tanzanian Government (as cited in Momba 2013) sees a small enterprise as an enterprise with 5-49 employees and a medium enterprise with 50-90 employees.

According to Oyelaran-Oyeyinka (2020) as published by the Financial Strategy System (FSS) defined SMEs as businesses with turnover of less than N100 MM per annum and or less than 300 employees. According to him, in a study by the IFC shows that approx. 96% of Nigerian businesses are SMEs compared to 53% in the US and 65% in Europe. It was further stated that SMEs represent about 90% of the manufacturing Industrial sector in terms of number of enterprises. To European Commission (as cited in Virglerova, Dobes Kramolis, & Kotaskova, 2017) a small-scale industry can be explained by the criteria of project costs, capital, number of employees, sales volume, annual business turnover and the financial. The main factors determining if a company belongs to the SME segment are number of employees and annual turnover or the annual balance sheet, there is no universally accepted definition of SME. Different countries use various measures of size depending on their level of development. The commonly used yardsticks are total number of employees, total investment, and sales sum over (Momba, 2013). Small and medium enterprises encompass vast scope covering activities like manufacturing, servicing, financing, construction and infrastructure,

Both the developed countries and the ones in course of development realize that the SMEs and entrepreneurs play a vital role in the industrial development of a country. However, SMEs are affected by the problems of raw materials, finance, marketing, underutilization of capacity, etc. Cash has become a big problem for small and even big businesses today. Lack of finance has driven many small scale business units into bankruptcy. Cook and Nixon (as cited in Momba, 2013) stated that despite the large contribution of SMEs in countries development and economic growth, their growth and development in developing countries were mainly inhibited by access of finance, poor managerial skills, and lack of training. In addition to the already existing problem the policy put in place by the Government in response to COVID-19 has worsened the situation.

To curb the menace of COVID-19 pandemic, the government at all levels directed the closure of schools, markets and other social activities on social gathering tending to a decline in economic activities, SMEs are now faced with the challenges of low turnout of customers, low income, and insufficient supply of goods and services, market fluctuations among others. Effect of COVID-19 on SMEs could lead to Shortage of supply, high demand and economic recession. SME proprietors therefore need information to plan on ways to grow even in the wake of COVID-19, they need information about goods and services, current price of goods and services, exchange rate information about suppliers, goods and services on high demand, customers preferences, interpersonal communication skills, digital marketing. Innovation/technologies, looking for the foregoing information need. SME owners may consult the internet, colleagues, customers. They may use the information sought for different

purposes including creation of new business adopt other marketing strategies, make decision, etc. They may face some challenges while seeking for their information needed including inadequate information, unavailability of information sources, lack of awareness of information sources. Notwithstanding, business environment constantly changing and evolving, Businesses themselves change over time and as they encounter grow and develop, the information needs of the business will change At the same time the information systems needed to support growth and development will also need to change. This essential therefore, to review those information as to continue to align business operations with changing market needs, especially in a business environment influenced by COVID-19 pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

The continuous increase in the number of cases of COVID-19 pandemic is forcing government to place stricter measures by imposing a lockdown on both Interstate within the state Ties is having a diminishing impact on virtually every including mall and medium enterprises because it is slowing down the Nigeria economy, interrupting or minimizing production and supply of goods and services, companies across the world, Irrespective of size are being affected, the impact on transportation can be noticed on the restriction of movement on land i and sea among countries which has further slowed down supplies Global financial markets have also been affected. Most importantly, consumers' usual consumption pattern has reduced Consequently, small and medium enterprises are at a risk because the above affected are the indices that make up the survival of small and medium enterprises Information is a key to the growth and development of any business as well as succeeding in a turbulent situation like the era of COVID-19 Therefore, all SME proprietors need information for survival but have different approaches or ways of seeking their information needs. Based on the foregoing, the study sought to determine the information needs und seeking behaviour of SME proprietors in Port Harcourt in Metropolis.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to determine Information needs and seeking behaviour of SME owners in the wake of OVID19 in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the Business Information demanded by SME proprietors in Port Harcourt Metropolis.
2. Determine the sources of information consulted by SME managers in Port Harcourt Metropolis.
3. Investigate the uses of information by SME owners in the Wake of COVID-19 in Port Harcourt Metropolis.
4. Unravel the Challenges Facing SMI Owners in Seek of their Information Needs in the wake COVID-19

Review of Related Literature

Concept of information Needs and Seeking Behaviour

The information is needed to prepare business plans, plan cash flow, examine business opportunities, and profit planning, information seeking behaviour is the processes of recognizing the need for information, searching for, using, and sharing it. Kassim, Babaruddin Arill & Buyong (2416) investigated the information needs and the kinds of information needed for decision-making by managers of small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) revealed that the most common kinds of Information required by SML managers were business information/opportunities, followed by financial sources, current marketing trends, location, survey/research, sources of raw materials/products, information on customers, government regulations/policies and competitors The most common kinds of information required For decision-making business opportunities/competitors, followed by finance, of analysis, market, data, suppliers (of raw materials/ products) and innovation/technology.

Information Sources Consulted by SME owners

Business information sources refer to the containers of information that are useful for different business transactions (Kaye, as cited in) although they may be formal or informal, these play a pivotal role in determining the input for an information system. Access us the right business information, from the right place, at the right time, from the right source, and at the right price and knowing how to use it is a major factor influencing trading efficiency and competitiveness In his study, Jorosi (2006) argues that the main sources of business information for SMEs include competitors, customers business associates, government officials, broadcast media, libraries newspapers/periodicals/magazines, government publications, trade and industry associations, and electronic sources. Ojo, (2015) found that business managers sources of information include personal sources of information (colleagues and friends), Newspapers, Printed Sources trade literature, Journals and reports); Mass media (television med radio); Information centers: Advisory services and the Internet

Uses of Information by SME Owners

Considering that business information is an Indispensable resource in overall business performance, one is forced to question the availability and utilization of business information by SME no doubt utilizing information resources contributes to overall business performance. Law (as cited in Haliso & Okunlulure, 2010) affirms that the utilization of information by organizations gives them the competitive advantage necessary to sustain their business. Ojo (2015) examined the influence of business information use on the sales performance of SMEs in the intimation technology sector in Lagos State and showed that business Information utilization influences males performance of SMID

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study is the exploratory type. The target population for the study were individuals from the SME sector who were operating their business in Port Harcourt metropolis. They were the owners or managers of the SME. A total of 58 owners managers of

the SME located in Port Harcourt metropolis were selected to be interviewed to solicit information on their business information needs. The respondents came from diverse categories of business sectors which are services providers, manufacturing and traders. The face-to-face structured interview was used. The interview questions were guided by questionnaire format where the responses were recorded as answers were provided. The Information solicited from the interviews covered kind of information demanded of business managers. The sources of information consulted by SME managers, the uses of information and the challenges facing information seeking of SME owners.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

Business that participated	No. of respondents
Service providers: saloons, hospital, transportation, laundry, network providers	15
Manufacturing: furniture manufacturers, bread manufacturers, tailoring, shoe producers,	18
Traders: retail shops (mix), clothes shop, food vendors, cosmetic shops, building materials, petrol station	25
Total	58

Findings of the Study

Table 1: Information demanded by SME Owners

Information Demand	Mean	Decision
Government policies	2.7	Accept
Loan/grant	3.9	Accept
Exchange rate	2.6	Accept
Sale	3.6	Accept
Digital marketing	2.8	Accept
Suppliers	3.3	Accept
goods/services on high demand	3.5	Accept
Current price of goods/services	2.5	Accept
Innovation/technology	3.2	Accept
Customer preferences	3.2	Accept
Current issues/environment	3.4	Accept
Business opportunities/competitors	3.8	Accept
Grand Mean	2.9	Accept

Table 1 shows the information demanded by SME owners in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic and shows that all the items are above the reference mean of 2.5 indicating that the respondents demanded all the stated information.

Table 2: Sources of information consulted

What are the source of information do you consult during COVID-19 lockdown	Mean	Decision
Radio	2.8	Accept
Television	2.6	Accept
Newspaper	2.0	Reject
Colleagues	2.7	Accept
Customers	2.5	Accept
Library	1.4	Reject
Internet	2.8	Accept
Social media	3.2	Accept
Grand mean	2.6	Accept

Table 2 shows the source of information consulted by SME owners in Port Harcourt Metropolis. It shows that social media (3.2), internet (2.8), radio (2.8), colleagues (2.7), and customers (2.5) meet the reference mean of 2.5 indicating that they were consulted by SME owners during the COVID-19 lock down.

Fig. 1: Uses of Information by SME Owners

Fig one shows the uses of information by SME owners and shows that they use information to make decision (87s), enhance their business (58%), invest (65% outsmart competitors (63%). Loan/grants (55%) personal development (51%), On the other hand, they disagreed using information sought to create new business (41%) and cheat (35%)

Challenges facing SME Owners during COVID- 19 lockdown and when seeking for their information needs amidst COVID-19 pandemic

What are the challenges you faced when seeking for Information need during COVID-19 lockdown	Mean	Decision
Inadequate information	2.6	Accept
Unavailability of information sources	1.9	Accept
lack of awareness of information sources	2.1	Reject
Information over load	2.8	Accept
Inadequate information seeking skills	2.5	Accept
Attitude of information providers	2.6	Accept
Government policies	3.8	Accept
Sales fluctuation	3.6	Accept

Table 3 shows the challenges that faced SME owners when seeking for their information needs during COVID-19 lock down. It shows that information overload (2.8), inadequate information (2.6), attitude of information providers (2.6) and inadequate information searching skills (2.5) were the challenges SME owners faced when seeking for their information needs amidst COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary of the Findings

The study summarizes thus:

1. SME owners demanded information on loan/grant, business opportunities, sales, goods and services on high demand, current suppliers, innovation/technology, preference, digital marketing government policies and exchange rate.
2. Social media, internet, radio, colleagues, and customers were consulted by SMF owners during the COVID-19 lock down.
3. SME owners used information sought to make decision, enhance their business invest outsmart competitors, obtain loan/grants and personal development.
4. The challenges SME owners faced when seeking for their information need were information overload, inadequate Information, attitude of information providers and inadequate information searching skills.

Discussion of the Findings

In research question one, respondents were asked to determine the type of information they demanded. It shows that SME owners demanded information on business sales, goods and services on high demand, current issues/environment, suppliers' innovation/technology, customer preference, digital marketing, government policies and exchange rate. The study corroborate with the study carried out by Kassim et al. (2016) who found that the most common kinds of information required by SME managers were business information opportunities, financial sources current marketing trends location survey research, sources of raw materials products information on customers. government regulations/policies and competitors: The most common kinds of information required for decision-making opportunities/competitors, followed by finance methods of analysis, marker data, suppliers bef.raw materials products) and innovation technology.

In research question two, the respondents were asked to identify the sources of information consulted when seeking for their information needs, it was revealed that social media, internet, radio, colleagues, and customers were consulted by SME owners during the COVID-19 lockdown as their sources. The study confirms that of Dalton (as cited in Ojo, 2015) that business managers sources of information include personal sources of Information (colleagues and friends, Newspapers Printed Sources (trade literature, journals and reports) Mass media television and radio): Information centers: Advisory services and the Internet.

In research question three, the respondents were asked to state what they uses the information sought for, it was stated that they used information to make decision, enhance their business: invest. Outsmart competitors, obtain loan/grants and personal development. The study corroborates with that of Kassin, Baharuddin, Nor Ariff & Buyong (2016) who ascertained that people use and need information to assist them in running the business and for the purpose of decision-making in order to survive in this vibrant and yet uncertain environment.

In research four, respondents were asked to identify the challenges facing them when sucking for their information need during the COVID-19 lockdown. It was revealed that information overload, inadequate information, attitude of information providers and inadequate information searching skills were the challenges SME owners faced when seeking for their information needs during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study supports that of Buoey (2020) businesses on physical space and shops such as supermarkets, traditional food markets, restaurants, car dealers, movie theaters, gyms, and bars, suffered losses. It was also discovered that there was increase in personal health-related product sales such as hand sanitizers, personal protection year, and vitamins and supplements. The study also found a low turnout on the sales of meat/fruit, luxury goods.

Conclusion

Information is the key to the survival of SMEs which every managers need. Different approaches however could be employed und different sources consulted depending on preferences The study ascertained that SME owners demanded information on loan/grant, business opportunities, sales, goods and services on high demand, current issues/environment, suppliers, innovation/technology, customer preference, digital marketing, government policies and exchange rate. Social media, internet, radio, colleagues, and customers were consulted by SME owners during the COVID-19 lock down SME owners used information sought to make decision enhance their business, invest, outsmart competitors, obtain loan/grants and personal development. The challenges SMB owners faced when seeking for their information need were information overload, inadequate information, attitude of information providers and inadequate information searching skills. The findings of this study have several implications on relevant authorities that deal with entrepreneurs, business managers and owners of other small and medium- sized enterprises in Nigeria. Developing an understanding of business information needs is important to promote and help business managers foster economic, business and social growth of entrepreneurs. The finding of the study has been useful in identifying the information needs, and from the identification of the information needs someone should be able to design new and novel information services and products to meet those needs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is suggested that;

1. the government agencies such as SME Comp and other bodies serving business people and entrepreneurs could consider setting up a platform that could provide information regarding business on how to examine business opportunities including other information such as on how to prepare business plans, plan cash flow, see to profit

planning, check on courses conducted on entrepreneurship, find methods to apply loan, look at current marketing plans communicating with clients.

2. Small and medium scale enterprises should consider adopting digital marketing minimize the negative effect of pandemic.

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