

## DETTOL'S HANDS-ON AD ON HUMAN CORONAVIRUS: BETWEEN FAKE NEWS AND EFFECTIVE PR IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*The deadly Coronavirus codenamed COVID-19 caused by a large family of viruses which results in illnesses that range from common cold to more severe diseases such as respiratory syndrome and severe acute respiratory syndrome which broke out in Wuhan, China on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019 has recorded fatalities. The fear and confusion associated with the disease is further heightened by arguments for and against its cure leading to various solutions such as the latest Dettol's Hands-On Ad on Human Coronavirus making the rounds on various social media handles such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram et al. To this end, the researchers embarked on a qualitative narrative study titled "Dettol's Hands-On Ad on COVID-19: Between Fake News and Effective PR in Nigeria" to investigate the matter. The study which used the individual differences theory as theoretical framework found that the "human coronavirus" written at the back of Dettol sanitizer refers to common cold and not COVID-19. To checkmate the trend, the paper recommended multimedia approaches, invoking media ethics and procurement of high-tech equipment as possible panacea. It concluded that with the right advice from health experts and requisite information by the press, the scourge of COVID-19 could be minimized and eventually fought.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Dettol, Fake, News, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Globally, the fear of Coronavirus has gripped everyone as the numbers of fatalities continue to rise with the pandemic spreading over 30 countries. The novel disease which simply goes by the acronym COVID-19 is both an **epidemic and a pandemic**. It is also generating tensions amidst various information and updates on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram to mention a few. Apparently, a lot of fake news and reports are shared online as to the possible cure of the disease. One of such recent messages is the hand-on advertisement (Ad) written on the label of Dettol cleanser. The said text is that of an image on the sanitizer which reads: “Kills E.Coli, Sammonella [*sic*], MRSA, Rotavirus, Flu virus, Cold viruses (Human Coronavirus and RSV).” Circulating the hands-on Ad on social media handles suggests that finally a cure has been found for COVID-19.

As at now, it is yet to be seen that Dettol has already provided cure for the deadly disease. With the avalanche of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram messages about the Dettol Disinfectant Ad which recently went viral, many people have insinuated that the company had prior knowledge of the outbreak but did not alert the public. What is more, the economic remedies for the coronavirus are dire. For instance, Reuters reported that the United States of America approved a \$8.3 billion bill for the epidemic; China earmarked 110.5 billion Yuan (\$15.9 billion) and Germany 50 billion Euros among other world powers to combat the spread of the new coronavirus and develop vaccines for the highly contagious disease (Reuters, 2020). Meanwhile, the United Nations reported that “apart from the devastating impact of the coronavirus outbreak on humans, the global economy has lost as much as \$50 billion to the disease” (Jimoh, Daka, Jeremiah, Onyedika-Ugoeze & Alabi, 2020). In Nigeria, it was reported that the federal government released N386million to two health agencies to strengthen *Coronavirus* (COVID19) preparedness in *the country* (NAN, 2020).

It is in the midst of this that purported cure of the outbreak is linked with Dettol. Perhaps the lack of regulation of social media act in Nigeria to address the menacing effect of fake news is responsible for the spread of misinformation in the society. Therefore, this study aspires to:

1. Ascertain the impact of Hand-On

2. Investigate the veracity that the Hands-On Ad at the back of Dettol disinfectant is a possible panacea for COVID-19
3. Discover the danger of fake news in the fight against Coronavirus
4. Interrogate whether the Human Coronavirus Ad that appeared on the back of Dettol is the same with the novel COVID-19 and also propose Public Relations (PR) as effective ways of enlightening the public about health issues.

## **Deconstruction of Concepts**

### *Dettol's Hands-On Ads*

In this paper, Dettol hands-on Ad refers **to the visible text laced with advertorial image on Dettol sanitizer which can be seen and** touched with the hands. The text on the image reads: "Produced in Oct 2019 before Coronavirus was introduced. How did Dettol (company) knew about this virus??" Dettol is an antiseptic used to disinfect the skin and surfaces against bacteria and germs.

### *Human Coronavirus*

Corona viruses are a large family of viruses that cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East respiratory syndrome and severe acute respiratory syndrome. They refer to the Wuhan Coronavirus outbreak which started in China on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019 (Latestly.com, 2020) which has symptoms which range from mild symptoms to severe illness and death for confirmed cases. Usually, **2-14 days after exposure, suspected patients suffer from fever, cough and shortness of breath** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a).

### *Fake News*

In this study, fake news would be understood as misinformation, disinformation and mal-information which comprises of information with little or no facts that is published based on falsehood which has devastating consequences on governments, people, businesses, information professionals, user experience designers and other groups in society. As a deliberate or intentional lie, fake news

creates confusion and mistrust among receivers making information difficult to use (Wilson & Umar, 2019).

### ***Effective PR***

As an operational definition, effective Public Relations (PR) here is the art of presenting a person or an establishment to the public through various media platforms in a way that it improves their public perception and impacts positively on their aims, objectives and output. In light of advertising, PR entails the alluring appeal business owners make to their customers for patronage and profit.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the psychological or individual diffusion theory which makes claims that the effect of media messages varies from person to person because of their individual psychological structures (Mgbejume, 2009). The theory makes the claim that it is as a result of individual differences amongst people that their judgment of reality is based upon. It makes the point that selective perception is based on an individual's psychological difference from that of others. The theory argues that different types of people select and interpret mass media content in widely different ways.

The theory proposes that individuals respond differently to the mass media according to their psychological needs. It maintains that individuals consume the mass media to satisfy specific needs like that of "information (e.g. providing statistics about players and teams), integrative (offering a sense of belonging to a group of similarly interested people), affective (e.g. by providing excitement), or escapist (helping to release pent-up emotions)" (Oxford Reference, 2020).

Although this theory talks about mass media, it also relates to social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram *et al* because most times, messages that are shared on those platforms are subject to individual interpretations unless where they are plain and explicit. This is why social media is a rich resource for selective perception as people choose what to share and who to share what with. The challenge here is the rise in the spread of misinformation, fake news and unwholesome information to unsuspecting members of the public. Sometimes,

because these media exist on virtual space, it becomes difficult to identify sources or distinguish between genuine and fake news.

Besides, there is strong evidence that “individual choice behavior can be based on affective as well as rational factors. Further, the impact of mood states on the consumer decision process appears to be a function of the valence of the current mood. Most of the studies that have investigated the role of mood or emotion in advertising have looked at the ability of ads to elicit different affective states. This work has popularized the “attitude toward the ad” stream of research which typically views this construct as an intervening variable that mediates the effects of the advertising message on brand attitudes and preferences” (Ashley, 2017).

Other scholars think that the specific effects of Ads often depend on message content and/or execution in combination with consumer characteristics (Pechmann, & Catlin, 2016). The psychological or individual diffusion theory is used here because it aligns with the submission of the authors referred to above. It is also utilized because it is appropriate to the selective perception that people are giving the Dettol hands-on Ad which is viral on social media.

## **Literature Review and Discussion**

### **COVID-19: Early Beginnings, Fatalities, Humanitarian Endemic and Preventive Measures**

COVID-19 is a new fatal disease that is characterized by mild symptoms such as runny nose, sore throat, dry cough, tiredness, fever and difficulty in breathing for severe cases. Some patients suffer aches and pains, nasal congestion, sore throat or diarrhea. The disease is fatal as older people or those who have medical conditions such as pneumonia, breathing difficulties or asthma, diabetes or heart disease are more vulnerable to being severely ill (WHO, 2020d). Since the outbreak of the deadly COVID-1 in Wuhan, China on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019 and its subsequent spread to other countries in the world, one of the crucial strategies to combat the disease has been to identify all contacts, ensure their strict isolation and to follow up daily with checks for any symptoms (Ehanire, 2020).

**Coronavirus** has affected **112 countries and territories** around the world with about 114,078 cases (Worldometers.info, 2020). According to data provided by

World Health Organization (WHO) as at 10am CET02 March 2020, the situation in terms of total numbers and new cases globally is 88 948 confirmed (1804 new); in China 80 174 confirmed (206 new) with 2915 deaths (42 new) and outside of China there are 8774 confirmed (1598 new); 64 countries (6 new) and 128 deaths (24 new). The organisation also gave the risk assessment in China, regionally and globally as very high. It highlighted that the disease has spread to six new member states (Armenia, Czechia, Dominican Republic, Luxembourg, Iceland, and Indonesia) (WHO, 2020a).

In Nigeria, first diagnosed case was that of an Italian on 27 February 2020. "Since then a total of 217 contacts were linked to the index case. Of the 217, 45 traveled out of Nigeria and 172 are presently in Nigeria. Of the 172 contacts currently in Nigeria, 69 are in Lagos, 40 in Ogun and 52 in other States, with 11 in unknown locations" (Ehanire, 2020). To arrest the situation, the Federal Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Lagos State Ministry of Health and NCDC and a team of researchers from various institutions in Nigeria which includes scientists from the Centre for Human and Zoology Virology in LUTH, African Centre for Genomics of Infectious Diseases in Redeemers University and the Nigeria Institute of Medical Research (NIMR) Lagos rose to the occasion to perform the genome sequencing of the coronavirus. On 8th March 2020, scientists also confirmed the presence of coronavirus in one of the Italian's contacts. The newly confirmed case is an Ogun State contact of the index case. This brings the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Nigeria today to two (Ehanire, 2020). Meanwhile, coronavirus is a humanitarian crisis. For instance, the case fatality rate for COVID-19 was 2.3% (Roser, Ritchie & Ortiz-Ospina 2020).

WHO has advised the public on the following preventive measures:

1. Frequent thorough washing of hands with alcohol-based hand rub or with soap and water so as to kill viruses that may be on your hands;
2. Maintain social distancing of at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing;
3. Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth to prevent transfer of the virus to other parts of the body;

4. Practice respiratory hygiene by covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze;
5. Avoid self-medication by seeking medical care early if you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing;
6. Reporting persons who are in or have recently visited (past 14 days) areas where COVID-19 is spreading to appropriate health experts
7. Staying informed and following advice given by your healthcare providers about latest developments on COVID-19 (WHOc).

### **Between Human Coronavirus and Novel COVID-19: Fact Check**

It is no longer news that the viral photo displaying the label of a Dettol disinfectant product with the mention that it is effective in fighting Corona Virus has led to confusion and misinformation. Since the appearance of the said Ad, various commentators have come out with theories such as, the company must have known about the existence of the virus before its outbreak was reported on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019. To put the facts straight, experts are of the view that “Coronaviruses are actually a family of viruses that cause infections in both mammals and humans. The virus transmits through airborne transmission. The recent 2019-nCoV is a newly emerged virus which has a similar genomic sequence as the old viruses but its source is yet to be identified. The genomic sequence of the current virus has been made available online by the researchers” (Sutaria, 2020).

Through an emailed statement, British MNC Reckitt Benckiser, the makers of Dettol, clarified that they are yet to test their product on the new strain of Coronavirus. However, the company predicted that Dettol would be effective against the novel 2019-nCoV strain. It maintained that some of their products indicated greater than 99% effectiveness against strains which belong to the same family as the 2019 Coronavirus. They, however, emphasized that they cannot confirm its efficacy in treating the new virus since Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been seen in humans before (Sutaria, 2020). BOOM discovered that the said Dettol label refers to other older strains of the Coronavirus and not the recent new Coronavirus that ravaged China. It found that

the term referred to a family of viruses which cause infections in both mammals and humans which is quite different from the recent novel Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China that lead to death of over 493 people (Sutaria, 2020).

Interestingly too, in another quarters, the point has again been made that “coronavirus is a broad category of viruses which includes a number of different respiratory illnesses. One is the common cold, but the category also includes SARS (the severe acute respiratory syndrome of which there were outbreaks in 2002 and 2004), and the new coronavirus identified in Wuhan. The ‘human coronavirus’ mentioned on the back of the Dettol bottle is almost certainly referring to the common cold. The coronavirus identified in Wuhan is a new virus, which hadn’t been identified in humans before the first cases at the end of 2019” (Rahman, 2020).

### **Dettol Ad: Fake News And Effective PR?**

#### **Fake News and the Fight against COVID-19**

It has been observed that fake news is summarily unethical, dangerous, provocative and subversive to peace and societal serenity especially in a multicultural setting like Nigeria. This is because it heightens tension and builds fear among people besides misleading the public. It is even worse when it comes to health concerns. The sheer volume of misinformation circulating across the world is overwhelming. Fake news could threaten and destroy the country. Unfortunately, in the world of advertising and PR, fake news sales for various reasons.

For example, there is often a commercial angle to news. Advertisements, whether they are done through traditional or social media outlets are attached to pecuniary reasons. No one goes into business to lose. As such, Ads are specifically designed with the customer in mind – to lure prospective buyers. It is suggestive that the manufactures of Dettol may not have envisaged a situation where their product would attract the world’s attention or patronage. However, that their sanitizers are recommended for keeping hands clean against various infections fulfills the commercial purpose of Ads. In light of our discussion, it is crucial to identify the effects of fake news on adverting with particular reference to the text on Dettol cleanser.

### *Love of Money*

In a society with low literacy level, people who are gullible could easily join the band wagon to patronize a product simply because they saw the said item being circulated on social media outlets. In the case of Dettol sanitizer, those who may not have the patience to interrogate the issues or seek proper health-guidance could actually buy as many bottles as possible hoping that doing so would protect them from the viral disease. Advertising increasing income for people (Ashley, 2017 & Samiksha, 2020).

### *Health Hazards*

Experience has shown that lack of adequate enlightenment on health-care issues has led to health hazards and deaths. It would be recalled that the scare of Ebola made many Nigerians to drink salt and bath with same. This led to the loss of lives and various health complications especially among the aged. In like manner, although there is no empirical evidence that anyone drank Dettol, lack of creating awareness could mislead the public that a cure has finally been found for the new COVID-19. In the long run, those who depend on such pedestrian news would experience health challenges.

Some Ads promote products that are harmful to the youths who often depend on television, radio, film and popular music as sources of influence for their choice about alcohol and drugs. The official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics disclosed that the negative effects of advertising on teenagers include increased cigarette and alcohol use, obesity, poor nutrition and eating disorders, according to Pediatrics" (Ashley, 2017).

### *Misinformation and Propaganda*

Social media-mania has created a mentality of pressing the share button even if one is not sure of the information. This has made social media handles temples for misinformation and propaganda. This is why, when for instance, a piece of information is shared on Facebook, in a matter of seconds, the news goes viral on several other platforms such that when it is finally discovered that the information is fake, it becomes difficult to retract. The current delete feature and limitation of sharing to only five people at a time on WhatsApp is a major step in stemming the tide of misinformation and propaganda. Mischief makers are often on the prowl

to fulfill their clandestine motives. This is view Ashley (2017) opines that: “Advertising influences how people feel about themselves – often in a negative way. These images are often unrealistic and unattainable.”

### *Customer Dissatisfaction*

Chances are that when customers realize that a certain product which is projected to provide cure for A and B does not do so in the end, they are left disenchanted, dissatisfied and discouraged. This is where the leading example of the manufacture of Dettol, British MNC Reckitt Benckiser, who came out to clarify that the human coronavirus mentioned at the back of their product is different from the new COVID-19, is worth commending. Where clarification like this one is made, it increases trust and reduces the level of customer dissatisfaction. This is key to effective PR. It has been observed that some Ads invent false “needs” and stimulates the formation of compulsive consumption habits among people which totally violates the conditions for maintaining an equilibrium (Ashley, 2017). Besides, **Ads also tend to create an unnecessary need like endless messaging often associated with sex and violence** (Suggett, 2019).

### *Fear and Panic*

Earlier in this study, we mentioned that COVID-19 is both **an epidemic and a pandemic** (WHO, 2020a). With the number of casualties across the globe coupled with the huge amounts of money being spent to fight the deadly disease, there is palpable fear and panic. Whether it is deliberate or not, one of the effects of fake news is fear. There are advert moguls who manipulate their customers through psychological means by creating a sense of danger so as to sell their products. Studies suggest that health-related communications can have significant and measurable effects on consumer cognitions, emotions and behaviors based on discounted or even counterproductive messages (Pechmann, & Catlin, 2016).

### **Dettol’s Hands-On Ad as Bandwagon Propaganda**

**According to estimates, there are about 20,000 marketing and advertising messages every single day** (Suggett, 2019). Without advertising, many businesses would fold up. This is why experts are of the view that “without advertisement,

many forms of mass media such as newspapers, radio, magazines, and television, might not exist as they do today. Advertising positively impacts society because it helps maintain mass communications media, making them much less expensive for the public" (Ashley, 2017). To this end, advertisers often use appealing techniques to sell their products. As such, the bandwagon propaganda tool comes in handy.

Both advertisers and propagandists make use of this technique to persuade the audience to buy their products. Capitalists who are into either wholesale or retail advertising often manipulate their customers through the bandwagon technique. Because this device plays on the feelings of loneliness and isolation, it also creates the impression of widespread support by reinforcing the human desire to be on the winning side (Edward, 1937) through patronizing goods because others are purchasing them.

Often times, propagandists adopt this method to convince people who are not already on the bandwagon to join in a mass movement while simultaneously reassuring that those on or partially on should stay aboard (Dyikuk & Gudaku, 2020). Perhaps this is why the Dettol Ad went viral on social media handles with each sharer claiming the company which produces the cleanser knew about COVID-19 many years ago. The news created a feeling as if those who do not share the information were late comers about the great discovery.

Interestingly, the new twist which bandwagon propaganda has now taken is that propagandists try to convince the target audience that if they don't join in, they will be left out. The phenomenon creates a sense of urgency about dissemination of such news within seconds. Studies have indicated that people join the bandwagon principally for two reasons - first, majority is the winner and the winner has great influence; second, most people like to be conformists rather than being different and as a result, make themselves vulnerable to criticism (Ronald, 2005). Therefore, from audience's perspective, the Dettol's hands-on Ad is fingered as a mere bandwagon propaganda.

## **Conclusion**

Earlier in this study, it was emphasized that the psychological or individual diffusion theory which holds this work creates room for selective perception. Unfortunately, this gives way to misinformation and breeds fake news. Because people are different by default, it becomes easy for them to perceive things differently and also subscribe to news and information based on those perceptions. This is where drawing a line between what sounds good and appeals to me and what is true and for public good comes in. Manufactures, PR professionals and advertises will always have a hard time creating awareness about useful information and public health concerns. One constant challenge in the fight against coronavirus is the fact that life is not static - people are always moving from one place to another. As a result, chances are that the disease might continue to spread. However, with the right information and advice from health experts, the scourge of COVID-19 could be minimized and eventually fought.

By way of summary, the first aim of the study was achieved because the paper ascertained that hand-On Ads have huge impact on audiences. The second aim which was to investigate the veracity that the Hands-On Ad at the back of Dettol disinfectant is a possible panacea for COVID-19 has been answered because as things stand, it is not – although it can be used as a cleanser to stop the spread of the disease. The third aim came through because the paper disclosed that fake news is a counter force to the fight against the novel coronavirus. The fourth aim which was to interrogate whether the Human Coronavirus Ad that appeared on the back of Dettol is the same with the novel COVID-19 and proposing Public Relations (PR) as effective ways of enlightening the masses about public health has been fulfilled because, first, we know that human coronavirus refers to common cold and is distinct from COVID-19; and second, the paper has highlighted the role of PR as indispensable tools for advertisement, advertorial and public enlightenment.

As it were, the claim that Dettol prevents from coronavirus is not true. This is because the producers of product disclosed that: “RB has become aware of speculation about Dettol products and the novel 2019-nCoV coronavirus. As this is an emerging outbreak, RB, like all manufacturers, doesn’t yet have access to the new virus (2019-nCoV) for testing and, as a result, are not yet in a position to confirm levels of effectiveness against the new strain” (Latestly.com, 2020).

Therefore, it is safe to conclude that “with the company’s own clarification on the image, the claim of disinfectant killing COVID-19 stands false. If you come across this image on WhatsApp or Twitter, make sure you correct the person on the partial truth of the claim” (Latestly.com, 2020). The task of curtailing fake news and ensuring effective PR is not limited to advertiser’s hands-on Ads but a collective responsibility since life is involved. On a whole, in line with the *individual differences theory* upon which this work is built, it is essential to always tailor Ads or communications to the target consumers so as to test their intended and unintended effects (Pechmann, & Catlin, 2016).

### **Recommendations**

**Multimedia Approaches:** Various media outlets could be employed to deliberately counteract fake news such as the Dettol Ad. Through the use of both traditional and social media platforms such as television, radio, newspapers and magazines as well as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram et al, rumors such as those associated with the alleged COVID-19 cure could be quashed. This is in addition to the use of billboards and public enlightenment campaigns aimed at creating awareness about the deadly disease and preventive procedures. British MNC Reckitt Benckiser, the makers of Dettol could also utilize multi-media approaches to advertise these brands and make the facts straight.

**Invoking Media Ethics:** Print and broadcast media have clear codes of conduct regarding content that incites violence but unfortunately, these regulations do not specifically mention dangerous news. To this end, it crucial to fill this void in terms of making clear regulations about fake news which are often published in print media or online for either commercial purposes or to cause unnecessary panic. In this vein, is crucial to hold fast to the doctrine of humanistic ethics which hinges on doing what is best for society (Dyikuk & Gudaku, 2020). The media plays an enviable role in forming public opinion about health concerns especially in the area of creating awareness (Dyikuk, 2017).

**Public Enlightenment Campaigns:** While the set of guidelines provided by The World Health Organization which include maintaining personal hygiene by washing hands with soap and water or using a alcohol based disinfectant is a right step in the right direction, the measure taken by manufacturers of Dettol to publish advisories on a poster in all the different countries that they operate in to create

awareness about the new virus (Sutaria, 2020) is even more laudable. Public enlightenment campaigns are at the heart of creating a clean bill of health for the nation.

**Procurement of High-Tech Equipment:** In line with the recommendations of The World Health Organization (WHO) governments should manufacture or procure high-tech personal protective equipment to meet rising global demands of COVID-19 (Jimoh, Daka, Jeremiah, Onyedika-Ugoeze & Alabi, 2020). Institutions like The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) should also be proactive in this regard (Amujo & Melewar, 2011). This involves putting state-of-the-art facilities in place (Dyikuk, 2017b) to address this endemic disease.

**Protecting Public Health:** Media professionals and regulators of the media space should rise up to promote practices that protect public health on the one hand and proscribe those that are detrimental to the health of the citizenry. The Ministry of Health and Nigeria Centre for Disease Control through the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should expedite action in creating awareness about the difference between the new COVID-19 and the Human Coronavirus which Dettol can prevent.

**Ensuring Civility of Language:** The onus lies on media corporations and professional associations and organisations like the Nigerian Press Council, Nigeria Union of Journalists, Public Relations Professionals, Advertisers Association of Nigeria, Standards Organisation of Nigeria and the Federal Ministry of Health to monitor Ads towards ensuring that only authentic ones which employ civility are allowed. Journalists working in media organisations should help to expunge fake news from the lexicon of the press even as they refrain from using offensive, abusive, or vulgar language which glorifies propaganda, hate speech and fake news (Dyikuk & Gudaku, 2020).

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