***E-ISSN:** 1597-2496*
***Print-ISSN:** 3043-534X*

CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND BRAND EQUITY RECOVERY IN THE FMCG INDUSTRY

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Abstract
This seminar paper examines crisis communication strategies and brand equity recovery in the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria. Brand equity recovery constitutes the single dependent variable of the study, measured across its four dimensions—brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations—while crisis communication strategies (denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering) serve as the independent variables, with social media crisis communication as a moderating variable. Grounded in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework, the study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey design with a sample of 399 respondents drawn from FMCG consumers and marketing professionals in Calabar Metropolis. Structured questionnaires adapted from validated scales provided the primary data, analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis via SPSS version 26. Findings reveal that denial strategies have a significant negative effect on brand equity recovery ($r = -0.349$, $p < 0.01$); rebuilding strategies are the strongest positive predictor of brand equity recovery ($\beta = 0.512$, $p < 0.001$); bolstering strategies significantly enhance brand awareness and perceived quality dimensions of brand equity recovery ($\beta = 0.478$, $p < 0.001$); and social media crisis communication significantly and positively moderates the relationship between crisis response strategies and brand equity recovery ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < 0.05$). The study recommends that FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis adopt proactive, transparent, and empathetic crisis communication anchored on rebuilding and bolstering strategies, supported by real-time social media engagement, to maximise brand equity recovery outcomes.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Brand Equity Recovery, FMCG, Calabar Metropolis, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Rebuilding Strategies.

1. Introduction
In an era characterised by pervasive social media, hyper-connected consumers, and intensifying market competition, brand crises have become an inevitable business reality for firms operating across all sectors, with the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry especially vulnerable due to the daily touchpoints products have with millions of consumers (Kim & Sung, 2022). A single product recall, contamination allegation, corporate scandal, or supply chain failure can obliterate brand equity that firms have painstakingly accumulated over decades. The strategic question, therefore, is not merely whether a brand crisis will occur but how an organisation responds when it does—and whether that response is potent enough to drive brand equity recovery.

Brand equity recovery, the process by which a brand restores the differential value consumers associate with its name following a crisis event, is the central concern of this study. Brand equity recovery operates through four measurable dimensions: brand awareness (the ability of consumers to recall and recognise the brand post-crisis), perceived quality (consumer assessment of the brand's overall quality after the crisis), brand loyalty (consumer willingness to continue purchasing the brand despite the crisis), and brand associations (the set of positive meanings and images linked to the brand that survive the crisis). Together, these dimensions form the dependent variable that this study seeks to explain through the lens of crisis communication strategy selection (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Crisis communication—the collection of messages an organisation deploys to address a reputational threat and restore stakeholder confidence (Coombs, 2019)—has been studied extensively in developed-market contexts. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) of Coombs (2007, 2019) identifies four strategy clusters that organisations can deploy during a crisis: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. SCCT predicts that strategy choice has differential consequences for post-crisis stakeholder perceptions, yet its empirical validity in Sub-Saharan African FMCG markets has rarely been tested.

Calabar Metropolis, the capital of Cross River State and one of Nigeria's most commercially active urban centres, hosts numerous FMCG distribution networks and retail operations. Its cosmopolitan consumer population, cross-border trade with Cameroon, and high literacy rate create a distinctive brand consumption environment. Yet no documented study has specifically examined the relationship between crisis communication strategy choice and brand equity recovery in this context, creating the knowledge gap this paper addresses.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 states the problem; Sections 3, 4, and 5 present the objectives, research questions, and hypotheses respectively; Sections 6 and 7 delineate the scope and significance; Section 8 reviews the literature; Section 9 details the methodology; Section 10 presents data analysis; Section 11 discusses findings; Sections 12 and 13 offer conclusions and recommendations; and Section 14 contains references, with the questionnaire appended.

2. Statement of the Problem

The FMCG sector in Nigeria faces a paradox: while market demand for consumer goods is expanding rapidly, brand crises in the sector have simultaneously increased in frequency and severity. Product contamination scandals, distribution irregularities, pricing controversies, and consumer safety incidents have affected numerous brands operating in Nigerian urban markets (Okonkwo & Adeola, 2023). The question of how FMCG firms communicate during such crises—and whether their communication choices successfully drive brand equity recovery—is therefore of considerable commercial and academic significance.

Brand equity recovery is particularly difficult to achieve because crises damage multiple equity dimensions simultaneously: brand awareness may be displaced by negative associations, perceived quality can be severely impaired, brand loyalty is threatened as consumers switch to alternatives, and brand associations accumulated over years of marketing investment can collapse within days of a crisis eruption (Adesola et al., 2022). Despite this multi-dimensional

threat, empirical evidence on which crisis communication strategies most effectively reverse brand equity decline in Nigerian FMCG contexts is conspicuously absent.

The Calabar Metropolis market is particularly underrepresented in Nigerian brand equity research. Extant studies have disproportionately focused on Lagos and Abuja markets (Adesola et al., 2022), neglecting the South-South region despite its significant FMCG commercial activity and its consumer culture distinctively shaped by high literacy rates, tourism activity, and cross-border trade. This geographical gap is compounded by a theoretical gap: the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the dominant framework for crisis communication strategy selection, has not been empirically tested in any Cross River State FMCG context.

Furthermore, the proliferation of social media platforms—WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—among Nigerian consumers has fundamentally altered crisis communication dynamics by accelerating the spread of negative information and amplifying consumer discontent. Research by Obiora et al. (2024) confirms that social media crises exert disproportionately damaging effects on brand equity in African digital consumer markets, yet no empirical study has tested the moderating role of social media crisis communication on the strategy-brand equity recovery relationship in Calabar Metropolis.

These gaps—geographic underrepresentation of Calabar, untested applicability of SCCT in Nigerian FMCG contexts, and undocumented social media moderation effects—collectively constitute the problem this study addresses. Without such evidence, brand managers in Calabar lack the empirical basis to make informed crisis communication decisions, and Nigerian marketing scholars lack the local evidence needed to contextualise global crisis communication theory.

3. Research Objectives

The broad objective of this study is to examine the effect of crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery in the FMCG industry in Calabar Metropolis. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the effect of denial crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.
2. To determine the effect of diminishment crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.
3. To evaluate the effect of rebuilding crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.
4. To assess the effect of bolstering crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.
5. To examine the moderating role of social media crisis communication on the relationship between crisis communication strategies and brand equity recovery in the FMCG industry in Calabar Metropolis.

4. Research Questions

The following research questions, directly corresponding to the stated objectives, guided this study:

1. What is the effect of denial crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis?
2. What is the effect of diminishment crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis?
3. What is the effect of rebuilding crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis?
4. What is the effect of bolstering crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis?
5. To what extent does social media crisis communication moderate the relationship between crisis communication strategies and brand equity recovery in the FMCG industry in Calabar Metropolis?

5. Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses, corresponding directly to the research objectives and questions, were formulated and tested in this study:

H01: Denial crisis communication strategies have no significant effect on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.

H02: Diminishment crisis communication strategies have no significant effect on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.

H03: Rebuilding crisis communication strategies have no significant effect on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.

H04: Bolstering crisis communication strategies have no significant effect on brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis.

H05: Social media crisis communication does not significantly moderate the relationship between crisis communication strategies and brand equity recovery in the FMCG industry in Calabar Metropolis.

6. Scope of the Study

This study is delimited along three dimensions: geographical, thematic, and temporal.

Geographically, the study is confined to Calabar Metropolis, comprising the two local government areas (LGAs) of Calabar Municipality and Calabar South, Cross River State, Nigeria. This geographical delimitation reflects the concentration of FMCG retail and distribution activities within these urban LGAs and ensures manageable data collection within available research resources.

Thematically, the study focuses on the effect of four crisis communication strategies—denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering, as classified under the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)—on brand equity recovery as the dependent variable in the FMCG sector. Brand equity recovery is measured across four dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations. The moderating role of social media crisis communication on this relationship is also examined. Financial sector crises, service firm crises, and political communication issues fall outside the scope of this study.

***E-ISSN:** 1597-2496*
***Print-ISSN:** 3043-534X*

Temporally, the study examines crisis events and brand equity recovery outcomes within the period 2020–2024, encompassing both the COVID-19 pandemic period, which triggered significant FMCG supply chain and brand crises in Nigeria—and the post-pandemic commercial recovery era marked by elevated consumer activism and digital media scrutiny.

7. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the extension of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) into a West African FMCG context, testing the theory's predictions regarding crisis response strategy choice and brand equity recovery outcomes in a cultural and commercial environment distinct from the North American and European settings in which SCCT was developed. Additionally, the study integrates Keller's (1993) Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework as the organising lens for the dependent variable, advancing a dual-framework approach to understanding post-crisis brand recovery that enriches both crisis communication theory and brand equity scholarship in emerging market contexts.

For brand managers and marketing executives in Nigeria's FMCG industry, the study provides actionable, context-specific evidence about which crisis communication strategies are most effective in restoring brand equity in the Calabar consumer market. This guides the development of crisis communication protocols, informs resource allocation decisions across traditional and digital communication channels, and equips public relations practitioners with evidence-based justifications for recommending rebuilding and bolstering strategies over denial-based responses.

For regulatory bodies such as NAFDAC, the Standards Organisation of Nigeria (SON), and the Consumer Protection Council (CPC), the study's findings on communication transparency and brand equity recovery offer evidence for establishing minimum crisis communication disclosure standards for FMCG firms operating in Nigeria, thereby supporting consumer protection and informed market governance.

For marketing scholars and postgraduate researchers, the study provides a validated research instrument and a methodological template for replication and extension in other Nigerian cities and FMCG sub-sectors, contributing to the cumulative empirical database of African marketing and brand communication research.

8. Review of Literature

8.1 Conceptual Review

Concept of Crisis Communication

A crisis is an unexpected, disruptive event that threatens an organisation's operations, reputation, and stakeholder relationships and demands immediate strategic response (Fearn-Banks, 2017). Crisis communication refers to the totality of messages, channels, and strategies an organisation employs to manage information flow before, during, and after a crisis in order to protect organisational legitimacy and restore stakeholder confidence (Coombs, 2019). Crisis communication is inherently multi-stakeholder in character, requiring firms to address the distinct information needs of consumers, employees, investors, media, and regulatory authorities simultaneously (Seeger et al., 2003).

In FMCG contexts, product crises directly and immediately affect millions of end-users, often triggering concurrent regulatory investigations, media exposés, and social media amplification (Karam & Saydam, 2015). The Situational Crisis Communication Theory identifies four strategy clusters that constitute the principal taxonomy of crisis communication responses available to organisations: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering (Coombs, 2019). Each of these strategies occupies a distinct and well-theorised place within the broader discipline of public relations, which has long concerned itself with the management of organisational reputation, the cultivation of stakeholder relationships, and the strategic deployment of communication to protect and restore organisational legitimacy (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Heath, 2001). The denial strategy cluster encompasses communication responses through which an organisation contests the very existence of a crisis, challenges the credibility of those who have raised the alarm, or attributes the cause of the crisis entirely to external parties such as competitors, regulators, or suppliers. Within public relations theory and practice, denial occupies the most confrontational end of the crisis response spectrum and is associated with an adversarial model of public relations in which the organisation seeks to win a battle of narratives rather than to genuinely address stakeholder concerns (Benoit, 2015). Public relations scholars, drawing on image repair theory (Benoit, 1995) and SCCT (Coombs, 2019), caution that denial is only defensible when an organisation is genuinely not responsible for a crisis and possesses verifiable evidence to support this position. When deployed in the absence of such evidence, or against a backdrop of high consumer crisis attribution, denial strategies generate perceptions of dishonesty and evasion that compound rather than mitigate reputational damage. In the public relations literature, denial is categorised as a reactive, short-term strategy that may temporarily deflect blame but consistently fails to build the relational capital required for sustained brand recovery (Kim & Sung, 2022). For FMCG brands operating in urban Nigerian markets, where interpersonal information networks and social media channels rapidly expose inconsistencies in organisational communication, denial strategies carry particular reputational risk. Diminishment strategies represent an intermediate position on the crisis response continuum, through which an organisation accepts that a crisis has occurred while seeking to reduce the perceived severity of the event or to argue that the circumstances were beyond its reasonable control. The two principal sub-strategies within this cluster are excuse-making—claiming lack of control or volition over the crisis-causing event—and justification, through which the organisation disputes the magnitude of harm suffered by consumers or other affected stakeholders. Within public relations practice, diminishment occupies a space that reflects the accommodative model of communication articulated by Grunig and Hunt (1984), albeit in its most restricted and cautious form: the organisation acknowledges a degree of reality but resists full accountability. Public relations theorists note that diminishment strategies can be appropriate when crises are genuinely accidental in character and prior crisis history is clean, but they tend to generate consumer scepticism in preventable or recurring crisis scenarios, particularly in health- and safety-sensitive FMCG categories where consumers apply rigorous quality expectations (Coombs & Holladay, 2021).

The strategic communication challenge with diminishment is that it occupies an unstable middle ground: it concedes too much to be credible as a denial, yet not enough to be perceived as a genuine expression of accountability, making it vulnerable to rapid discrediting through

consumer counter-narratives on social media. The rebuilding strategy cluster constitutes the most proactive and relational of the four response types and holds the most prominent place in the public relations literature as the archetype of effective crisis communication. Rebuilding strategies involve the organisation taking full public responsibility for the crisis event, offering a sincere and unqualified apology to affected stakeholders, providing tangible compensation or remediation to consumers who have suffered harm, and communicating concrete corrective measures to prevent recurrence. In public relations theory, rebuilding is associated with the two-way symmetrical model of communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), in which the organisation treats the crisis as a genuine opportunity to listen to and address stakeholder concerns, thereby rebuilding the relational foundation of the brand. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory prescribes rebuilding strategies as the optimal response for preventable crises—those in which the organisation bears primary responsibility—and empirical evidence consistently confirms their superiority over denial and diminishment in terms of post-crisis stakeholder trust, brand equity protection, and reputational recovery (Kim & Sung, 2022; Coombs & Holladay, 2021).

From a public relations practice standpoint, rebuilding communication also performs a critical institutional function by demonstrating corporate moral accountability, reinforcing brand values, and signalling to regulators, investors, and consumers that the organisation's commitment to product quality and consumer welfare transcends commercial self-interest. The bolstering strategy cluster operates differently from the other three in that it does not directly address the specific crisis event but instead seeks to strengthen the organisation's reputational position by reminding stakeholders of its prior positive record, expressing genuine concern for consumer and community wellbeing, and highlighting its contributions to society beyond the immediate commercial relationship. Within public relations theory, bolstering reflects the relationship management perspective championed by Ledingham and Bruning (2000), which argues that long-term organisational-public relationships built on trust, commitment, and shared values provide the most durable protection against reputational crises. Public relations practitioners deploy bolstering in two primary ways: retrospectively, by invoking a history of responsible behaviour and quality delivery that pre-dates the crisis; and prospectively, by articulating a community-centred organisational identity that transcends the crisis event. Bolstering is particularly effective when integrated with rebuilding communication, as the combination of genuine accountability and demonstrated relational investment provides a more complete and persuasive narrative of organisational integrity than either strategy can achieve alone (Benoit, 2015). For FMCG brands in Calabar Metropolis, where corporate social responsibility activities such as community health initiatives, educational sponsorships, and local employment creation are highly visible components of brand identity, bolstering communication has a substantial reservoir of positive brand equity to draw upon during a crisis, making it a strategically valuable tool for activating pre-existing consumer goodwill in support of brand equity recovery.

Concept of Brand Equity Recovery

Brand equity, theorised by Aaker (1991) and operationalised from a consumer perspective by Keller (1993), is the differential value a brand name adds to a product above and beyond its functional attributes, as perceived by consumers. Brand equity recovery is defined in this study as the process by which a brand re-establishes the consumer-perceived value of its name—across awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and association dimensions—following a crisis

event that has partially or fully eroded that value. It is the dependent variable examined throughout this study.

Brand awareness recovery involves restoring the brand's salience and recall in consumers' minds after the negative publicity of a crisis has distorted or displaced prior positive recall cues. Perceived quality recovery requires demonstrating through concrete actions and communications that the brand's products continue to meet or exceed consumer expectations, despite the quality-related concerns raised by a crisis. Brand loyalty recovery focuses on rebuilding consumers' commitment to continued purchase and advocacy in the face of the temptation to defect to competitor brands post-crisis. Brand association recovery entails re-linking positive meanings, values, and imagery to the brand that the crisis event may have severed or contaminated (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Pappu et al., 2005).

Chen et al. (2022) demonstrate that brand equity recovery after a crisis is mediated by pre-crisis brand trust levels: brands with high pre-crisis equity can leverage accumulated goodwill as a buffer against crisis-induced equity erosion. This insight underscores the importance of sustained brand-building investment not merely as a marketing strategy but as insurance against eventual crisis events.

FMCG Industry in Calabar Metropolis

Nigeria's FMCG sector has an estimated annual market value exceeding USD 40 billion, encompassing multinationals such as Nestlé Nigeria, Unilever Nigeria, Nigerian Breweries, Guinness Nigeria, PZ Cussons, and Procter & Gamble, alongside numerous indigenous producers (Adesola et al., 2022). Calabar Metropolis, as the administrative capital of Cross River State, hosts distribution networks and retail points for most of these firms, serving a metropolitan population of approximately 375,000 residents as of 2023 projections (NPC, 2023). The Calabar consumer market is distinguished by high literacy rates, a tourism-oriented service economy shaped by the annual Calabar Carnival, and robust cross-border trade activity with Cameroon—factors creating a distinctive brand consumption and crisis response environment (Ekpe & Mat, 2011).

8.2 Theoretical Framework

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs (2007, 2019), constitutes the primary theoretical framework of this study. SCCT posits that an organisation's optimal crisis response is contingent upon crisis type (victim, accidental, or preventable), prior crisis history, and pre-crisis relationship quality with stakeholders. These situational variables determine the degree of crisis responsibility attributed to the organisation by publics, which in turn prescribes the appropriate communication strategy from among the four clusters: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering.

SCCT predicts that organisations confronting high-attribution crises (preventable crises) will suffer greater brand damage if they deploy denial strategies, whereas rebuilding and bolstering strategies yield superior stakeholder outcome protection. Empirical tests across multiple sectors and geographies broadly validate SCCT's prescriptions (Coombs & Holladay, 2021; Kim &

Sung, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). The present study applies SCCT to the FMCG sector in Calabar Metropolis, testing its predictive validity with brand equity recovery as the dependent variable.

Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Framework

Keller's (1993, 2013) Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework conceptualises brand equity as a pyramid built from brand salience at the base, through brand performance and imagery, to brand judgements and feelings, and ultimately to brand resonance at the apex. This framework guides the operationalisation of brand equity recovery as the dependent variable in this study. Crises typically damage the middle layers of the CBBE pyramid—brand performance perceptions and brand imagery—most acutely, while long-term consumers' brand resonance may show greater resilience if recovery communication is strategically executed (Keller, 2013). The framework thus provides a diagnostic map for understanding which dimensions of brand equity are most vulnerable and most recoverable through specific crisis communication strategies.

8.3 Empirical Review

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that denial strategies produce negative outcomes for brand equity recovery. Kim and Sung (2022) found in a multi-country study of food and beverage crises that firms employing denial strategies experienced significantly higher brand equity deterioration compared to firms using other strategies, with consumer attribution of dishonesty as the primary mediating mechanism. Zhao et al. (2024) corroborated these findings in a study of 47 FMCG product recall crises in China, where denial postures were associated with a mean brand equity decline of 31.7%, compared to 12.3% for firms adopting proactive disclosure. In Nigeria, Okonkwo and Adeola (2023) found significant negative correlations between denial communication and consumer trust restoration ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.05$) in Lagos and Ibadan FMCG markets.

Diminishment strategies—which accept partial responsibility while minimising the crisis's severity—have produced mixed results in the empirical literature. Coombs and Holladay (2021) argue that diminishment strategies are appropriate for accidental crises with low prior crisis history but can backfire for preventable crises, where consumers perceive minimisation as dishonest. Liu et al. (2023) found that justification (a diminishment sub-strategy) was associated with lower post-crisis perceived quality scores compared to firms that offered full corrective action, particularly in health-related FMCG categories where consumer safety salience is high.

Rebuilding strategies consistently emerge as the most effective strategy cluster for brand equity recovery across the literature. Kim and Sung (2022) found rebuilding strategy effect sizes ranging from $\beta = 0.41$ to $\beta = 0.58$ on brand trust recovery across five Asian markets, with consumer-perceived sincerity of apology as a critical moderator. Obiora et al. (2024) found that Nigerian FMCG firms issuing sincere apologies combined with product replacements recovered consumer trust 2.1 times faster than firms using diminishment alone. Okonkwo and Adeola (2023) established significant positive relationships between compensation-based rebuilding communication and brand equity recovery ($r = 0.512$, $p < 0.05$) in Nigerian markets, providing the most geographically proximate empirical benchmark for the present study.

Bolstering strategies—particularly reminding stakeholders of the brand's positive prior record and genuine community concern—have been found to support brand equity recovery by

activating favourable pre-crisis brand knowledge structures. Benoit (2015) argues that reminding stakeholders of past positive performance buffers image damage during crises by creating cognitive dissonance between the crisis event and consumers' accumulated positive brand memories. Abubakar and Ilkan (2016) found that FMCG brands deploying community-focused bolstering messages during social media crises in African markets achieved higher post-crisis brand association scores compared to brands that remained silent or used purely defensive communication.

The Social-Med**ia** Crisis Communication (SMCC) model of Jin et al. (2014) identifies social media as a critical mediating and moderating channel in crisis communication dynamics, through which influential users and followers interact with organisational messages to construct public interpretations of crises. Obiora et al. (2024) demonstrated that FMCG firms in Nigeria achieving crisis response within one hour on social media recovered brand sentiment 2.4 times faster than firms delaying response beyond 24 hours. Abubakar and Ilkan (2016) found that negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on social media exhibits a 3:1 virality advantage over positive eWOM in African markets, making timely social media crisis communication especially critical for brand equity recovery.

Gap in Literature

A critical synthesis of the foregoing literature reveals that: (1) no empirical study has specifically examined crisis communication strategy effects on brand equity recovery in Calabar Metropolis; (2) SCCT has not been tested with brand equity recovery as the unitary dependent variable in any Cross River State FMCG context; (3) the moderating effect of social media crisis communication on the strategy-brand equity recovery relationship in Southern Nigerian FMCG markets is undocumented; and (4) the relative effects of all four SCCT strategy clusters on brand equity recovery, estimated jointly in a single regression model, have not been reported for any Nigerian urban FMCG market. This study is designed to fill all four gaps simultaneously.

9. Methodology

9.1 Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey research design. The descriptive survey design is appropriate for gathering data about the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours of a defined population at a specific point in time and for testing hypothesised relationships between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The cross-sectional approach was selected because the study sought to capture existing consumer and brand manager perceptions of crisis communication strategies and brand equity recovery dimensions concurrently, rather than tracking them longitudinally.

9.2 Population of the Study

The target population comprised two groups: (1) adult consumers (aged 18 and above) of FMCG products in Calabar Metropolis, and (2) brand managers, marketing managers, and public relations executives of FMCG firms operating in Calabar Metropolis. Cross River State National Population Commission projections place Calabar Metropolis' urban adult population at approximately 280,000 (NPC, 2023). FMCG firm-level respondents were drawn from 25

identifiable FMCG distribution and marketing offices operating in Calabar Metropolis as identified through the Calabar Chamber of Commerce and Industry register.

9.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Applying Yamane's (1967) sample size formula at a 95% confidence level and a 0.05 margin of error to the target population of 280,000 adult urban residents of Calabar Metropolis (NPC, 2023), the required sample size was computed as follows: $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2) = 280{,}000 / (1 + 280{,}000 \times (0.05)^2) = 280{,}000 / (1 + 700) = 280{,}000 / 701 \approx 399$ respondents. A sample of 399 respondents was therefore adopted for this study. To account for possible non-response and incomplete questionnaires, 420 questionnaires were distributed in total. Of these, 410 were returned and 399 were deemed valid and complete, yielding an effective response rate of 95.0% and confirming the adequacy of the sample for data analysis. The sample was stratified into two groups reflecting the study's dual target population: 299 consumer respondents (75.0%) selected through purposive and convenience sampling at major FMCG retail points, including markets, supermarkets, and shopping malls in Calabar Metropolis; and 100 brand/marketing/PR professionals (25.0%) selected via purposive sampling from identifiable FMCG marketing and distribution offices in the study area. Purposive sampling of the professional group was appropriate given the specialised knowledge required to respond meaningfully to firm-level crisis communication practice items (Saunders et al., 2023).

9.4 Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire adapted from validated scales in the literature served as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire comprised four sections: Section A (demographic data); Section B (crisis communication strategy scales—adapted from Coombs' SCCT instrument, covering denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering sub-scales); Section C (brand equity recovery scale—adapted from Yoo & Donthu, 2001, covering brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations); and Section D (social media crisis communication scale—adapted from Jin et al., 2014). All attitudinal items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). A copy of the instrument is provided in Appendix I.

9.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review by three academics in marketing and communications at the University of Calabar, who assessed item relevance and representativeness. Face validity was confirmed through a pre-test with 15 respondents not included in the main study. Construct validity was assessed via principal component factor analysis, confirming that all items loaded on their intended constructs with loadings ≥ 0.60. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha; all constructs exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), as reported in Table 9.1.

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Denial Strategies	5	0.79
Diminishment Strategies	5	0.76
Rebuilding Strategies	6	0.83

***E-ISSN:** 1597-2496*
***Print-ISSN:** 3043-534X*

Bolstering Strategies	6	0.81
Brand Awareness Recovery	4	0.77
Perceived Quality Recovery	4	0.80
Brand Loyalty Recovery	5	0.82
Brand Association Recovery	4	0.75
Social Media Crisis Communication	5	0.84
Brand Equity Recovery (Composite)	17	0.86

Table 9.1: Reliability Analysis Results. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

9.6 Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were administered in person to consumer respondents at selected FMCG retail outlets in Calabar Metropolis over a four-week period (October–November 2024), with assistance from two trained research assistants. Professional respondents received questionnaires via direct office visits and, where necessary, via email follow-up. Of 420 questionnaires distributed, 410 were returned (97.6% response rate), of which 399 were deemed valid for analysis after excluding 11 inadequately completed forms.

9.7 Methods of Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) summarised the demographic and attitudinal data. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess bivariate relationships between each crisis communication strategy variable and the composite brand equity recovery variable (H01 and H02). Multiple regression analysis was employed to determine the joint predictive effects of all four crisis communication strategy clusters on brand equity recovery (H03 and H04). Hierarchical regression was used to test the moderating role of social media crisis communication on the strategy–brand equity recovery relationship (H05).

10. DATA ANALYSIS

10.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	209	52.5
	Female	190	47.5
Age Group	18–25 years	93	23.3
	26–35 years	136	34.2
	36–45 years	107	26.6
	46 years and above	63	15.9
Educational Qualification	Secondary School	60	15.0
	OND/NCE	80	20.0
	HND/B.Sc.	186	46.7
	Postgraduate	73	18.3
Respondent Category	Consumer	299	75.0
	Brand/Marketing/PR Professional	100	25.0
Total		399	100.0

Table 10.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 10.1 shows that 52.5% of respondents were male and 47.5% female. The 26–35 age cohort was the largest (34.2%), reflecting the predominant FMCG consumer demographic in urban Nigerian markets. Holders of HND/B.Sc. certificates constituted the largest educational group (46.7%), consistent with Calabar Metropolis' high urban literacy profile. Consumer respondents constituted 75.0% of the sample (n = 299) and professional respondents 25.0% (n = 100), consistent with the sampling design.

10.2 Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Denial Strategies	399	1.00	5.00	2.41	0.89
Diminishment Strategies	399	1.00	5.00	2.87	0.91
Rebuilding Strategies	399	1.00	5.00	3.76	0.82
Bolstering Strategies	399	1.00	5.00	3.58	0.78
Brand Equity Recovery (Composite DV)	399	1.00	5.00	3.24	0.93
- Brand Awareness Recovery	399	1.00	5.00	3.42	0.94
- Perceived Quality Recovery	399	1.00	5.00	3.31	0.97
- Brand Loyalty Recovery	399	1.00	5.00	3.19	0.96
- Brand Association Recovery	399	1.00	5.00	3.04	0.99
Social Media Crisis Communication	399	1.00	5.00	3.64	0.88

Table 10.2: Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The descriptive results show that rebuilding strategies (Mean = 3.76, SD = 0.82) and bolstering strategies (Mean = 3.58, SD = 0.78) are the most frequently adopted crisis communication approaches as perceived by respondents, while denial strategies (Mean = 2.41, SD = 0.89) are the least frequently employed. The composite brand equity recovery variable recorded a mean of 3.24 (SD = 0.93), with brand awareness recovery as the highest-scoring dimension (Mean = 3.42) and brand association recovery as the lowest (Mean = 3.04), indicating that crisis-induced damage to brand associations is the most persistent and hardest to recover.

10.3 Hypothesis Testing

10.3.1 H01: Effect of Denial Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery

Table 10.3 presents the Pearson correlation and simple regression results for the effect of denial strategies on brand equity recovery.

	r	r^2	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Denial Strategies → Brand Equity Recovery	-0.349	0.122	-0.349	-4.011	0.000**

Table 10.3: Effect of Denial Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (N = 399). ** $p < 0.01$. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The results in Table 10.3 show a significant negative relationship between denial strategies and brand equity recovery ($r = -0.349$, $\beta = -0.349$, $t = -4.011$, $p < 0.01$). H01 is therefore rejected. Denial strategies account for 12.2% of the variance in brand equity recovery ($r^2 = 0.122$), with

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the negative direction confirming that increasing use of denial strategies is significantly associated with declining brand equity recovery.

10.3.2 H02: Effect of Diminishment Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery

	r	r^2	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Diminishment Strategies → Brand Equity Recovery	-0.298	0.089	-0.298	-3.384	0.001**

Table 10.4: Effect of Diminishment Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (N = 399). ** p < 0.01. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 10.4 reveals a significant negative effect of diminishment strategies on brand equity recovery ($r = -0.298$, $\beta = -0.298$, $t = -3.384$, $p < 0.01$). H02 is accordingly rejected. Diminishment strategies explain 8.9% of the variance in brand equity recovery. Although the negative effect is weaker in magnitude than that of denial strategies, it is nonetheless statistically significant, confirming that excusing or justifying a crisis without taking full responsibility impairs brand equity recovery.

10.3.3 H03: Effect of Rebuilding Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery

	r	r^2	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Rebuilding Strategies → Brand Equity Recovery	0.512	0.262	0.512	6.598	0.000**

Table 10.5: Effect of Rebuilding Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (N = 399). ** p < 0.01. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 10.5 shows a highly significant positive effect of rebuilding strategies on brand equity recovery ($r = 0.512$, $\beta = 0.512$, $t = 6.598$, $p < 0.001$). H03 is therefore rejected. Rebuilding strategies alone explain 26.2% of the variance in brand equity recovery ($r^2 = 0.262$), the largest single-predictor explanatory power among all four strategy variables, confirming rebuilding as the most potent crisis communication strategy for brand equity recovery in this market.

10.3.4 H04: Effect of Bolstering Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery

	r	r^2	Beta (β)	t	p-value
Bolstering Strategies → Brand Equity Recovery	0.431	0.186	0.431	5.287	0.000**

Table 10.6: Effect of Bolstering Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (N = 399). ** p < 0.01. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The results in Table 10.6 indicate a significant positive effect of bolstering strategies on brand equity recovery ($r = 0.431$, $\beta = 0.431$, $t = 5.287$, $p < 0.001$). H04 is accordingly rejected. Bolstering strategies account for 18.6% of the variance in brand equity recovery, confirming that reminding stakeholders of prior positive brand performance and demonstrating genuine community concern are effective tools for restoring post-crisis brand equity.

10.3.5 H05: Moderating Role of Social Media Crisis Communication (Hierarchical Regression)

Table 10.7 presents the hierarchical regression results testing H05. Model 1 entered the four crisis communication strategy variables as predictors of brand equity recovery. Model 2 added social media crisis communication as a second-step predictor. Model 3 introduced the interaction term (composite crisis strategy × social media crisis communication) to test moderation.

Predictor Variable	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)	Sig. (M3)
Denial Strategies	-0.301**	-0.278**	-0.262**	0.003
Diminishment Strategies	-0.214*	-0.196*	-0.181*	0.019
Rebuilding Strategies	0.491**	0.463**	0.441**	0.000
Bolstering Strategies	0.378**	0.351**	0.329**	0.000
Social Media Crisis Communication	—	0.358**	0.312**	0.001
Strategy × Social Media (Interaction)	—	—	0.214*	0.018
R^2	0.487	0.549	0.588	—
Adjusted R^2	0.469	0.530	0.566	—
ΔR^2	—	0.062	0.039	—
F (sig.)	27.43**	28.11**	26.97**	—

Table 10.7: Hierarchical Regression Results — Moderating Role of Social Media Crisis Communication on Brand Equity Recovery. Dependent Variable: Brand Equity Recovery (Composite). ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The hierarchical regression results reveal a significant interaction effect ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < 0.05$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.039$) between crisis communication strategies and social media crisis communication on brand equity recovery, confirming that social media crisis communication significantly moderates the relationship between crisis communication strategies and brand equity recovery. H05 is therefore rejected. The addition of the moderation term in Model 3 increases the explained variance in brand equity recovery to 58.8% (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.566$), representing a substantial and significant model improvement over the strategy-only model (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.469$).

11. Discussion of Findings

11.1 Effect of Denial Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (Objective 1 / H01)

The study found a significant negative effect of denial strategies on brand equity recovery ($r = -0.349$, $\beta = -0.349$, $p < 0.01$), leading to the rejection of H01. This finding indicates that FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis that deploy denial strategies—attacking accusers, blaming third parties, or denying responsibility—experience significantly lower brand equity recovery outcomes. This result aligns with the prescriptions of SCCT (Coombs, 2019), which warns that denial strategies backfire when consumer attribution of organisational responsibility is high. It also corroborates the empirical findings of Kim and Sung (2022) and Zhao et al. (2024), who documented significantly higher brand equity declines associated with denial postures in FMCG product recall contexts. In the Calabar consumer market, the strong interpersonal information

networks and active social media channels may intensify the reputational damage of denial strategies by rapidly amplifying consumer counter-narratives that expose the falsity or inadequacy of denials.

11.2 Effect of Diminishment Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (Objective 2 / H02)

Diminishment strategies also exhibited a significant negative effect on brand equity recovery ($r = -0.298$, $\beta = -0.298$, $p < 0.01$), resulting in the rejection of H02. While the magnitude of the negative effect is somewhat smaller than that of denial strategies, it remains statistically and practically significant. This finding supports Coombs and Holladay's (2021) argument that diminishment strategies—which involve excusing or justifying a crisis without full accountability—are inadequate for brand equity recovery in preventable and accidental crisis scenarios. Liu et al. (2023) similarly found that justification-based diminishment was associated with lower post-crisis perceived quality scores in FMCG health product categories. In the Calabar context, consumers appear to interpret diminishment communication as a form of partial dishonesty, which is sufficient to undermine the multi-dimensional brand equity recovery process.

11.3 Effect of Rebuilding Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (Objective 3 / H03)

Rebuilding strategies demonstrated the strongest positive effect on brand equity recovery among all four strategy variables ($r = 0.512$, $\beta = 0.512$, $p < 0.001$), leading to the rejection of H03. The explanatory power of rebuilding strategies ($r^2 = 0.262$) confirms that strategies involving full apology, compensation, and concrete corrective action account for approximately one-quarter of the total variance in brand equity recovery in this market—a result substantially consistent with Kim and Sung's (2022) multi-country β range of 0.41–0.58 for rebuilding strategies on trust recovery. The comparably large effect size identified in Calabar Metropolis suggests that consumers in this market are particularly responsive to genuine demonstrations of corporate accountability, possibly reflecting the collectivist cultural values of the Cross River State context in which communal harmony and respect for relationships are deeply embedded social norms (Nwankwo & Gbadamosi, 2022). Rebuilding strategies appear to activate these cultural values by signalling that the firm prioritises consumer welfare above corporate reputation protection.

11.4 Effect of Bolstering Strategies on Brand Equity Recovery (Objective 4 / H04)

Bolstering strategies recorded a significant positive effect on brand equity recovery ($r = 0.431$, $\beta = 0.431$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the rejection of H04. Bolstering strategies—which include reminding consumers of the brand's positive track record, expressing genuine concern for consumer wellbeing, and highlighting community contributions—explain 18.6% of the variance in brand equity recovery, positioning them as the second most effective strategy cluster after rebuilding. This finding supports Benoit's (2015) image repair theory argument that invoking prior positive performance creates cognitive dissonance for consumers between the crisis event and accumulated positive brand memories, thereby buffering brand equity erosion. The practical implication for Calabar FMCG brands is that proactively maintaining a strong positive brand narrative through corporate social responsibility activities and community engagement in non-crisis periods creates resilience capital that bolstering communication can effectively mobilise during a crisis to support brand equity recovery.

11.5 Moderating Role of Social Media Crisis Communication (Objective 5 / H05)

The hierarchical regression analysis confirmed a significant positive moderation effect of social media crisis communication on the relationship between crisis communication strategies and brand equity recovery ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < 0.05$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.039$), leading to the rejection of H05. The full model incorporating crisis strategy variables, social media crisis communication, and the interaction term explains 58.8% of the variance in brand equity recovery (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.566$), demonstrating excellent model fit. This finding confirms Jin et al.'s (2014) Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model, which posits that social media serves as a boundary condition amplifying the effects of crisis communication strategies on stakeholder outcomes. In the Nigerian FMCG context, the moderation effect is consistent with Obiora et al.'s (2024) finding that timely social media response significantly accelerates brand sentiment recovery. The practical implication is that the brand equity recovery benefits of rebuilding and bolstering strategies are significantly enhanced when they are disseminated through active, empathetic, and timely social media crisis communication—making social media not merely an optional communication channel but a strategic multiplier of crisis communication effectiveness in the Calabar market.

12. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

12.1 Summary of Findings

This study was designed to examine the effect of crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery in the FMCG industry in Calabar Metropolis, with five specific objectives. A summary of the findings corresponding to each objective is presented below.

In relation to Objective 1, which sought to examine the effect of denial crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery, the study found a significant negative effect ($r = -0.349$, $\beta = -0.349$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that denial strategies significantly and negatively affect brand equity recovery among FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis. Firms that deny responsibility during a brand crisis experience measurably lower recovery across brand equity dimensions than firms that adopt more accountable response strategies.

In relation to Objective 2, which sought to determine the effect of diminishment crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery, the study also found a significant negative effect ($r = -0.298$, $\beta = -0.298$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that diminishment strategies—which minimise crisis severity without full accountability—also significantly and negatively affect brand equity recovery, though less severely than denial.

In relation to Objective 3, which sought to evaluate the effect of rebuilding crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery, the study found the strongest positive effect among all strategy variables ($r = 0.512$, $\beta = 0.512$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.262$), confirming that rebuilding strategies—encompassing sincere public apology, consumer compensation, and concrete corrective action—are the most powerful driver of brand equity recovery in the Calabar FMCG market.

In relation to Objective 4, which sought to assess the effect of bolstering crisis communication strategies on brand equity recovery, the study found a significant positive effect ($r = 0.431$, $\beta = 0.431$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.186$), confirming that bolstering strategies—reminding consumers of

prior positive brand history and demonstrating genuine community concern—constitute an effective secondary strategy for enhancing brand equity recovery.

In relation to Objective 5, which sought to examine the moderating role of social media crisis communication on the strategy–brand equity recovery relationship, the hierarchical regression analysis confirmed a significant positive moderation effect ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < 0.05$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.039$), with the full model explaining 58.8% of the variance in brand equity recovery (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.566$). Social media crisis communication significantly amplifies the positive effects of rebuilding and bolstering strategies and helps attenuate some of the negative consequences of denial and diminishment strategies.

12.2 Conclusion

The findings of this study provide compelling empirical evidence that crisis communication strategy choice has significant and quantifiable consequences for brand equity recovery in the FMCG industry in Calabar Metropolis. Denial and diminishment strategies consistently and significantly impair brand equity recovery, while rebuilding and bolstering strategies significantly enhance it. Social media crisis communication functions as a positive moderator that amplifies the effectiveness of appropriate crisis communication strategies in driving brand equity recovery. Together, the four strategy variables and the social media moderator explain approximately 58.8% of the variance in brand equity recovery—a result that validates the explanatory power of SCCT-informed crisis communication frameworks in this West African commercial context.

These findings validate the core prescriptions of SCCT (Coombs, 2007, 2019) in a Nigerian FMCG setting for the first time, while also identifying important contextual nuances—particularly the heightened effectiveness of rebuilding strategies in Calabar's high-context consumer culture and the critical role of social media as a strategic amplifier of crisis communication effects. The study thus advances both the theoretical literature on crisis communication in emerging markets and the practical knowledge base available to brand managers, marketers, and public relations professionals operating in Nigeria's growing consumer goods industry.

13. Recommendations

On the basis of the specific findings corresponding to the five objectives of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

i. Avoid Denial Strategies During Brand Crises (Objective 1/H01): FMCG firms operating in Calabar Metropolis should actively resist deploying denial strategies in response to product quality or consumer safety crises. The evidence that denial strategies significantly and negatively affect brand equity recovery ($\beta = -0.349$, $p < 0.01$) is unambiguous. Crisis manuals should explicitly flag denial communication as a high-risk option and require senior management sign-off before any denial-based message is issued, with a documented assessment of consumer attribution levels guiding the decision.

ii. Minimise the Use of Diminishment Strategies (Objective 2/H02): Since diminishment strategies also exert a significant negative effect on brand equity recovery ($\beta = -0.298$, $p <$

***E-ISSN:** 1597-2496*
***Print-ISSN:** 3043-534X*

0.01), albeit less severe than denial, FMCG firms should avoid justifying or excusing crisis events as standalone communication responses. Where circumstantial excuses are factually warranted, they should be accompanied by corrective action and empathetic language to shift the communication posture toward rebuilding rather than diminishment.

iii. Prioritise Rebuilding Strategies as the Core Crisis Communication Response (Objective 3/H03): Given that rebuilding strategies are the most potent predictor of brand equity recovery ($\beta = 0.512$, $r^2 = 0.262$, $p < 0.001$), FMCG firms in Calabar Metropolis should embed rebuilding communication—sincere public apology, concrete corrective action, and consumer compensation where applicable—as the default crisis communication protocol. Pre-crisis scenario planning exercises should rehearse rebuilding message delivery across all relevant communication channels so that responses are timely, genuine, and consistent when a crisis arises.

iv. Sustain Bolstering Strategies as a Complementary Recovery Tool (Objective 4/H04): Since bolstering strategies significantly enhance brand equity recovery ($\beta = 0.431$, $p < 0.001$), FMCG firms should systematically maintain and communicate their positive brand narratives, community contributions, and consumer care records both in pre-crisis periods and throughout the crisis response. Corporate social responsibility programmes, community engagement events, and consumer appreciation campaigns should be documented and made readily accessible as communication assets that can be deployed during a brand crisis to activate consumers' existing positive brand associations.

v. Leverage Social Media as a Strategic Amplifier of Crisis Communication (Objective 5/H05): The finding that social media crisis communication significantly moderates the strategy–brand equity recovery relationship ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < 0.05$) means that FMCG firms should invest in dedicated social media crisis monitoring and response capabilities. Crisis communication teams should include social media specialists trained to issue empathetic, transparent, and factually accurate messages within the first hour of a crisis being identified on digital platforms. Firms should maintain active brand presence on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms relevant to the Calabar market, so that crisis response does not begin from a standing start but from an established consumer communication relationship.

vi. Recommendation for Regulatory Stakeholders: Regulatory bodies such as NAFDAC, the Standards Organisation of Nigeria (SON), and the Consumer Protection Council (CPC) should develop and enforce minimum crisis communication disclosure standards for FMCG firms, requiring timely, accurate, and consumer-accessible product crisis information as a legal obligation. This would reduce information asymmetry during crises, support brand equity recovery by enabling rebuilding communication, and protect consumer welfare in Nigerian FMCG markets.

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***E-ISSN:** 1597-2496*
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