ASSESSMENT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT ON SMEs MARKETING ACTIVITIES IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs marketing activities in Rivers State of Nigeria. A conceptual framework was used to illustrate a diagrammatic relationship between COVID-19 pandemic and SMEs marketing activities. The study adopted descriptive research design. The target population was all the SMEs registered with the Rivers State Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The study used purposive sampling technique and the sample size was 325. Data analysis was performed using regression analysis to show the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, and the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to explain the fitness of the model. The study revealed COVID-19 Pandemic significantly impacts SMEs in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The study therefore concludes that, there is a strong, positive and significant impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs marketing activities in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, and recommends amongst others that government should assist SMEs to assess fund which is a very effective tool for business sustainability during pandemic, to boost manufacturing, trade and supply chain activities.
KeyWords: *Marketing activities, Covid-19 pandemic, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, SMEs,*

INTRODUCTION

Businesses operate in environments susceptible to activities that significantly ignite intense changes that could enhance, retard, stifle or shrink sales, patronage, and profitability as well as transforming marketing operational strategies. It is therefore unavoidable that the novel covid-19 epidemic will have a considerable impact on the global economy and society at large. A global crisis as the covid-19 pandemic can either paralyze businesses (SMEs) or galvanize them to thrive. In the wake of the covid-19 pandemic, that's exactly the experiences of most businesses (SMEs). Emphatically, China is the foremost country traced to the stretch of the disease with more than 80,000 people contaminated. The World Health Organization (WHO) pronounced Covid-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Congressional Research Service, 2020). The disease eruption has multiplied fast and projected to carry on dispersion to all part of the globe. Accordingly, marketers envisage the downward movement of marketing activities impetus on

track from March 2020 beyond, devoid of definite climax time (Segal & Gerstel, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic is a human catastrophe upsetting billions of people on earth, and forcing harmful impact on the worldwide economy, industries, corporations and small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

The COVID-19 epidemic is an unanticipated worldwide observable fact, which has terrified countries into sudden disruption and successfully put businesses at a decline. It has affected living and all profitable activities particularly business enterprises as well as SMEs (Sansa, 2020; Ruiz Estrada *et al.,* 2020). SMEs have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the closures and reduced working hours recommended to curb the spread of the virus (IOM, 2020). This period has seen SMEs observe severe turn down in production and other marketing activities IOM (2020) stated. Le *et al.* (2020) revealed that SMEs were going through dilemma owing to interest payment, moribund inventory, workers' wages, and rental costs for the duration of this plague. The prospective impact of COVID-19 on the economy is an extensive thrash out theme in current times all over the earth. McCloskey and Heymann (2020), dispute that economic worn out can be anticipated by the economy owing to supply chain disruption, trade discontinuation, and restricted market demand. Runyan (2006) asserts SMEs are mainly sternly shocked in disaster due to their lesser altitude of watchfulness, superior propensity, elevated dependence on government and local agencies, and the superior emotional and financial influence on the owners.

Government attempts to preserve unparalleled public health and economic rejoinders by enforcing movement control, lockdown, confinement and social distancing amongst others (Craven *et al.,* 2020). The coronavirus may not swing back completely once the epidemic has given in Craven *et al.* (2020) stated. Currently, several industries face supply-side concerns, seeing that governments hold back the activities of dispensable industries and workforce are confined to their homes. SMEs at this point have to compete with digits of confrontations, as well as the execution of requisite health protection measures, condensed production and demand, and supply chain disruptions. SMEs seriously require a way forward to combat this state of affairs.

This state of affairs calls for scholarly investigations to supply companies with applicable strategies on how to scale through with the confrontations of the COVID-19 predicament. Despite the academic and managerial relevance of scholars in times like this, only very few studies have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on SMEs (Acee-Eke & Ikegwuru, 2020; Ikegwuru & Harcourt, 2020; Ratnasingam *et al.,* 2020; Duricin, 2020; Gain, 2020). The momentum with which the COVID-19 pandemic has erupted, the instantaneous health hazards for the entire economic actors and the stringent governmental restrictions just about it, crafts an inimitable circumstances that stimulates inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Small and Medium-Size Enterprises.

Against this backdrop, this study provides a synchronized substantiation of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on SMEs and provides hypothesis. Section 3 introduces methodology Section 4 performs a proportional inert analysis on the effects

of COVID-19 on SMEs by using the regression analysis method. Finally, section 5 presents conclusions, implications, and suggestions for future research.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The starting point of the COVID-19 pandemic was in Wuhan in the Hubei Province of China. It is a type of disease which possibly will not be ascribed to any identified origin (WHO, 2020a, & 2020b). The eruption of the pathogen was confined to a regional seafood market in Wuhan, which was stopped by home authorities January 1st, 2020 began to spread instantly after its pronouncement as epidemiological alert (Zhu, *et al.,* 2020; Huang *et al.,* 2020). At that time, 41 people were already infected (Huang *et al.,* 2020). Earliest inquiries summed up that the disease was caused by a new virus that can be passed on from one person to another via personal contact (Chen *et al.,* 2020).

The initial state of affairs statement on the new COVID-19 Pandemic was published by the World Health Organization on January 21st, 2020 , delineation 282 established cases in four countries together with China (278 cases), Thailand (two cases), Japan (one case) and the Republic of Korea (one case) (WHO, 2020a, 2020b). Sequel to that on March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed an epidemic of the extremely contagious COVID-19 disease (WHO, 2020a, 2020b), indicating its worldwide stretch. Since then, the rapid worldwide outbreak of the novel COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an alarming global health crisis.

Countless countries' governments have used procedures spectacularly touching the everyday life of humanity. The public health measure of "social distancing" has been extensively applied to unhurry the communication and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. States and Countries have been utterly locked down, schools, universities and public facilities are shut down; as well as public events (sports, matches, concerts and marriages) are still been prohibited in a good number of countries.

Governments have set ruthless restrictions on firms in various industries, authorized social distancing and health protection plans and still locked down dispensable businesses in numerous countries, prompting concurrent demand including supply-side problems (del Rio-Chanoma *et al.,* 2020), while demand in industries such as healthcare has risen sharply, demand in other industries has dispersed. All-purpose effective demand and consumption in individual home have also been impinged upon (Muellbauer, 2020).

SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (SMEs)

The majority of companies globally are SMEs, which based on their relevant classification, encompasses just about 90% of all businesses in countries (Xi *et al.,* 2015), and depending on their powerful presence in the business scenery, SMEs' responsibilities in countries as employers of labour, wealth creators and innovators are noteworthy (Filser *et al.,* 2016). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are of enormous worth to the unwavering and sustainable progress of the economy and fascinated towering consideration from governments globally. SMEs are sighted as a prompter of marketing activities, modernization and industry expansion, which can prop up economic growth, urbanization, employment, technological innovations, social

synchronization, and firmness. Small and medium sized enterprises account for a huge share of employment and a large share of enterprises in the private sector, which have made significant input in the growth of emergent countries, such as motivating marketing competitiveness (Etuk, Etuk & Michael, 2014). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are a remarkable influencer of economic progress (Obi, Ibidunni & Tolulope, 2018), being fundamental to most economy's growth worldwide, and predominant in budding developing countries (Ndiaye, Razak & Nagayer, 2018). Ikegwuru and Pokubo (2019) assert SMEs are significant to employment generations, marketing of goods and services, industry expansion, and also predominant in the growth of emergent economies such as Nigeria which has a high unemployment rate.

IMPACTS COVID-19 ON SMES MARKETING ACTIVITIES

Besides coronavirus worrying effects on human life, its novel strain has the potential to significantly slowdown not only the Chinese economy but also the global economy. China has become the central manufacturing hub of many business operations globally. Any disruption of China's output is expected to have repercussions elsewhere through regional and global value chains. Indeed, most recent data from China indicate a substantial decline in output (UNCTAD, 2020).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 no doubt has a great impact on small businesses, especially in developing countries. SMEs in Nigeria have had to deal with anxiety over uncertainties that might exist after the crisis, such as; challenges with cash flow, customer retention, and disruption in essential marketing operation processes. As the government and economy all over the world adapt to the impact of Covid-19, SMEs must implement strategies to help secure firm footings and prepare for post-covid-19 economic conditions, business recovery services, and long-term sustainability in the area of manufacturing, trade and supply chain logistics (Acee-Eke & Ikegwuru).

In Nigeria and probably in many other countries many watched the news about the COVID-19 outbreak like detached movie audiences until the nation recorded its first case on 27 February, 2020. Still, reality did not kick in until it began to spread in the weeks afterwards, forcing the Nigerian government at the state and national levels to impose lockdowns, isolations, border closures etc. around end of March, 2020. The impact of these measures according to Olatunbosun, (2020) was more harmful than anticipated. Many business owners are licking their wounds following the month-long lockdown, with inevitable courses of action such as cutting down their workforces, work hours, budgets and salaries. Businesses (SMEs) that pose a high risk of COVID-19 infections remain grounded as their owners strategize new business models and modes of engagement (Olatunbosun, 2020).

According to Olatunbosun, (2020), a Nigerian-based market research organization, SBM Intelligence, has made public a number of firms that will be positively and negatively impacted by the pandemic, as part of the narratives about the impact of COVID-19 on the Nigerian economy. The restrictions imposed by government no doubt affected the supply chain of raw materials and other materials used by firms. Burdened by the pandemic's negative impacts, Olatunbosun, (2020) states the Nigerian government has engaged with the private sector (SMEs) to chart a path towards solutions. Despite its gloomy side, the pandemic offers a unique

opportunity for local manufacturers in Nigeria to rise to the challenge of inadequate PPE supplies.

Countries, industries and companies suffer drastically from the outcomes of a universal epidemic as a result of instantaneous demand and supply upset. Demand turns down since consumers step down their purchases of dispensable goods and services. Supply is scared out of wits since scores of companies are basically not equipped to deal with the observable fact of disrupted supply chains (Simchi-Levi *et al.,* 2014). A lot of service and manufacturing sectors as a consequence have had to shut down their operations (delRio-Chanona *et al.,* 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic is making vulnerable the economic welfare of people and institutions (Sneader & Singhal, 2020), affecting global health order and looming the configuration of global economic order. Accordingly, several countries are in the first light of recession (OECD, 2020).

Chinese manufacturing is important to many global value chains, especially those related to precision instruments, machinery, automotive and communication equipment. Any significant disruption in China's supply in these sectors according to UNCTAD (2020) is deemed to substantially affect producers in the rest of the world. Many companies around the world are not comfortable due to the measures put in place to contain COVID-19 (restrictions to economic activities and movement of people), could hinder the supply of critical parts from Chinese producers, therefore affecting their own output (UNCTAD, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs marketing activities is remarkable. Even though harsh government measures and rejoinders to curtail the infection are indispensable, a good number of businesses are faced with disheartening consequences in both short and long-term period. Major challenges are shutting down of business, laying off workers, and thinned firms' capability for potential expansion (Wahyudi, 2014; Craven *et al.,* 2020; Smith-Bingham & Hariharan, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 calamity has and will continue to have massive impact on SMEs worldwide.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Drawing from the study of Acee-Eke and Ikegwuru (2020), it examined corona virus containment measures and patronage of supermarkets in Rivers State of Nigeria, using responses from 250 respondents from supermarket in the area of Port Harcourt, Rivers State of Nigeria. The study adopted the convenient sample (non-probability sampling method) on 250 consumers. Out of the total of 250 questionnaires distributed, 200 (80%) questionnaires were retrieved and were useful. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were also used for the analysis. The major findings of the study confirmed an overall strong, positive and significant association of the independent variables with the dependent variable. The study concludes the features of corona virus containment measures have strong, positive and significant association with patronage of supermarkets in Rivers State of Nigeria.

Similarly, Ikegwuru and Harcourt (2020) investigated the effect of corona virus containment measures on rapid-fire changes in purchase behaviour in Rivers State of Nigeria using a cross-sectional survey design and a convenient sample (non-probability sampling method) of 320 consumers from Senatorial districts of Rivers State. 296 (92. %) copies of questionnaire were

retrieved from respondents. The Analyses were carried out with reliability analysis, descriptive statistics and regression analysis in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 22.0). The results demonstrate that the stay at home, locking up of shops/markets and curfew/restriction of movement directives by government have a positive and significant effect on rapid-fire changes in purchase behaviour in Rivers State of Nigeria. The study therefore, concludes that corona virus containment measures significantly and positively influence rapid-fire changes in purchase behaviour of consumers in Rivers State of Nigeria.

Again Gain (2020) studied the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated control measures on food system SMEs in the processing and distribution sectors and grains, vegetables, and fruit value chains in 17 countries. 363 responses were received, with the majority emanating from micro- or small-sized firms, vegetables, and fruit value chains. It was found that, 94% confirmed being impacted by the pandemic, largely by way of decreased sales (82%), complication accessing inputs (49%), and complexity paying staff (44%). 84% of firms reported altering their production capacity due to the pandemic, generally decreasing it; 57% had distorted their product's sales price. 85% of respondents anticipated future impacts on their supply chains, as well as shortages of supplies (61%) and transportation and distribution disruptions (49%). 80% and 84% of firms confirmed taking actions to alleviate the impact of the virulent disease on their companies and to guard their employees, in that order. 81% and 64% of firms affirmed without delay requiring financial and technical support, correspondingly, to deal with with the effects of the epidemic.

Also the findings of Ratnasingam *et al.* (2020), reveals two major issues i.e. the financial management and the supply chain disruptions creating the main cut on business operations. More firms in the processing and distribution sectors and grains, vegetables, and fruit value chains. Moreover, they revealed that a large amount of the SMEs were operating well below capacity, which was a gigantic financial damage on their business feasibility. Regrettably, the SMEs are also aware the weaker and vulnerable members of firms would go out of business. Drawing from the study of Beraha and   uri in (2020) COVID-19 impacts on SMEs in Serbia by gathering data through an online survey, the study found that SMEs have to go through unmatched experiences like exchanging business, incapable of paying the fixed obligation, lay off employees, and restricted access to resources.

In another similar study, Robinson and Kengatharan (2020) assessed the potential effects of COVID-19 on Sri Lankan SMEs and found that SMEs are intensely suffering due to the shortage of materials, the decline in foreign and home demand for their products and services, complicatedness in repaying loan and interest, cancellation of orders, dire cash deficit, and lack of savings. The study put forward that the COVID-19 pandemic is sensitively demanding for both employees and operators of the SMEs for that reason, government relief and the best policies and guiding principle to hold up the SMEs are undeniably decisive for travelling through the catastrophe.

Other studies as Nyanga and Zirima (2020) examined reactions of SMEs in Masvingo, Zimbabwe to COVID-19 by means of qualitative techniques and revealed that SMEs were negatively affected by the lockdown and stopped their operations and had to lay off some of their employees. What's more, production in most cases was brought to a standstill and this

necessitated that the future following the lockdown was unwelcoming for them. The SMEs requested for government support to enable them to revive following the lockdown.

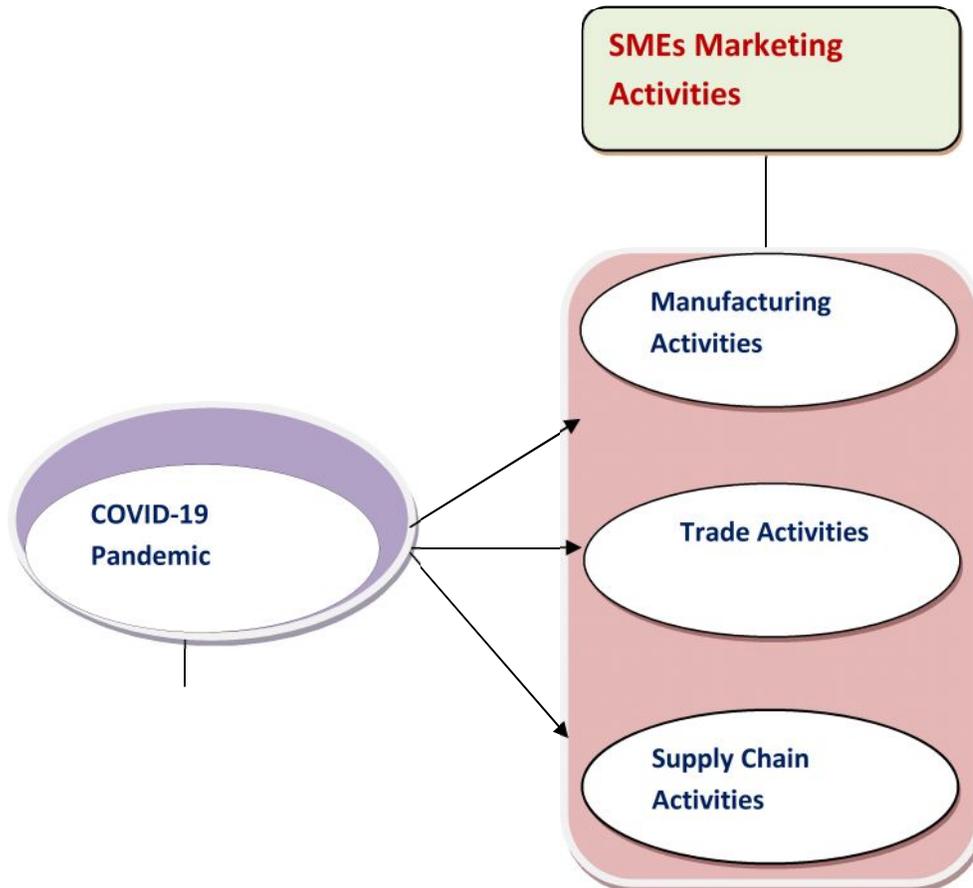From the review of literature, the following research model was designed:

Figure 1: Research Model of Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SMEs

Source: Authors Desk Research, (2020).

Based on the research model the hypothesis below was formulated:

Ho$_1$: There is no significant impact of COVID-19 on SMEs marketing activities

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional study on all the SMEs registered with the Rivers State Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Port Harcourt. There are approximately 2000 SMEs that are registered with the Rivers State Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Port Harcourt. The sample size for this study was obtained from the guideline developed by Krejcie & Morgan (1970), as cited in Sekaran & Bougie (2010). The application of this model, gave the study a minimum sample size of 325. The study adopted the purposive sampling technique. The *key informants* approach was used to assess Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) or branch managers. The study was therefore, a macro analysis. The researchers used regression analysis to show the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, and the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to explain the fitness of the model. The regression equation was as follows; $Y = + 1X1 +$

= Constant 1 = Partial regression coefficient
Y = SMEs Marketing Activities
X1= COVID-19 pandemic
 = error term

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis one (H_{01}) states there is no significant impact of COVID-19 on SMEs business activities.Table1 shows the statistical evidence of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SME marketing activities.

Table 1: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on SMEs Marketing Activities

Model summary

Model R	R square	Adjusted Square	R std error of the Estimate
1 .983 [a]	.969	.963	.000

ANOVA[b]

	Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.063	1	.063	233.264	.000[a]
	Residual	.002	289	.000		
	Total	.066	290			

Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized			
	B	Std. error	Beta	T	Sig.
1 (constant)	.1.866 .	.064		28.968.000	
	.367	.024	.983	15.273	.000

Source: SPSS 22.0 window output (based on 2020 field survey data)

Decision: Since for hypothesis, the significant .000 is less than 0.05, there is a significant impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs marketing activities. The regression helps us to conclude with the R (coefficient of correlation) that there is 98.3% direct relationship between COVID-19 pandemic and SMEs marketing activities. R-squared value of 96.3% shows that COVID-19 pandemic can affect SMEs marketing activities to a high degree.

The ANOVA Table explains the fitness of the model as shown by. The F-ratio in the model is 233.264, which is very significant at $p < 0.05$. This implies that there is significant evidence to extrapolate that COVID-19 pandemic is linearly related to SMEs marketing activities. This proposes that the model is measured to be fit and that COVID-19 pandemic has substantial impact on SMEs marketing activities. There is also a standardized coefficient of .983 which is perfect as well as corresponding P value (sig.) of 000 which is less than alpha (0.05). Therefore, we conclude that COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacts SMEs in Rivers State.

This research provides an empirical rationalization for a structure that investigates the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs in Rivers State of Nigeria. The hypothesis tested portrays that the sample of SMEs studies unmistakably demonstrates that COVID-19 pandemic explained a high percentage of the variance 96.9% (R2 adj) SMEs marketing activities and has a strong, positive and significant impact on SMEs marketing activities in Rivers State. This finding is not absolutely very surprising; given that some prior studies reported likenesses which are associated to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic (Robson & Kengatharam, 2020; Beraha & Duricin, 2020; Ratnasingam *et al.,* 2020; Nyanga & Zirima, 2020). The significant results of the investigations anchored on the regression analysis technique can be underscored that COVID-19 pandemic input to illuminating SMEs marketing activities in Rivers State, was as a result of the upsetting force of the deadly disease that impacted almost all aspects of human activities. Through this study, the researchers offered companies with applicable strategies on how to muddle through with the confrontations of the COVID-19 predicament.

The study reveals the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs marketing activities in Rivers State was at a high level, the companies studied experienced obstacles in manufacturing, trade and supply chain activities. A good number of these SMEs were faced with disheartening consequences in both short and long-term period. Major barriers noticed visibly were cash flow issues, shutting down of businesses, laying off workers and thinned firms' capability for potential spreading out. COVID-19 pandemic impacted heavily on SMEs in Rivers State of Nigeria. This results is in line with earlier studies such as (Robson & Kengatharam, 2020; Ratnasingam *et al.,* 2020; Nyanga & Zirima, 2020), who found strong, positive and significant impact of COVID-19 on Srilankan SMEs, financial management and supply chain disruptions, and negative impact of lockdown on SMEs respectively.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of this study is to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs' in Rivers. In a synopsis, the SMEs marketing challenge all through the instantaneous quarantine measures ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic are characterized as operational problems in manufacturing, trade and supply chains for SMEs in Rivers State There were also, problems in forefront detection of the future business bearing, and financial related problems such as cash flow problems; access to stimulus packages; risk of bankruptcy. Thus, COVID-19 pandemic is consequential for the failure of SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic period, due to the high level of its impact amid the performance of manufacturing, trade and supply chain activities. The study therefore concludes that, there is a strong, positive and significant impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs marketing activities in Rivers State of Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS
The study therefore, recommends the following:

1. Government should assist SMEs to assess fund which is a very effective tool for business sustainability during pandemic, to boost manufacturing, trade and supply chain activities.

2. In this moment, government should rapidly strengthen the distribution apparatus of all marketing-related incentive packages and circulate the information noticeably, since this is indispensable in volatile potential of the Covid-19 pandemic predicament.

3. Marketing development bureaus should provide free and classified marketing consultative services to SMEs to enable them coordinate their marketing activities effortlessly in the course of this thorny state of affairs.

4. SMEs should identify critical marketing functions and develop recovery strategy such as Business Recovery Services (BRS) to enable them mitigate the impact of covid-19 on their businesses.

5. SMEs should review existing policies, procedures and response plan if they must survive the post-COVID 19 business challenges.

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