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SURVIVAL OF CHINESE-LANGUAGE MEDIA IN AFRICA: MEDIA CREDIBILITY OR BRAND EQUITY?

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Abstract

The coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak is causing economic hardship for almost all sectors including media outlets operating in foreign countries. Focusing on *The Oriental Post*, a Chinese-language media published in Africa, this study aims to uncover how it can survive the pandemic. In doing so, this study integrates concepts and theories from journalism and advertising practice to explore the effects of media credibility and brand equity on its consumers' media buying intention-the main source of media's income. An online survey was conducted on Chinese expatriates. Most of them run businesses in pan-African countries and are potential buyers of space of *The Oriental Post.* A total of 277 valid responses were gathered and the data was later analyzed using multiple regression. The results show that both dimensions of consumer-based brand equity namely perceived quality and brand loyalty significantly predicted media buying intention. Contrary to past research, this study found that media credibility had no effect on media buying intention, but it was significantly related to brand equity. The results have some theoretical and managerial implications. First, it enhanced the literature on media credibility and tested it as a precedent to rarely studied media buying in the Africa context. Also, for Chinese media to survive the pandemic, the study suggests they should report more salient news closely related to readers' lives and business operating policies and regulations, ensure reliable news and service quality, and strengthen the bonding with readers/customers through different events and public activities to increase its exposure and customers' loyalty.

Keywords: Media credibility, brand equity, media buying, Chinese-language media, Africa

1. Introduction

Since mid-2010s Chinese media began to increase their presence in pan-African countries (Keane, 2016), penetrating various fields such as entertainment, telecommunication and news content. Ranging from state-owned news corporations such as CGTN (China Global Television Network) and Xinhua, a news agency, to StarTimes, a privately controlled pay TV operator, and the Oriental Post, a private online and offline newspaper, the widespread penetration of Chinese media in most African countries today is ubiquitous. Most Chinese media that used prevailing languages, such as English and French, in Africa tend to propagate a good image of China, give China a louder voice in global discussions concerning China's development and its engagement with the world and also Sino-African relations (Madrid-Morales, 2021). Meanwhile, Chinese-language media in Africa mostly cater for Chinese expatriates' need and provide information deemed necessary for the Chinese community living in the respective African country.

One of the representatives of Chinese-language media in Africa is the Oriental Post, which was established in 2009 headquartered in Botswana (ChinaTown Times News, 2013). Since then, it has opened its branches in other African countries, including Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, Rwanda, and Angola. The purpose of this newspaper is to inherit Chinese culture, focus on local society, serve the Chinese community, promote Chinese entrepreneurship, and bolster friendship between China and Africa (ChinaTown Times News, 2013). Since its establishment, according to the then Chinese ambassador to Zambia, the newspaper has become one of the most influential Chinese papers in Africa (ChinaTown Times News, 2013).

After one decade of existence in Africa, the Oriental Post has made it known to the Chinese community, at the same time it also faced the challenges of declining readership and advertising dollars. This situation deteriorated due to widespread Covid-19 pandemic which broke out in China in late 2019 and spread to African countries in early 2020. During times of economic crisis and economic recession, firms are often confronted with survival threats which are more evident in times of a global health pandemic (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020). At this critical time survival is the far most important agenda for much Chinese businesses operating in Africa, including the media industry.

Past research found credible media are able to arouse various activities, such as advertised brand buying intention (Bae, 2001); taking action towards health information (Hu & Sundar, 2010); online-shopping likelihood (Jordaan et al., 2011). Meanwhile, a medium outline is operating as a corporate. Past study has conceptualized corporate credibility as the extent to which people believe in a corporate's trustworthiness and expertise in providing products and services that can satisfy their needs (Fombrun, 1996; Keller, 1998). We assume a newspaper company with high media credibility will also attract its customers/readers to buy its products/services—its charged space for their potential advertising needs.

Another factor worth consideration is the customer-based brand equity (CBBE), a concept that argues consumers will react more favourably toward the product, price, promotion, and distribution of a branded product (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (p. 15). According to him, there are five dimension of brand equity: 1) brand loyalty: customer's attachment; 2) brand awareness: customer's

capability to recall or recognize a brand within its category, 3) perceived quality: customer's appraisal of the quality or superiority of the brand relative to alternative, 4) brand association: any other things linked to consumer's reminiscence about the brand, and 5) other proprietary brand assets: logos, trademarks, channel distribution, etc. This study adopted the first 4 dimensions. Bakshi and Mishra (2016) used Aaker's conceptualization of brand equity to study newspaper's branding and found newspaper's credibility positively influenced its brand equity.

This study explored the relationship between the media credibility and its CBBE, and empirically tested their contributions to media buying intention—the main income of a medium outlet. CBBE's important role is further demonstrated by its effectiveness in enhancing "value of license, products, and services" offered by organizations (Fombrun, 1996, p. 108) and consolidating consumers' positive perception toward organizations and their products (Keller, 1993). Conventionally, people apply CBBE to distinguish products from one another in marketing and management literature, whereas media credibility has the same purpose in journalism literature (Keller, 1993; Meyer, 2004). These studies claim that audiences are less likely to patronize news products they do not deem credible (Greenberg, 1996; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987; Wanta & Hu, 1994). Therefore, media outlets that are regarded to be credible, just like products with higher levels of CBBE, are more likely to be patronized by consumers and audiences (Meyer, 2004; Oyedeji & Duncan, 2006).

2. Problem Statement

The tandem forces of technological advancements and notably lower financial entry threshold into the media industry are causing exceptional renovation in the principles and practice of mass communication (Oyedeji, 2007). The evolving media environment is symbolized by the fragmentation of media outlets broadcasting differentiated content in multitudes of formats to niche audiences (Goldstein, 2004). Traditional media enjoys a reputation for regarding journalistic norms, such as accuracy and fairness (Johnson & Kaye, 2015). Nevertheless, since 1985 the percentage of the public who think journalists usually get the facts straight has plummeted by more than half (from 55 to 26 percent) and those who trust the media are objective and fair to all involved sides has also dropped dramatically (from 34 to 19 percent) (Dimock et al., 2013).

Declining media credibility raised fears of the audience that is escaping news of traditional channels and increasingly switching to non-journalist alternative media, both presumably leading to a less informed, more polarized public (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). The decrease of the audience base adversely affects media circulation. Lazer et al. (2018) argued higher credibility of media contributes to a larger audience than other media and in fact determines the survival of the press. News research found that credibility has greater effect on online news consumption than interactivity (Kee & Omar, 2020) and that lack of credibility can lead to media displacement (Omar & Ahrari, 2020). Improving credibility is therefore assumed to help media's sustainability.

On the other hand, like other industries, media managers are increasingly turning to consumer branding strategies to improve audiences' perceptions of their brands and gain an advantage in this audience-media negotiation (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2001; McDowell, 2004; Oyedeji, 2007). Effective branding strategies generate customer-based brand equity (CBBE): an aspect of the strength, uniqueness,

and favourability of audiences' perceptions of a brand (Keller, 2002). Media outlets with high CBBE enjoy a variety of market margins, such as relatively better audience perception of media credibility and news quality, and higher levels of brand loyalty and price elasticity, compared to competitors with lower CBBE (Keller, 2002; Oyedeji, 2007).

The media operation in Africa context is facing exceptional difficulty after the break-out of coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic. In his study Ozili (2020) found the effect of the pandemic was more severe for African region which is already vulnerable in terms of economy and public health infrastructure compared to other regions. The rising pandemic affected social interaction and economic activities through the imposed social distancing policies that have different levels of strictness in several African counties.

Under this situation, the need to explore the relations between media credibility and customer-based brand equity and their contribution to media buying becomes urgent and contemporary as to survive the pandemic is what most businesses operating in Africa need to consider. Like the oriental post, the traditional business model of free newspapers is underpinned by advertising. The pandemic has added fuel to the fire: revenue from advertising has been steadily declining. For the media industry to have a chance of survival post-Covid-19, radical measures must be pursued (Ntibinyane, 2020).

3. Research questions

Based on the argument above and in order to induce insights from participants regarding media credibility, customer-based brand equity and media buying this study formulated several research questions to be answered:

- What are audiences' perceptions of the media credibility and CBBE of the Oriental Post?
- What is the relation between the media credibility of the Oriental Post and its CBBE?
- Media credibility and CBBE, which one plays a bigger role in explaining audiences/customers' media buying intention of the oriental post's charged space?

4. Purpose of the study

The goal of this study is to understand the survival strategy of Chinese-language media in Africa through the lens of the Oriental Post, to know audiences' perception of its media credibility as well as customer's evaluation of its CBBE. Above all, this study intends to determine which factor significantly contributes to people's media buying intention of the Oriental Post's charged space.

Apart from the purposes mentioned above, this study aims to shed new light on the media credibility and CBBE literature. As early as in the 1950s, regular surveys of media credibility were conducted in the United States by asking respondents to indicate which medium they would believe (Metzger et al., 2003), and scholarship about media credibility is abundant. However, the application of branding to media management is a recent trend; therefore theories that integrate branding concepts, which were specifically developed for consumer goods, with journalism concepts--are still being tested and developed (Oyedeji, 2007). Thus, this study contributes to this theory-building process. In addition, findings of this study would hopefully useful for media organizations to survive in the challenging time of the pandemic.

5. Research methods

5.1. Data collection

This study used an online survey to obtain data from Chinese expatriates who stay in different African countries. The questionnaire was designed to generate their perception of media credibility and CBBE of Oriental Post using a survey web tool called Tencent Survey. Sheehan and Hoy (1999) suggested that there has been a tendency for web surveys to be employed to study "large groups of online users". Since many readers read the Oriental Post through its online version, this method is therefore deemed suitable to reach out to potential respondents.

The questionnaire link was distributed and circulated in Oriental Post's reader Wechat groups which were established by this paper's editors. To increase participation, we announced 10 participants who completed the questionnaire would get a lucky draw gift after the participation target was met. A total of 277 valid respondents were finally recruited with a purposive sampling method. The criterion to be included in the sample is that those readers must have once read the Oriental Post, either through online or offline version. Those who haven't read the Oriental Post are excluded as they are not able to perceive the Oriental Post's attributes.

The respondents were readers of Oriental Post and also the potential buyers of the newspaper's charged space. The survey results indicated that majority of the Chinese expatriates are doing business in Africa and they are in the high-income category.

5.2. Measurements

Independent variables: Media credibility and CBBE. Mass communication scholars generally agree that media credibility is measured by three factors: the source, the content and the medium itself (Metzger et al., 2003). Among those factors, medium credibility focuses on the channel through which content is delivered, and explores people's trust in a certain medium such as newspaper, radio, television or the internet as a whole (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). This study does not intend to compare medium channel's credibility, so we exclude the medium factor. For the source credibility variable, we asked participants how much they agreed that those characteristics can represent the Oriental Post as a news source: reputation, expertness, timeliness, completeness, fairness, accuracy, source reliability, editorial process, depth, objectivity, trustworthiness, no level of bias, interactivity (Nozato, 2002). The thirteen items were measured using a five-point scale (1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree). Then, source credibility was constructed by taking the mean score of the thirteen items (M=3.71; SD=0.81, Cronbach's alpha=0.971). Next, content credibility was measured by asking the respondents how much they agreed that the news on Oriental Post is authentic, insightful, informative, consistent, fair, focused, accurate, timely, and popular (Kang, 2010). Then content credibility was constructed by taking the mean core of the nine items (M=3.82; SD=0.81, Cronbach's alpha=0.973).

Yoo and Donthu (2001) adopted four dimensions of Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) from previous study, namely brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association. In his study Oyedeji (2007) used Yoo and Donthu's scale to develop the CBBE measure. This study modified

Oyedeji's measure to suit current research. For brand awareness, respondents were asked to rate how much they are aware of and can distinguish Oriental Post ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree (M=3.90; SD=0.90, Cronbach's alpha=0.905). For perceived quality, respondents were asked the degree to which they think the news from the Oriental Post is usable, of high quality and reliable (M=3.84; SD=0.85, Cronbach's alpha=0.951). For brand loyalty, respondents were asked whether they read the Oriental Post exclusively, consider themselves loyal to the newspaper and the newspaper is their choice for receiving news (M=3.16; SD=1.17, Cronbach's alpha=0.937). Last, for brand association, respondents were asked whether they can recall and recognize the Oriental Post's brand identity (M=3.64; SD=1.08, Cronbach's alpha=0.902).

Dependent variable: media buying intention. Unlike tangible products media buying is buying a medium's space--in our newspaper's case--for buyer's marketing purpose. We modified Goldsmith et al.'s (2000) construct by asking readers/potential buyers' possibility to buy Oriental Post's space (either online or offline) to market their company's products if they have this need. Due to relatively small and close Chinese community in Africa interpersonal relationship plays a bigger role in people's daily life. This study also asked respondents how likely they would recommend the Oriental Post to his/her friends if friends happen to have this marketing need (Hu & Sundar, 2010). Hu and Sundar (2010) claimed it is appropriate to include behavioural intentions related specifically to the online context. Therefore, their construct was adopted, and we asked how likely the respondent was to forward the Oriental Post to his or her acquaintances online if acquaintances happen to have marketing need. The three items were averaged to create a media buying intention scale (M=3.64, SD=0.98, Cronbach's alpha=0.934).

Control variables: media exposure, media reliance, and issue salience. Three variables related to media behaviours and practice were measured. Media exposure were adopted from Mehrabi et al. (2011) by asking users how often they read the Oriental Post, and during past week how many days they read this newspaper (M=3.17, SD=1.27, Cronbach's alpha=0.853). Media reliance were measured by asking respondents' degree of agreement on relaying on the Oriental Post to get news (Kim & Johnson, 2009), and by asking respondents averagely how long do they not read the Oriental Post, thus they may feel something absent from their everyday life (Mingxin, 2006). These two items were averaged to form media reliance scale (M=2.736, SD=1.11, Cronbach's alpha=0.742). Last, issue salience were measured with a total of 5 items regarding the statement of the Oriental Post's news: I think the story of the Oriental Post is relevant to my own life , is important (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007) and after getting news in the Oriental Post, I often think about what I have received, I often discuss with others, I often recommend what I have obtained to a friend (Mehrabi et al., 2011). These five items were constructed to create issue salience scale (M=3.4953, SD=0.88, Cronbach's alpha=0.915).

6. Findings

Data collected from this study were analyzed in two stages; first is descriptive analysis to present respondents' profile and distribution of variables in terms of percentage and mean) and second is correlation to examine the relationships between variables and third is hierarchical regression analysis to determine the best predictors to media buying intention.

The survey received 391 returns, out of which 277 were valid responses. The discarded answers were from those who indicated that they had never read the news from the Oriental Post. The majority of respondents were in the age category of 20-34 (35.4%), while the group of 35 years and above made up 43% of the total sample. Most people (20.9%) earned 10,001RMB to 15,000 RMB (1526 USD to 2289 USD) per month, while 12.6% of respondents earned above 30,000RMB (4578 USD) per month. This indicates most Chinese expatriates in Africa were in their prime of careers and were well paid off. Thier demographic characteristic suggest that they were the potential buyers of the space of the paper, because they have enough financial capacity.

6.1. Perception of Media credibility of the Oriental Post and its CBBE

To answer the first research question, this study used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to check the degree of agreement of respondents to each statement. The descriptive statistics indicated that respondents have the highest brand awareness (M=3.90; SD=0.90) of the newspaper compared to other variables, followed by perceived quality of news (M=3.84; SD=0.85), content credibility of the newspaper (M=3.82; SD=0.81), source credibility (M=3.71; SD=0.81) and brand association (M=3.64; SD=1.08). Respondents have the least royalty (M=3.16; SD=1.17) towards the Oriental Post.

Overall, the respondents have mid-range appraisal of the newspaper. None of the variable's evaluation was above 4. The Oriental Post was well-known to the Chinese community. One of the reason may be the lack of competitors—there were very few Chinese-language newspapers operating in Africa. Hence, a high reputation does not necessarily reflect high loyalty. The respondents turned to the Oriental Post for news and information mainly because they did not have many choices, not because they were loyal to it.

6.2. Media credibility is positively and significantly correlated with CBBE

To answer the second research question, we computed the constructs of media credibility (source credibility and content credibility) and CBBE (perceived quality, brand association, Brand Awareness, Brand Loyalty). Our exploration of the relationships among variables suggests that strong (r=.5 to 1.0) correlation was found for the relationship between media credibility and CBBE.

Among all the variables, perceived quality was strongly correlated to media credibility-source credibility, r=.903, p<.01 and content credibility, r=.932, p<.01.

This indicated that audiences, who perceived the Oriental Post as having high quality, also perceived it as a credible news source which has high content trustworthy. There was also a significant correlation between brand awareness and media credibility- source credibility, r=.677, p<.01. The higher the brand awareness among the respondents, the higher their perception of source credibility.

Table 1. Correlation between constructs of media credibility and CBBE

Variables	Media credibility	
	Source credibility	Content credibility
CBBE	*r(p)*	*r(p)*
Perceived quality	.903**	.932**
Brand Association	.772**	.768**
Brand Awareness	.677**	.770**
Brand Loyalty	.708**	.709**
N=277, **.Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

6.3. CBBE plays a bigger role in explaining media buying intention

To answer the third research question, we run hierarchical regression; a more robust statistical test that provides a framework for model comparison. In this analysis, control variables (media exposure, media reliance, issue reliance) were entered in the first block of the equation, followed by media credibility (source credibility, content credibility) in the second block and customer-based brand equity (perceived quality, brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty) in the third block.

Table 2 shows that among control variables only issue salience has a significant influence on media buying intent (β=.159, p<.05). The result suggests that those audiences who found the news published by the Oriental Post relevant and important to their life and liked to discuss with their friends or acquaintances would be more willing to patronize this newspaper either by directly purchasing the advertisement space or recommending the newspaper to others online or offline. One possible explanation to this phenomenon can be attributed to the limited numbers of Chinese-language media in Africa because audiences have not many alternatives, they tend to develop strong bonding with the newspapers which were relevant to them.

Our findings also suggest that none of the media credibility factors was a significant predictor to media buying intent (p>.05). However, we found significant relationships between CBBE and media buying intent. We found that perceived quality (β=.321, p<.01) and brand loyalty (β=.238, p<.001) were significant predictors to media buying intent. The results indicate that branding strategy brings into play a bigger contribution in persuading people to advertise in the newspaper than journalist's practice. However, perceived quality (one construct of CBBE) was the most significant predictor to media buying intent. It was the most significantly correlated to media credibility (see Table 1) as well. The result implies that the higher perceived news quality can be obtained from rigorous journalism practice which can lead to a customer-trusted credible medium.

This study echoes past management scholarship: brand loyalty contributes to frequent buying for a company's products (e.g. Chandrasekhar, 2012; Mirabi et al., 2015;), a branding outcome many managers like to achieve. Nevertheless, media managers and journalists sometimes act as if they have different agendas, with journalists emphasizing the quality of news and journalistic standard while profit-seeking media managers focus on revenue goals (Oyedeji, 2007). Though media credibility has no significant contribution toward media buying intention, it is positively and significantly correlated with CBBE constructs, indicating an increase of the credibility index may instigate an increase in the CBBE and vice versa. The close relationship between these two concepts should appeal to managers when they consider the attractiveness of their outlets.

Table 2.   Hierarchical regression analyses predicting media buying intent

Independent Variables	Media buying intent
Block 1: Control Variables	
Media Exposure	-.003
Media Reliance	-.043
Issue salience	.159[*]
Adjusted R^2	.422
Block 2: media credibility	
Source credibility	.074
Content credibility	.124
$\triangle R^2$	.214
Block 3: customer-based brand equity	
Perceived quality	.321[**]
Brand association	-.014
Brand awareness	.056
Brand loyalty	.238***
$\triangle R^2$	.032
Total adjusted R^2	.661

Notes: Beta weight are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. N=277, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

7.   Conclusion

This study, focusing on the Oriental Post, explores the relation between CBBE and media credibility and their respective roles in contributing to media buying intent to shed new light for Chinese-language media in Africa to survive the covid-19 pandemic. Our most important finding is that perceived quality of news and brand loyalty, two constructs of CBBE, are the significant predicators to media buying intent, while media credibility has no effects on media buying intent.

Nevertheless, perceived quality is the most related concept to media credibility regarding a medium corporate. Our correlation analysis also shows that all media credibility constructs are positively and significantly correlated with all CBBE constructs. Their interdependent relationship is extremely important for both journalists and media managers to consider when they balance the journalism practice and profitable goals seeking. It is noteworthy to reiterate the importance of brand loyalty. Covid-19 is a challenge for most businesses operating in Africa as they need to endure the economic hardship and the threat of closing down their operations. One of the advantages of Oriental Post is the lack of competitors of Chinese-language media in Africa, yet the slowing down of business in general during the pandemic may cause a sharp decrease in the media-buying activities. During this challenging period, Oriental Post can invest its efforts in implementing effective branding strategies to expand the customers base and cultivate loyalty to the brand. At times of crisis, loyalty is critical to survival and success.

Acknowledgments

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