

B2B brand marketing in Africa? An exploratory investigation of B2B buyers' perception of supplier brands

Nwamaka A. Anaza ^{a,*}, Elyria Kemp ^b, Christian Nedu Osakwe ^{c,d,f}, Ogechi Adeola ^e

^aDepartment of Marketing, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Rehn Hall Building, Room 229A, 1025 Lincoln Drive, Carbondale, IL 62901, United States of America

^bCollege of Business Administration, University of New Orleans, 2000 Lakeshore Drive, New Orleans, LA 70148, United States of America

^cRabat Business School, International University of Rabat, Rabat-Sale, Morocco

^dUniversity of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science, 26 Melville Rd, Illovo, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

^eLagos Business School, Pan-Atlantic University, Km 22 Lekki-Epe Expressway, Ajah, Lagos, Nigeria

^fDepartment of Customs Affairs, South Ural State University (National Research University), Chelyabinsk, Russian Federation

*Corresponding author. Email: nanaza@siu.edu

Highlights

- B2B branding is a saleable downstream strategy in African markets.
- B2B buyers in African markets prefer foreign brands but support local brands.
- B2B brands are key purchase considerations in African markets but economic and social considerations equally matter.
- B2B brands with value for money, popularity, and credibility are important features to African B2B buyers.

Abstract

Despite growing interest in business-to-business branding, there is limited understanding of how B2B brands impact organizational buying decisions in fast-emerging African markets. To address this omission, this study attempts to investigate the role and significance of B2B supplier brands in emerging African economies. Using a qualitative inquiry, we conducted interviews with business-to-business buyers across various sectors of the Nigerian economy. Leveraging insights from these buyers, we offer a comparative analysis of the role of B2B buying practices in African and Western markets and provide a grounded model addressing the role of B2B brands in organizational buying behavior. Findings indicate that the direct role of brands in business-to-business buying is contingent on several factors, including the supplier's branding strategy, the foreignness or localness of the brand, features of the brand as well as an evaluative process of purchase considerations. Our findings provide a deeper understanding into how brand value is perceived by Nigerian buyers, consequently setting the foundation for suppliers to better comprehend buyers in emerging African markets.

Keywords: Africa; Branding; B2B buying; Grounded model; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) branding has been recognized as a necessary tool for building and sustaining an organization's competitive edge as well its financial profitability (Lynch and De Chernatony, 2004, Lynch and De Chernatony, 2007). B2B brands are critical decisional cues used by industrial buyers to bolster their trust in the buying decision process, while offsetting any concerns associated with the product (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2007; Ohnemus, 2009). Strong brands carry with them an associative element that suggests more positive product attributes, which increases purchase interest (Brown, Sichtmann, & Musante, 2011; Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, & Johnston, 2011). Given the historical complexities in organizational buying models (Kemp, Borders, Anaza, & Johnston, 2018; Webster Jr & Wind, 1972), researchers contend that B2B brands offer rational decision makers a pathway to finalize purchase decisions in a faster and more emotive way (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2019; Kemp et al., 2018). This notion suggests that branding is indeed a positioning strategy (Blankson, Nkrumah, Opare, & Ketron, 2018). And such “positioning strategies never occurs in a cultural vacuum” Blankson, Iyer, Owusu-Frimpong, Nwankwo, and Hinson (2020, p. 627), which means that B2B branding is culturally intertwined and must be contextualized socially from market to market and country to country.

Despite the growing body of B2B branding literature, a review of these studies indicates that there are three major gaps. First, the role of B2B brands as perceived and accounted for by industrial buyers in fast-emerging economies has been overlooked in African markets. Currently, in the B2B literature much of the branding research stems from researchers based in the United States, Europe, and Australia. This necessitates the urgency for B2B brand research in other parts of the world, including in Africa (Seyedghorban, Matanda, & LaPlaca, 2016). For example, B2B branding research in Africa represents less than 1% of papers published in notable B2B journals, including *Industrial Marketing Management* and the *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* combined. With several emerging African B2B brands such as MTN (South Africa), Dangote (Nigeria), and Tusker (Kenya), it is imperative that scholars turn their attention to these markets to understand the brand perceptions of industrial buyers in African countries (Seyedghorban et al., 2016). The absence of this type of research indicates that B2B suppliers, both domestically and globally, lack insights about the decision-making process within burgeoning economies in Africa. There is a genuine sense of urgency to identify *if and why* suppliers' brands matter to industrial buyers in African markets.

Second, academic scholars have limited knowledge about B2B branding preferences in relation to country-of-origin effects on African industrial buyers' decision-making processes. In an economy that relies heavily on both foreign and domestic brands, understanding the relevance of how brand foreignness or localness influence purchase decision-making will deepen suppliers comprehension of industrial buyers in Africa.

Third, existing B2B branding studies have mostly drawn conclusions from Western societies concerning organizational buying behavior as an extension of buying behavior in fast-emerging African markets (see Seyedghorban et al., 2016). In fact, the literature on B2B branding in Africa is extremely scarce, so much so that African scholars themselves equally implant Western deductions as applicable in African markets (e.g., Owusu, Hinson, Adeola, & Oguji, 2021). This is problematic because B2B branding studies from Western societies should neither be translated nor transplanted into the African market space, given the indigenous cultural values and business practices specific to this part of the world. However, at the same time, it should not be implied that the African market is monolithic in its cultural practices, as each

society possesses unique national disparities. Nonetheless, within African economies, there are indigenous cultural practices, values, and beliefs that are shared across national borders (Mufune, 2003; Munene, Schwartz, & Smith, 2000). For example, the preference for traditional order, the maintenance of the status quo, a hierarchical social structure, the importance of relationships, the value placed on family structure, the primacy of collectivist well-being, and a shared value system are cultural dynamics that are prioritized in sub-Saharan Africa (Munene et al., 2000). Even from a marketing perspective, positioning strategies used by domestic African firms tend to yield different results than practices employed by foreign competitors (Blankson et al., 2020). These differences along with the aforementioned gaps in the B2B branding literature provide the impetus for the current study.

As such, the purpose of this study is to fully comprehend the role and significance of B2B supplier brands in emerging African economies. To this effect, the following research questions are proposed:

1. What role do industrial brands have in the B2B purchase decision making process in fast-emerging African economies?
2. What role does country-of-origin brand preferences (indigenous vs. foreign) have on the B2B purchase decision making process in fast-emerging African economies?
3. What are the differences between brand-based purchase decisions in fast-emerging African economies compared to the Western context?

To address these research questions, a qualitative inquiry will be undertaken to glean deeper insights into how branding affects B2B transactions in African markets. This study advances B2B marketing in several ways. First, a comprehensive mastery of buyers' needs, including brand-related expectations in African markets are discussed. From an academic perspective this research contributes to the marketing literature by identifying important brand considerations made by B2B buyers in African markets. Second, major similarities and differences in B2B branding strategies in emerging African markets are identified to explain the disparities and parallels with respect to Western societies. Finally, we identify strategies to enhance B2B brand marketing.

In the following sections, organizational buying behavior models along with B2B brands and organizational buying from an African perspective are discussed. Next, the data collection, sampling, and data analysis process are described. Findings are presented along with a thorough discussion of the insights gleaned from the analysis. The article concludes with limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Organization buying behavior model

Models have been put forward to explore organizational buying behavior. Notable among these models are the Webster and Wind Model, the Sheth Model, and the Johnston and Lewin (1996) Integrative Framework. The Webster and Wind Model is regarded as the most comprehensive organizational buying behavior explanation (Webster Jr & Wind, 1972). The model identifies four variables that determine organizational buying decisions. The model contends that variables such as environmental, organizational, buying center, and individuals are the core variables that determine an organization's buying behavior. Environmental factors are classified under external factors. External factors are cultural, technological, economic,

political and competitor forces. On the other hand, organizational factors consist of organizational goals, organizational structure, and resource constraints. The individual variable suggests that buying decisions are sometimes made based on relationships with suppliers. Decisions can be reached based on loyalties and informal relationships between buyers and suppliers. It is also about the creativity of the individual's ability to take risks, be competitive, and problem solve.

2.1.1. The Sheth Model

The Sheth model suggests that a combination of psychological, marketing, and social factors impact the buying preference of organizations in a logical order (Sheth, 1996). Three levels of buyer's decision-making, which are extensive problem solving, limited problem solving, and routinized problem solving, are identified. Extensive problem solving is regarded as the first stage of decision-making, whereby the organization is introduced to the market. At this level, the organization makes decisions and tries to get information about different suppliers in the market to make informed decisions. The second identified level is "limited problem solving", and at this level, the buyer still does not have all the needed information about the choice of supplier or market. To make an informed decision, the organization undertakes a comparison of all the suppliers, brands, and offerings available to the organization in the market. Finally, routinized problem solving suggests that the organization is aware of the different suppliers and their offerings. The advantages and disadvantages of doing business with each supplier are analyzed. Through this analysis of the market and the availability of information about the different suppliers, the organization decides from whom it will buy.

2.1.2. The integrative framework

Johnston and Lewin (1996) proposed the integrative framework, which suggests a conceptual process of determining organization buying behavior. Specifically, Johnston and Lewin propose that organizational buying is dependent on all the factors highlighted in Webster and Wind's model as well as by decision rules and buyer-seller relationships (e.g., commitment, cooperation/trust, conflict management, power/dependence), which influence organizational buying decisions.

2.1.3. Model extensions by marketing scholars

Some scholars (e.g., Webster Jr & Keller, 2004) contend that organizational buying is motivated by buyers' need to make a profit while remaining budget-constrained, whereas others argue that purchase decisions are directly derived from characteristics of the organization (e.g., size, structure, orientation, technology) and purchase situations (e.g., risk, bus task, product type/attributes), seller (price, product, quality) (Hunter, Bunn, & Perreault Jr., 2006; Lewin & Donthu, 2005). Another critical factor gaining attention in the B2B literature is a product's country-of-origin effect (cf. Dobrucali, 2019 for a review of recent literature in the field), which earlier studies consider to be an informational cue that can reduce the organizational buyer's decision-making uncertainty (Ahmed, d'Astous, & El-Adraoui, 1994). However, this factor has not been integrated into any organizational buying behavior models. In recent years, researchers have found that intangible factors and non-product-based factors such as emotional triggers impact how buyers evaluate purchase decisions (Anaza & Rutherford, 2014; Kemp et al., 2018; Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997). For example, Mudambi et al. (1997) and Mudambi (2002) recognized that branding and brand characteristics influence buying decisions.

Despite the presence of various organizational buying behavior models, none has been applied to the African context. But all of the existing organizational buying behavior models have been tested in advanced Western economies. In understanding factors that influence B2B relationships, there has been limited attention to testing organizational buying models, with more emphasis placed on key predictors such as trust and satisfaction in the African context. For example, in their study, Mpinganjira, Roberts-Lombard, and Svensson (2017) found that economic satisfaction from the buyer-supplier relationship leads to trust, which in turn enhances commitment among the parties involved. The role of satisfaction has been highlighted as a critical factor in developing B2B relationships in Africa (Mpinganjira et al., 2017; Svensson, Mpinganjira, & Roberts-Lombard, 2019). Consequently, the buying decision models that emphasize environmental, organizational, interpersonal, and individual factors (i.e. Webster and Wind Model) are yet to be applied to Africa.

2.2. B2B brands and organizational buying in the African context

Until the late 1990s and early 2000s, following seminal studies by Mudambi et al. (1997) and Mudambi (2002), researchers had concluded that B2B brands played less of a role in the organizational purchase decision-making process (Saunders & Watt, 1979; Sinclair & Seward, 1988). However, all of this changed when world economies became more co-dependent, with growing buyer demand, expansion of multinational companies, technological advancements, and the pursuit for differentiated product strategies (Seyedghorban et al., 2016). Escalating and fierce product and marketing competition between major multinational companies meant that they had to identify lasting strategies to stay competitive, which led to increased academic research on B2B branding. Although the literature on B2B branding has grown immensely, researchers agree that the field has yet to reach its full potential given the lack of “theoretical advancements, modifications and improvements in using qualitative and conceptual models” (Seyedghorban et al., 2016, p. 2665). Moreover, scholars also highlight the need for more research on the role of branding in buyer-supplier relationships in African markets due to the limited understanding of buyers' perceptions of B2B brands (Seyedghorban et al., 2016).

In African markets, studies on buyer behavior focus more on business-to-consumer (B2C) buying behavior (e.g., Babalola, Lateef, & Zekeri, 2020; Uloko & Ogbadu, 2021), with few studies on organizational buying behavior (e.g., Bamgboye, 1992; Ebitu, Essien, & Basil, 2012; Essien & Etuk, 2012). Even more minimal are studies on brands and branding in Africa. Except for a handful of studies (e.g., Alexander, Bick, Abratt, & Bendixen, 2009; Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004), most B2B branding research in emerging economies overlooks organizational buying behavior. For example, Sheth and Sinha (2015) examined sustainability as a mechanism for building B2B corporate branding in emerging markets with case studies from Mozambique, Tanzania, and Ghana on Shell in Africa. Yet, with a focus on how B2B marketers can adopt social, economic, and environmental sustainability strategies as a branding tool, the buyer's perception of the branding strategy is completely overlooked in their discussion.

Even within studies that explore organizational buying models in Africa, the supplier's brand as a component of organizational buying is not included as a search criterion for organizational buying. In one of the earliest B2B studies conducted in Africa, Bamgboye (1992) found that the factors determining supplier search in organizational buying include dissatisfaction with an existing supplier, improved utility from an alternative supplier, financial savings, technological improvement, end-user customer requirements, and changes to the supplier's products. Nowhere is the brand mentioned, thus relegating brands to a non-issue status in supplier searches. In another study involving organizational consumers in Cross River, Nigeria, Ebitu

et al. (2012) found that the purchase of industrial goods is dependent more on the price differential than on the supplier's quality specification. Again, brands remain a non-issue in this study. Contrary to these articles, Alexander et al. (2009) embarked on a brand-based investigation within the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. In a joint decision-making environment involving the purchase of three branded tires (tyres- Bridgestone, Goodyear, Michelin) and one unbranded tire, Alexander et al. (2009) revealed that tire brands were the most important to users and deciders when making purchase decisions, while durability was more important to influencers. Despite the aforementioned studies, we still know far less about the mechanisms through which brands relate to organizational purchasing in an African B2B context, especially concerning if and why brands matter.

3. Methods and study's context

To examine the significance of brands, brand preference, and resulting value in African markets, we undertook a qualitative inquiry to develop a grounded model concerning the role of brands in B2B purchase decision-making. A systematic inductive approach recommended by Thomas (2006) and similar to Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded model approach was employed when analyzing the qualitative study because this method allowed the researchers to interpretively identify themes from the data without being confined to theory-specific connections. The inductive approach used by the researchers attempts to streamline the raw data into a meaningful format using a coding system by creating clear connections between the research objectives and findings, which then allows for the development of a model resulting from the textual data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Thomas, 2006). Themes most pertinent to the research questions were identified through Strauss and Corbin (1998) three-step thematic coding process. Descriptions of these core themes were derived from the data, creating the template for building the model.

B2B buying and decision-making in Nigeria represents the context of our study. The researchers use Nigeria as a research context for several reasons. First, Nigeria as a nation has enormous opportunities for B2B markets, with increasing prospects for growth and global investment (Owusu et al., 2021). In 2015, Nigeria and South Africa constituted the largest proportion of Africa's B2B spending (Williams, 2019). Second, Nigeria is the most populous country and the largest economy in Africa (OECD, 2020). This constitutes an opportunity for B2B growth and expansion but also presents unique challenges. Issues such as inadequate infrastructure, poor road networks, and energy and power supply constraints are contextual factors affecting supply chain management (Oyedijo, Koukpaki, Kusi-Sarpong, Alfarsi, & Yang, 2021); additionally, increased spending patterns impact service delivery in Nigeria (Williams, 2019). Finally, with an estimated population of over 200 million (Worldometer, 2021), Nigeria provides a good representation of the continent (about 15% of Africa's population). This scenario makes Nigeria a unique research context to explore, with the possibility of applying the findings to other African countries.

3.1. Study sampling frame

Nigeria comprises six (6) geo-political zones (i.e., North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South and South-West). This study was conducted in the South-West and North-Central regions of Nigeria, specifically Abuja (North-Central), Lagos (South-West), and Ogun (South-West) States. These states were selected because of the availability of industries, a high level of industrial activities, the benefits of external economies of scale for B2B businesses, and proximity/access to data. The data were collected from B2B organizations that

have been in business for more than 10 years. Most of the organizations are small to mid-sized companies. The National Bureau of Statistics estimates that small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) make up about 17.4 million enterprises, contribute about 48% to the national GDP, and account for about 50% of industrial jobs and nearly 90% of activities in the manufacturing sector in Nigeria (PWC, 2020). Hence, the focus of this study is on this target market.

Three field researchers assisted one of the research investigators with data collection. Most of the firms were identified through a network of individuals in the B2B sector. The interviewers approached the various companies and shared the purpose of the study with the personnel in charge of purchases. Appointments were booked and when the participants were not available, a suitable alternative date was fixed for a face-to-face interview. Follow-up calls were made to confirm appointments. All participants in the study worked in B2B organizations and oversaw buying decisions; from purchase managers to supply chain directors, every respondent had direct involvement and played key roles in organizational purchasing behavior. Face-to-face contact ensured access to knowledgeable respondents, and the respondents were given the opportunity to ask questions to clarify the research objectives. During the face-to-face interviews, all necessary health precautions as prescribed by the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Health were followed, including six feet of social distancing and mask wearing during interviews, as the data were collected in 2021 in the second year of the global COVID pandemic.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 49 participants during office hours and at prescribed office locations. In instances where the responsible officers contacted were not available, a junior staff member with buying responsibilities was delegated to participate in the study. The respondents voluntarily agreed to be part of the study as there is a willingness to support and participate in research studies in Nigeria in line with the culture. Three buyers who were called upon for an interview felt uncomfortable with social contact due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These respondents were encouraged to complete an electronic written version of the interview via an open-ended questionnaire created and posted on Qualtrics. The same questions asked in the face-to-face interview were reproduced in the questionnaire. Thus, a total of 52 participants were involved in the study, as summarized in Table 1 (14% of the participants were from Lagos (South-West), 6% were from Ogun (South-West), and 80% were from Abuja (North-Central)).

As shown in Table 1, participants engaged in B2B buying and worked in the purchasing department. Most participants were uncomfortable providing their exact ages and were encouraged to quantify their ages in a range. Forty-two percent of participants ranged in age from 35 to 44 years, 46% from 45 to 64 years, and 12% from 25 to 34 years. Participants on average had worked in purchasing for over six years and had worked for their companies an average of eight years. Sixty-five percent of participants worked for smaller-sized companies with 1–49 employees, 27% worked for mid-sized companies with 50–499 employees, and 8% worked for larger-sized firms (4%, 500–999 employees and 4%, 1000–4999). Thirty-four participants were male and 18 were female, all representing various industries including agricultural, hospitality, food services, manufacturing, and finance. Seventy-nine percent had a university or post-graduate degree, while only 10% had secondary schooling plus vocational training. Purchases made by these buyers included fertilizer from Olam farms, air conditioners from Fouani, diesel from Total fuel stations, drinks from Nigerian breweries, cabinets from Epsom Inc., mattresses from Mouka Foam, computers from Dell, fuel tanks from Sayona Nig Ltd., excavators from Schronberger, generator sets from Yamaha, etc. Purchases were made

for internal manufacturing purposes or for resell purposes to retailers, wholesalers, distributors and, in some cases, end-user consumers. Table 2 provides a summary of the buying firm's industry, products purchased, and supplying firm. Pseudonyms are provided for participants in Table 1 and when reporting the study's findings.

Table 2. Profile of buying firm's industry, purchased product, and supplier.

Number	Industry type of buying firm	Purchased product	Supplier
1	Retail trade	Skincare products	Melao
2	Real estate, rental, and leasing	A vehicle	Nissan
3	Construction	Diesel	Total fuel station
4	Real estate, rental, and leasing	A set of computers	Happiness Computers
5	Information	Digital Tablets	KCEE Accessories
6	Real estate, rental, and leasing	Air conditioners	Fouani
7	Educational services	Furnitures	Bedmate Furnishings
8	Public Administration	tables and chairs	Bo concept
9	Agriculture, fishing, and forestry	Fertilizer	Olam farms
10	Other services	Clothing materials	Versace
11	Manufacturing	CAT pay loaders	Donfeng, China
12	Hospitality, hotel administration, and food services	Drinks (Alcohol)	Nigerian breweries
13	Manufacturing	Smart Television sets	Shang Chen Group
14	Transportation and warehousing	Engine oil and Filters	Total Oil limited
15	Finance	HP Printers	HP Office, Wuse II
16	Insurance	Computer sets	Dell
17	Other services	Timbers	Hard wood.com
18	Other services	Smartboard	LG
19	Real estate, rental, and leasing	Mattress	Mouka Foam
20	Insurance	Cabinet	Epsom Inc
21	Finance	Toshiba Laptops	Big Day Computers
22	Other services	Toyota Hilux Pickup Trucks	Choscharis Motors
23	Manufacturing	30KVA Generator	Chuma Energy Electronics
24	Wholesale trade	Fast moving consumables (Nestle)	Ik Superstores
25	Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	Fuel Tanks	Sayona Nig. Ltd
26	Hospitality, hotel administration, and food services	Generator set	Yamaha
27	Construction	Excavators	Schronberger
28	Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	TV Set	Samsung
29	Real estate, rental, and leasing	Solar Lamps	Light out solars
30	Manufacturing	Mikano 70KVA Generator	Mikano
Number	Industry Type of Buying Firm	Purchased Product	Supplier
31	Hospitality, hotel administration, and food services	Diesel	Oando
32	Transportation and warehousing	10 Toyota Hiace buses	Alfatr Motors
33	Agriculture, fishing, and forestry	CCTV Cameras	Sony
34	Educational services	20 hp. laptops	HP

35	Health care and social assistance	Bionet EKG Machines	Medixab
36	Health care and social assistance	Ambulance	TOYOTA
37	Agriculture, fishing, and forestry	Fish feed (Aqua feeds)	Aqua feed Depot
38	Construction	Dangote Cement	Dangote Depot
39	Manufacturing	Polythene bags	Dandi poly limited
40	Retail trade	Guinness Drinks	ELO DEPOT
41	Agriculture, fishing, and forestry	Maikano Generator	JOHN HOLT NIG LTD
42	Hospitality, hotel administration, and food services	Whiskey drinks	ELO Wine shop
43	Transportation and warehousing	Ford Cars	Inter cars LIMITED
44	Hospitality, hotel administration, and food services	Yam flour	TALATA YAM FLOUR
45	Agriculture, fishing, and forestry	Fish Feeds	Chikun Feeds
46	Art entertainment and recreation	Set of woofers and speakers	Sony
47	Educational services	Bags of rice	Lakerice
48	Educational services	Dell laptops and printer	Slot
49	Music, Television and Movie entertainment	Solar Panels and Inverter	Schneider
50	Retail trade	Mercury UPS device	Shang Xi Electronics
51	Waste management	Scrap	Brismax
52	Retail trade	Gluta	Ozonosky limited

Name of buying firm was collected but will not be publicly shared.

3.2. Data collection

Every face-to-face interview began in the same manner: a show of gratitude for the respondent's participation, an explanation of the academic purpose of the research with future publication potential, a review of the Institutional Review Board statement, and receipt of participants' written agreement to take part in the study with the assurance that their participation will be kept confidential. On average, the entire conversation lasted 60 min. We used a semi-structured protocol which centered the interview around recent major purchases that participants made on behalf of their organizations in order to ascertain their relationship with suppliers. To begin, we asked descriptive questions concerning the participants' role in purchasing and in relation to recent organizational purchases. Descriptive information about suppliers was also collected at this early stage of the interview. Next, we posed a closed-ended question based on various purchase attributes. We asked participants to rate attributable factors that impacted their purchase decisions such as: price, fear of making a wrong purchase, the salesperson, supplier satisfaction, no alternatives on the market, brand name, loyalty to the supplier, trust in the supplier, discounts, tribal relationship, decisional confidence, exclusive purchase contract, and purchase mandated by superiors. This question was based on a cumulative percentage (100%) where more important attributes received more percentage points and less important attributes received fewer percentage points. Irrelevant attributes received no points (0%). Based on this distribution, follow-up questions were asked based on participants' responses. For instance, we asked: “*why* was the brand name ranked high” or “*why* was the brand name not ranked higher.” Given that the interview was based on a recent purchase, we asked additional open-ended questions about the role of the brand in the purchase. See Table 1 for the purchases made and the supplying firm.

3.3. Coding and data analysis process

The data analysis process followed a common three-step thematic coding approach in the grounded method for qualitative research made popular by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). To begin, notes taken during the interviews and responses entered in Qualtrics were then inserted into an Excel spreadsheet for both storage and analysis purposes. Our first step was to read the data closely. Both the individual notes and the Excel spreadsheet of responses were read multiple times by two members of the research team.

Open coding ensued during this process. The data were read line-by-line to identify key pieces of information, key quotes, and sentences that had connections across interview responses as well as reoccurring information. This open coding process allowed the researchers to designate relevant accounts made by buyers concerning factors that influence their organizational buying behavior. Several significant accounts, now identified as first-order codes, were recognized and then closely evaluated across other participants' responses for similar or dissimilar points. It was important for the researchers to compare first-order codes across all the interviews to establish consistencies and determine whether any new information emerged. Conceptually, relatable first-order codes based on the meaning and our interpretation of the quotes were identified and grouped together into second-order categories using axial coding. For example, codes relating to “consider all buying needs and specification” and “brand is part of a purchase checklist” were abstracted to a second-order category called “brands are important but other considerations must be made”; first-order codes for “we want to sell what we buy” and “without the brand we cannot expect sales” were abstracted to a second-order category called “major (re)selling factor.

The axial coding process revealed 15 second-order categories with clear differences among them. The next step involving selective coding required us to capture connections among our second-order categories by identifying meanings and explanations for each category and making the necessary links across the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Several interconnections were made across second-order categories to derive an aggregate concept. Five aggregate concepts emanated from this process. For example, second-order categories relating to “promoting the brand,” “offering direct and pass-through discounts,” “maintaining product excellence,” “collaborating on marketing efforts,” and “building co-creative partnership” aggregated to a concept called “designing a strong brand.” With the delineation of the key aggregate concepts, we further examined the association among the concepts to develop a sound grounded model clarifying why and how brands contribute to organizational buying behavior in an African context. Fig. 1 shows the coding structure following the open, axial, and selective coding processes, while Fig. 3 illustrates the grounded model.

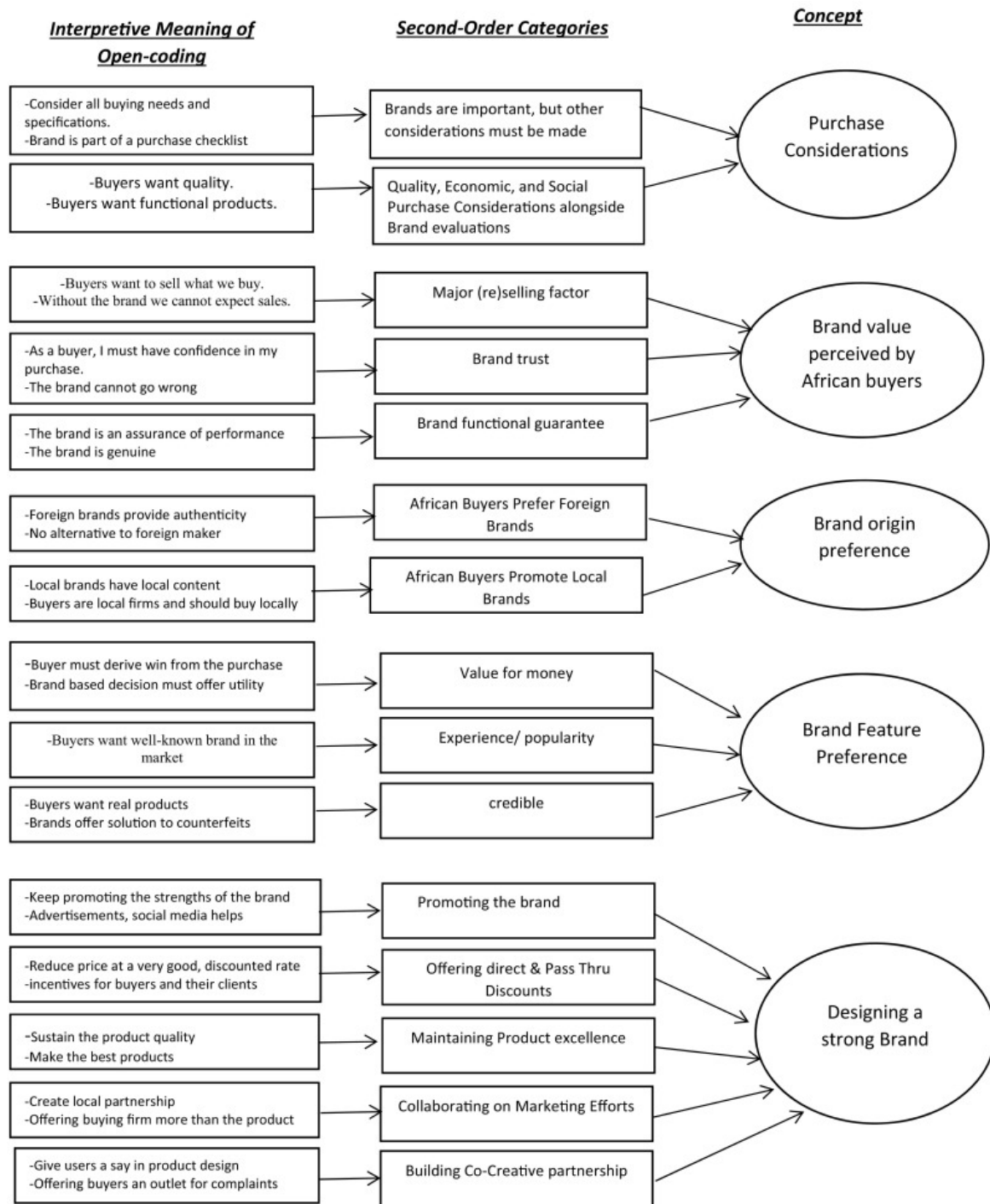


Fig. 1. Analysis coding structure.

In the following section, we discuss the findings and present the grounded model that followed from them. We then highlight both the similarities and differences between the experiences of our target buyers in developing African economies with buyers in Western contexts.

4. Findings

The presentation of the findings is arranged in line with the coding structure as seen in Fig. 1 where 15 second-order categories are aggregated into five concepts (Refer to Fig. 1). We begin by discussing concept level findings followed by second-order categories aggregated into those concepts. The first concept discussed will be purchase consideration which is delineated by two second-order categories: (1) brands are important, but other considerations must be made and (2) quality, economic, and social considerations matter alongside brand consideration. The second concept (i.e., brand value perceived by African buyers) explains the brand's perceived value to African buyers. This concept is explained by three second-order categories: (1) major (re)selling factor, (2) brand trust, and (3) brand functional guarantee. The third concept (i.e., brand origin preference) reflects buyers' inclination towards foreign or local brands when making a purchase decision. This concept is explained by two second-order categories: (1) African buyers' preference for foreign brands and (2) African buyers need to promote local brands. The fourth concept (i.e., brand feature preference) is explained by three second-order categories including: (1) buyers' value for money, (2) brand popularity and (3) credibility. The final concept (i.e., designing a strong brand) suggests five ways for suppliers to build brands in an industrial purchase context through (1) promoting the brand, (2) offering direct and pass through discounts, (3) maintaining product excellence, (4) collaborating on marketing efforts, and (5) building co-creative partnership.

4.1. Purchase consideration

All buyers interviewed shared one similar sentiment in that they all made buying considerations before finalizing the purchase decision. We describe purchase consideration as the features, items, and deliberations that members involved in the buying decision make before settling on which products to buy from suppliers. As seen in Fig. 2, our results indicate that brands are generally the most important consideration that buyers make before concluding on a purchase decision. According to the percentage-based distribution where participants allocated importance points to the different attributes, the analysis revealed that brands accounted for 20.40% of the purchase decision, thus revealing their importance to organizational purchases. Following the brand, buyers made additional purchase considerations, including pricing and quality considerations. Participants with some of the highest brand scores had never purchased from the supplier's previously.

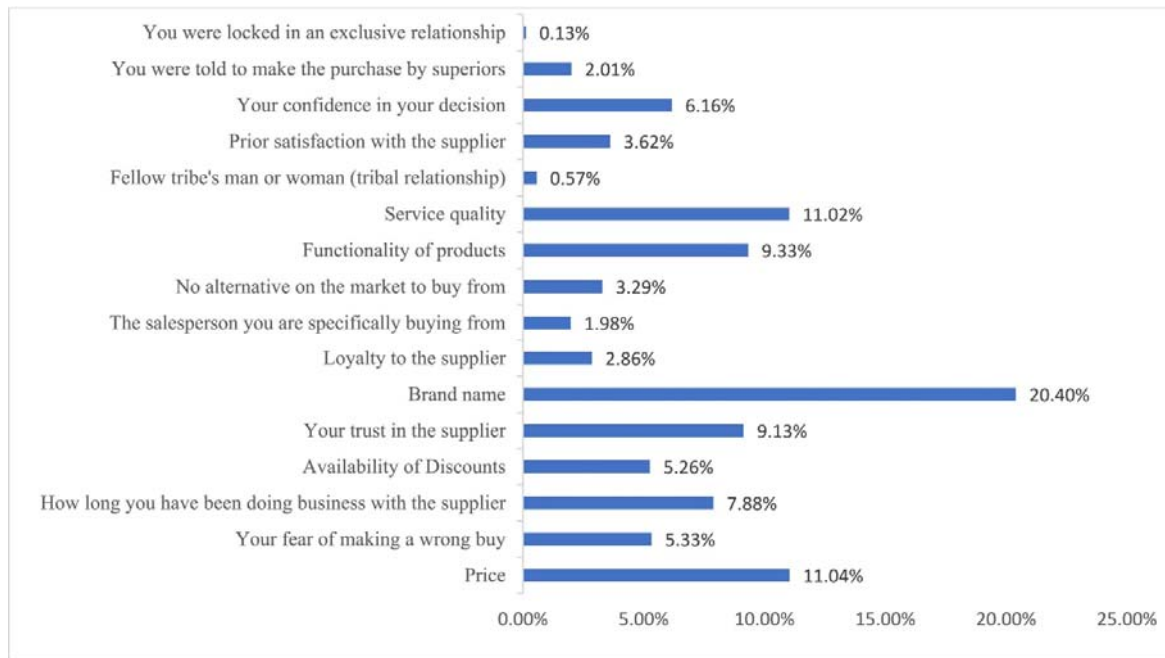


Fig. 2. Factors affecting B2B purchase decision.

4.1.1. Brands are important, but other consideration must be made

Most of the respondents in our study were unanimous in their view that branding matters in B2B purchase decision-making. While participants emphasized the significance of the supplier's brand during the purchase decision-making process, they equally highlighted that other purchase considerations must be evaluated to make a sound final purchase decision. Still, for several buyers, the brand was the most important consideration that they made when making B2B purchases. One buyer recounted that the brand “*was ranked actually as the highest ... This brand name in this case is based on the company producing and preserving this particular product for the benefit of mankind and the use of quality furniture*” (Odibo, head of logistics). While a handful of participants acknowledged that the supplier's brand was a top consideration when making buying decisions, most respondents contended that it was not necessarily their top consideration but was an important factor in the decision-making process, along with a healthy balance of key quality, economic, and social considerations. In fact, one participant stated that “*as we all know the [brand] name would rank higher, but the truth remains that other attributes need to be focused on also to strike a balance*” (Yomi, deputy logistics officer). Adaugo, a logistics executive for Max Habib investment, similarly noted that “*other factors are juxtaposed with the brand-name factor.*” This indicates that, for these buyers, the brand name does indeed matter, but it must be evaluated alongside other industrial purchase considerations. In fact, decisional weights allocated to other purchase considerations appear to be similar across key purchase considerations such as price, service quality, product functionality, etc.

As seen in Fig. 2, when buyers were asked to rate the degree to which certain key purchasing attributes were important, the results show that some rate the brand as their most important consideration, but other factors are also evaluated. For example, one participant exclaimed that “*though brand name is a good consideration, other factors were placed side by side and evenly distributed*” (Adesuwa, facility manager). Several instances of buyers highlighting the need for

balance or striking a good balance when making purchase decisions were prominent in the findings. This indicates that these buyers have their own checklist of priorities, and determine importance based on their different buying needs. In the words of one respondent: *“We have a careful consideration list we tick. Other considerations were added to meet up with a perfect decision”* (Paul, manager). This same sentiment was recurrent among other participants:

“There are other priorities that also needs to be attended to because it's on the same page and this would also need some more points. But on the contrary the brand name is the all in all and has its own score point”

(Jide, head ICT)

“It [brand] ranked high. It is a huge determinant factor. Mikano is a top brand in the Nigerian power supply market. Other factors were also considered”

(Nkechi, resourcing director)

“It was a huge concern since we've known Dell to be a strong product. So, the brand name was considered along with some other decisions”

(Eben, proprietor)

4.1.2. Quality, economic, and social purchase considerations alongside brand evaluations

For most buyers, it was important to make the right purchase decision, which meant looking beyond the brand name and making quality, economic, and social purchase considerations during the decision-making process. This was an indication that many of these purchasers still approach buying from a classical organizational buying model, which subscribes to the view that buyers make purchase decisions based on objective economic and non-economic considerations (Webster Jr, 1995).

4.1.2.1. Quality considerations

Quality was a recurrent theme brought up by participants when making buying decisions. Participants recognize that quality and the functional performance of the product is just as important as brand considerations. Quality of the service was a critical consideration stressed by many buyers. Some buyers considered quality to be more important than brand name in that *“the quality and specification was a more required consideration on the decision-making scale”* (Musa, operations assistant). Another purchasing manager noted that when making purchase decisions, the *“service quality and functionality of products was more concerning”* (Williams, purchase manager). To some participants, quality was seen as a transferable brand trait that could be found across competent suppliers, thus giving greater credence to quality than brand name. For instance, Ike, a purchasing manager, noted that *“the brand name can still be replaced with another that has similar quality too.”* Nike, an inventory and procurement officer, held the same viewpoint when she noted that *“we prefer quality from any brand over brand name,”* suggesting that as long as the brand was known for its quality, they were willing to give it a trial. However, several buyers considered service quality to be just as important as the brand name. Kazeem, the head of inventory and logistics, stated that *“the quality of service was placed alongside while considering brand name.”*

Several participants associated service quality as being part of the supplier's brand, and as such, the quality was inseparable from the brand itself. Demilade, a supply chain manager, noted that *“we consider good quality and we're comfortable with Chikun products, which makes the brand name also considered.”*

4.1.2.2. Economic considerations

Economic considerations were made along with quality and brand considerations. The price of the product was one of the key economic considerations mentioned by participants. Babatunde, the head of logistics and supplies, noted that *“we purchase a lot of equipment. We consider price and quality first especially for the Nigerian market.”* Benjamin, an operations manager, reiterated the same sentiment: *“I consider other several parameters before making a purchasing decision.”* He went on to emphasize that their last major purchase was a *“discount-based decision,”* again highlighting the impact of cost and price in their decision-making process.

Another economic consideration emanating from the participants, as alluded to by Benjamin and Nonso, was the performance of the product in the consumer market. Buyers were interested in delivering a reliable product because their downstream buyers wanted functional products. In the words of a buyer, *“functionality is more important to us and our target market”*

(Chioma, marketing manager).

Customer demand was another purchase consideration highlighted by participants. Buyers stressed making purchases based on their customers' wants. This is an indication that buyers are making purchase decisions with their downstream supply channel members in mind. In other words, the buyers are buying brand-name products in response to their clients' desires. Several buyers made the following observations:

“It [Brands] gives us more and more confidence based on what our customers want. Customers are crazy about brand names and its subs that comes out of it”

(Ken, director of logistics)

“The customers we have ask specifically about the brand name and then subsequently ask for the product itself or the categories of drinks they actually ask for”

(Dami, treasurer)

“Most products are mainly identified with brand names, and this makes it easy for customers to identify them easily for purchase”

(Amadu, relationship officer)

4.1.2.3. Social considerations

Relational duration was the primal social consideration made by buyers as a determinant for their purchasing behavior in addition to brand name. Many buyers were eager to highlight that they were buying from the supplier because it was a reliable brand, but also because they had been in business together for some time. Several buyers remarked:

“It [brand] was part of the reasons for purchase, ... We have been purchasing from HP so we are familiar with their services”

(Osamede, inventory manager)

“It [Toyota brand] was ranked higher and actually has been a major supplier of our vehicles so far”

(Sunday, purchasing officer)

“We have a partnership with Mouka”

(Ejiro, head of logistics department)

4.2. Brand value perceived by African buyers

Our findings reveal that purchase decisions based on brands were due to the brand's derived value. Researchers contend that the brand value beneficiary can be customers focused on brand perception or companies focused on brand equity (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Our findings indicate that, for most participants in our study, the benefit of buying an industrial brand-name product lies at the intersection of buyers' brand perceptions and the brand commercial value, including the major (re)selling factor, brand trust, and brand guarantee.

4.2.1. Major (re)selling factor

Researchers have often treated the sales and buying units of organizations as distinct unrelated silos, but Anaza, Harrison, and Rutherford (2020) recently acknowledged that B2B buyers share key boundary-spanning responsibilities with salespeople despite the differences in their job roles. The present findings corroborate Anaza et al. (2020) arguments in that buyers take on more of a sales role when making purchases because they purchase products with the intention that the products will sell. For many of these buyers, purchasing brand-name products is a tangible way of increasing the resell value for their own customers' post-purchase. As one participant noted *“brands are always the name being sold and without a brand name it would be difficult to sell a particular product”* (Nancy, assistant accountant). Several buyers also highlighted that there is local confidence in the familiarity associated with a well-known brand name that increases the ability to sell the product:

“The name alone is the brand and the brand is what is sold and bought by people”

(Ike, purchasing officer)

“The brand name alone is something that always makes sales for any product--just like the way Toyota is making sales for its different kinds of products”

(Sunday, purchasing officer)

4.2.2. Brand Trust

Our findings show that trust is an important value obtained in B2B purchases. Participants indicated that brand trust is gained directly and indirectly. Indirect trust in the brand was

ascertained mainly from three avenues. First, there were positive testimonials from existing brand users in the marketplace. One buyer noted that *“the testimony I have been hearing from persons who use the brand name makes it sounds like it's going to be a good vibe to us when its starts to be in use”* (Dele, purchaser). Second, the length of time the brand had been in business was mentioned. For example, vintage brands that had been in business longer yielded greater perceived value as Odibo, head of logistics, noted about his company's supplier's brand. He stated that this brand *“has been trusted over the years and has been able to deliver the quality needed for the products.”* Finally, a third factor was the number of competitors using the brand, such that the more competitors using the brand increased brand trust. As stated by Jide, head ICT, *“the brand has been used by some other firms and they have seen its functions and it has been very helpful and productive for them.”* Trust can also be evaluated directly from past satisfactory consumption experiences with the brand. As one buyer purchasing CCTV cameras from Sony noted *“Sony brand has been known to be a trusted brand.”* (Okiti, director).

4.2.3. Functional brand guarantees

In Westernized societies, B2B transactions are often completed with an expressed product warranty (Biong & Silkoset, 2014). In contrast, our findings revealed that, for most Nigerian buyers, the brand was the functional guarantee that the product's performance would meet specified buying expectations. Participants highlighted that the brand ensured quality, reliability, originality, likeability, and assurance. In the words of one buyer, *“to ensure the item purchased is bona-fide, going for the brand name was a guarantee”* (Osamede, inventory manager). Another buyer specifically highlighted these benefits: *“It matters to consider originality, guarantee, and authenticity else the purchase experience most times won't be positive”* (Adaugo, logistic executive). Others noted the persuasive value of a brand in terms of its likeability: *“The brand carries all it takes to make a product likeable and acceptable by the customer”* (Sola, purchasing officer). The issue of originality and authenticity also emerged prominently as an important value of the brand. This parallels the view of source credibility in consumer market research in that messaging from a credible entity significantly influences customer beliefs and actions (Nguyen, Melewar, & Chen, 2013). For most of these African B2B buyers, brands are a source of guaranteeing authenticity so as not to purchase fake products:

“The brand is difficult to counterfeit. Making confidence in the brand improved”

(Kazeem, head of inventory and logistics)

4.3. Brand origin preferences

Past B2B brand preference research, although minimal, has found that brand preferences are measured variables that ascertain a company's decision to buy one brand-name product over another (e.g., Zablah, Brown, & Donthu, 2010). Many of these studies do not contextualize aspects of the brand that buyers prefer as determinants of their purchase behavior. However, our findings reveal that brand preferences are predicated on the origins and features of the brand.

4.3.1. African buyers prefer foreign brands

Mohan, Brown, Sichtmann, and Schoefer (2018) acknowledged that there are B2B brands positioned as global or local but, for most of our participants, the brand's origin rather than the brand's positioning was a reason for their brand preference. Our findings indicate a strong preference for foreign brands as these brands were associated with originality, quality, experience, and trust. For example, Osamede, an inventory manager, stated that *“foreign brands are authentic, sincere and honest with their description and guarantee.”* This was also echoed by Nonso, a director, who noted that *“foreign brands are authentic, genuine and robust. We stick to brands that assure us top quality.”*

Other buyers indicated that their preference for foreign brands was due to a lack of alternative local manufacturers. For example, Ojo who recently handled the purchases of solar lamps noted that his decision to purchase a foreign brand-name product was *“because they are the only ones who can actually produce these particular products we need. And even if it's produced here there is a possibility that it wouldn't be sustainable and durable.”* Several buyers suggested that they would consider using local competitors if their quality was as good as their foreign counterparts.

The issue of trust in foreign brands was also pronounced in the findings. Our results demonstrated that African purchase decision makers trust foreign brands because the supplying firms allow buyers to reduce their risks in case of faulty parts. For instance, Benjamin, an operations manager, noted that *“most of these foreign brands have been tested and trusted. They also call back their products if anything rampantly goes wrong.”* A similar sentiment was noted by Ojo: *“It [brand] was ranked higher because it's a known company that purchases most of its products from China and has been certified by the standard organization of Nigeria.”*

4.3.2. African buyers promote local brands

While most of our buyers did not prefer local brands, 11 participants noted that they sourced mainly from local brands for three main reasons: 1) the need for local content/materials, 2) a patriotic view of promoting their own, and 3) accessibility.

The African continent is rich in natural resources and Nigeria is home to many raw materials and minerals. Ken, a director of logistics who buys drinks from Nigerian breweries, highlighted that the locally sourced content is one of their major product advantages: *“It has the local content inside of it and it is refined and also very acceptable to the body system.”* Ehi, the head of logistics, who purchases fish feed from Aqua Feed Depot, equally highlighted the value of sourcing from local brands: *“The feed has been very effective and very advantageous to our fish. It also has a local nutrient to grow the birds.”*

A few buyers noted that buying domestic brands was a necessary way to promote local businesses, which was important to them as to the local businesses themselves. One participant noted: *“We are promoters of local brands, and we lead by example”* (Nkechi, resourcing director). A similar sentiment was recounted by Okiti, a director of a local farm: *“We prefer local self-made quality brands to promote and lead local companies on.”* The findings indicated that most of the participants who promoted local brands worked in similar industrial sectors: agriculture, fishing, and forestry; mining, quarrying, oil and gas; food and beverage; waste management (recycling); construction and manufacturing; educational services and retail (skin care).

Immediate access to local brands was the third reason that buyers gave for purchasing local Nigerian brands. Being able to physically evaluate a purchase, try it out, see how it functions and have it delivered without major delays or costs, including import duties, was important to some of these buyers. Eneh, who worked in the sales and budget department, noted that her preference for local brands was because *“it's affordable, available, durable and very sustainable.”* Yomi, a deputy logistics officer, shared that local brands *“solve our needs quickly and they are readily available.”*

4.4. Brand feature preferences

Information about the features of the brand that buyers generally preferred was also salient in the findings. Brand feature preferences are the characteristics that make buyers perceive a brand as more appealing than alternative brands. Brand feature preferences were prominent in our findings and were used to strengthen the purchase decision.

4.4.1. Value for money

Brands that offered good value for the money were critical to many buyers. This meant that the benefits of purchasing the brand should outweigh the financial cost of acquiring the purchase. Amadu, a relationship officer, noted that the brand should *“make available more reliable products and provide value for the money.”* A big part of this value was the quality and performance of the product. Several participants highlighted that they preferred brands that were market leaders because it meant that the brands were performing ahead of their competitors and offering the best solutions in the market. This is consistent with Herbst and Merz (2011) B2B brand personality scale, which shows that industrial brands that are achievement oriented and offer a functional promise, intrigue buyers. In the words of Ibrahim, *“brands are a huge factor... Quality identified with a brand is a selling factor. So, there's a quality associated with an expected satisfaction when dealing with a purchase.”*

4.4.2. Experience/popularity

Buyers also preferred brands that were well known in their industry or household names. This helps to solidify confidence in their purchase decisions. One buyer noted that *“CAT is a household name--known for quality and long-lasting machinery”* (Kanayo, director for purchasing). But he also noted that *“if the brand name is already a universally known brand, confidence increases.”*

4.4.3. Credibility

Credibility was another feature expressed by many participants. Originality, uniqueness, and authenticity of the brand were important attributes of brand credibility that buyers preferred. Many buyers were extremely concerned about purchasing fake and counterfeit brands that were not original, given the potential dangers this posed to the buying firm's reputation and the harm that could be inflicted on their buyers. Ali, a procurement manager, noted that he purchased Diesel from Total fuel stations because he preferred *“unadulterated products...and this is a way for the company to keep its reputation over the years.”* Eben also highlighted the importance of selling authentic products: *“To ensure that the brand is our most important factor, they [the brand] should ensure fake products are not mixed with the products on sale.”* Chioma shared that her preference was for the brand *“to be unique, easy to pronounce and remember, emotionally appealing and authentic.”*

4.5. Strategic direction for building strong B2B brands

The buyers in our research expressed considerable interest in continuing to engage with suppliers even after purchases had been made. They were especially forthcoming in suggesting inducements that suppliers might provide to make their brands more appealing, as well as ways in which suppliers might partner with them in post-sale support efforts.

4.5.1. Promoting the brand

There was general consensus among participants regarding the importance of promoting the brand to clearly demonstrate its value. Participants were in favor of using persuasive tactics that emphasized brand quality and positive brand attributes. Many of the participants recommended enlisting social media platforms to promote the brand. Research has found that 60% of buyers look at an unknown brand on social media before purchasing (Frederiksen, 2022). Social media can allow B2B brands an opportunity to communicate their value to potential customers through their social media profiles. As potential customers are identified, the product can be positioned to appeal to prospects. Dele, a buyer, noted the following about the importance of social media:

“Nissan should have done maximum publicity on social media... and also allow for comment and critiques (for those for, and those against the brand)”

Ensuring top-of-mind awareness for the brand was key and participants suggested using mass media (e.g., television spots, away-from-home advertising) to increase brand exposure and prominence. Others, as expressed by Emeka, noted the important role that packaging played in promoting the product: *“Now the product packaging has been changed to a more fulfilling one and has also helped in making the design look finer and more acceptable.”* Packaging designs were vital as they often helped the consumer to recognize the product and subsequently sell the product.

4.5.2. Offering direct and pass-through discounts

Discount pricing can be an effective strategy for increasing sales volume and short-term revenue and profits. Many of the participants indicated that offering some form of discount would incentivize purchase behavior. For example:

“Lakerice could have a more discounted rate when it comes to delivery of services to esteemed customers. It should also have incentives for customers who frequently patronize”

(Ekanem, storekeeper)

Companies can work to strategically offer discounts without devaluing their products or significantly lowering return. Blindly implementing a discount pricing strategy to achieve quick conversions may not be in the company's best interest but, by using clear and effective guidelines, discounting can create value for the brand.

4.5.3. Maintaining product excellence

Quality products are essential to creating excitement among a company's customers and building a strong brand. Product excellence can present an unrivaled source of growth and have

considerable positive implications for a brand's equity. However, varying cultural norms, product availability, or local laws can affect a brand's offerings in global markets. Participants emphasized the significance of maintaining consistency in quality as well as overall product and service excellence. For example, Adesuwa commented that the brand her organization uses should “*continue to make their products the best on the market.*” Other participants shared how the brand had become a promise and its tangible benefits were what continued to make the brand desirable:

“HP is already a brand that we choose. They need to retain the quality of the products and services we enjoy”

(Osamede, inventory manager)

Additionally, offering a range of successful products can provide a company with a competitive advantage in the marketplace. In such instances, customers have multiple choice options so that the firm can become a viable competitor in multiple segments. One of the participants expressed the desire for a range of choice options:

“The company should offer more intense design options and continue developing additional and innovative functionality in their car types”

(Sunday, purchasing manager)

4.5.4. Collaborating on marketing efforts

Many of the participants were interested in working with firms on marketing efforts. They felt that such a collaborative approach could help in building long-term and lucrative relationships. Participants were interested in partnering with firms that would help them sell products through collaborative buying and selling (e.g., easy payment processing). Additionally, working together to provide excellent after-sales service and support was important. By offering a more comprehensive product solution, participants felt that firms could help them in developing mutually beneficial strategies that could serve the needs of their customers. Participants reflected on this approach:

“We would welcome partnerships with the brands. We could work together implementing warranties and customer follow-ups. These efforts would be beneficial for both the brand and our company”

(Akin, chief procurement officer)

“Partnering with the brand to develop marketing strategies to better serve the needs of our customers would be a win/win for all”

(Ibrahim, director)

4.5.5. Building co-creative partnerships

Participants were interested in firms that could help them design and co-create new products. They wanted to be proactively involved, when appropriate, in the creative process as opposed to having products and processes imposed on them. In this way, they could be involved in

shaping their own experience with the brand. They also suggested sharing in product designs and marketing costs:

“They [brand company] should consider involving buyers and allowing them to make some choices in the product development process. Taking this approach provides customers more choice and makes the brand more competitive”

(Florence, head of unit sales)

Participants also called on firms to express concerns in relation to the experiences of stakeholders who both directly and indirectly shape customers' experiences. For example, many of the participants expressed interest in being involved in the problem-solving process. As one participant commented, various stakeholders would be interested in being invited to exchange ideas and opinions.

“They can give us an opportunity to share ideas and even complaints which need to be tendered. This information can be shared with other people.”

(Ali, procurement officer)

4.6. Further analysis and a grounded model of the role of B2B brands in the organizational purchase decision

From further analysis of the coding structure (Fig. 1) and findings from the data, we were able to meaningfully connect the concepts together and devise relationships between the concepts as displayed in the model in Fig. 3. This model is grounded in the data and displays a mechanism used in explaining the key phenomenon, namely purchase decision-making in industrial markets, driven by brands. This mechanism lays out the motivations, brand considerations, decision, intervening conditions, and consequences of brand purchases in B2B markets. The model makes sense of how B2B buyers in Nigeria formalize purchase decisions based on brands.

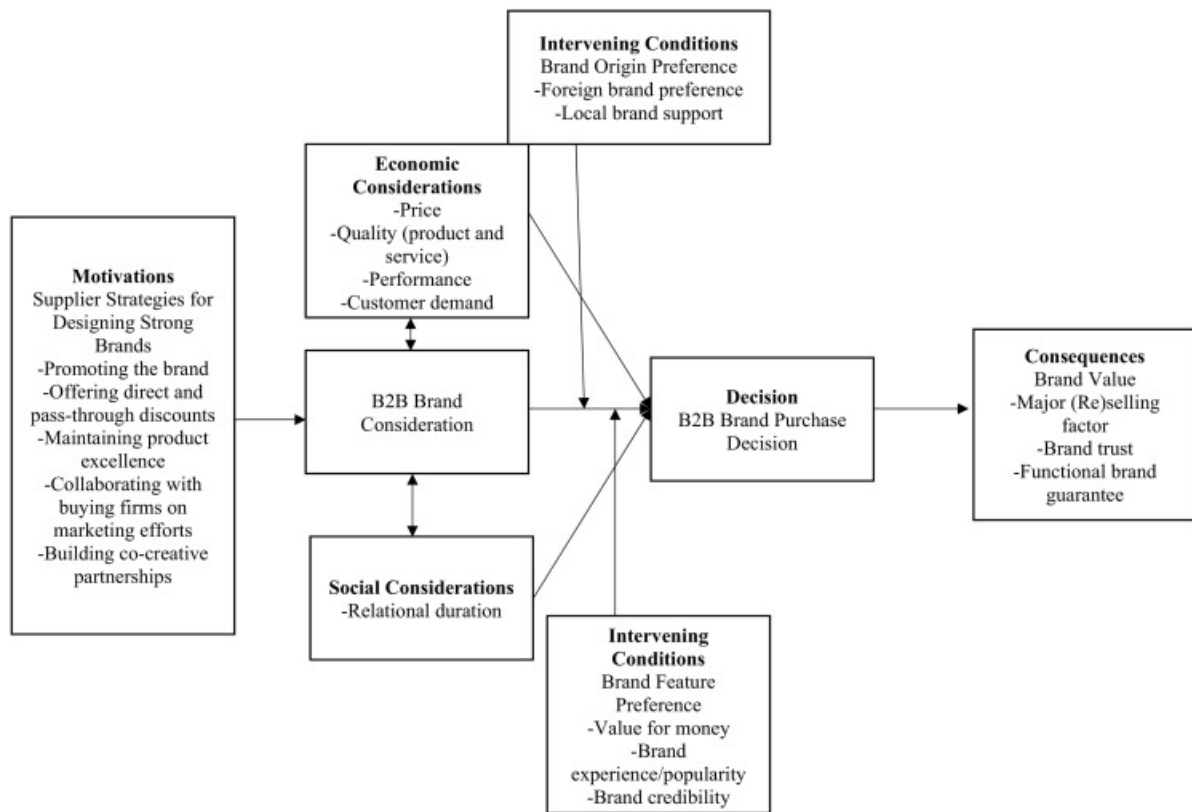


Fig. 3. A grounded model of the role of B2B Brands in the B2B purchase decision making.

Drawing from the model, motivations give rise to B2B brand considerations (economic and social), which lead to the purchase decision on the basis of the brand. The brand consideration can be strengthened by intervening conditions (brand origin preference and brand feature preference), which then lead to ensuing consequences (brand value). The model shows that Nigerian buyers' decisions to purchase B2B brands are initially motivated by the supplier's strategies to design strong brands.

Social and economic considerations of the brand are found in the secondary layer of the model, which are motivated by the efforts of the supplier in designing a strong brand. Most respondents noted that if suppliers can offer discounts, promote the brand, maintain brand excellence, and build partnerships with their firms, they are more inclined to consider these aspects of the brand from the economic and social perspectives. Relational duration built on trust was highlighted as necessary for Nigerian buyers to buy brand-name industrial products. Interviewees indicated that, without an existing trusting relationship, suppliers in an African context can still make a sale in new buy situations if the brand acts as a surrogate quality communicator. Selling industrial products in Africa without an established relationship will require brand strategies that offset any presumed risks associated with doing business with a new supplier.

Enabling or intervening conditions in the model increased buyers' consideration to formalize purchase decisions based on brand name. These conditions were the brand's origin and brand feature preferences. Many buyers whom we interviewed stated that their preference for foreign brands is an affinity for brands not made in the local market and carries an “outside-of-African-made” connotation. In contrast, the preference for local brands is a fondness for brands made

in the local market and carries a “made-in-Nigeria” connotation. Popular, credible, and valuable brands were features that were most mentioned among these groups of buyers.

Taken together, our model demonstrates that in Nigeria B2B purchase decisions based on brands do not ignore the economic consequences expected from making such organizational purchases. These buyers are shrewd purchasers, evaluating the returns of making a brand-based B2B purchase, again highlighting their unwillingness to make risky decisions. For these buyers, a thorough appraisal of purchase considerations, including brand considerations and suppliers' brand strategies remain mechanisms to reduce risk. Contrary to existing studies in Westernized societies that consider brands as a “cue for choice simplification” (Brown, Zablah, et al., 2011), Nigerian buyers consider brands as a heuristic, not to bypass the careful assessment of objective criteria, but as a signal to avoid the risks associated with buying fake products, bad products, and sourcing from new suppliers.

5. Summary of findings and comparative analysis

In this study, we investigated the significance of B2B supplier brands in fast-emerging African economies using the Nigerian B2B buying context. Specifically, our findings address the role industrial brands have in the B2B purchase decision making process in fast-emerging African economies as well as the differences between decision making in African and Western economies. We found similarities and key differences between B2B branding in emerging African economies and Western societies. First, we found concrete evidence from Nigerian buyers that industrial branding influences their organizational purchase decisions. Not only do B2B brands influence purchasing in Nigeria, but they also constitute the most important factor for many buyers in their purchase decision, ahead of product pricing, quality, and other buying considerations. However, although brand reputation reigned as one of the premier purchase considerations, there are other considerations that are important to buyers in emerging African economies. For example, quality and economic considerations played crucial roles in decision-making, which are also consistently important attributes in Western buying decision-making contexts. Research has demonstrated that, in Western firms, product quality helps to drive customer loyalty (Almquist, Cleghorn, & Sherer, 2018), and that 73% of buyers rank features/functionality as top concerns, whereas 72% indicate that pricing is a major consideration (Gaffney, 2020). This research also found that in emerging African markets, relational ties are a primary purchasing consideration for African buyers. Buyers noted that they were buying from suppliers not only because they had confidence in the brand, but also because they had been in business together for some time. This underscores the importance of placing the buyer at the center of every aspect of business to drive engagement and build strong long-term relationships. The interpersonal orientation at the center of African culture may explain the importance of relational ties when buyers consider suppliers' brands. “African[s] expect a long-term relationship and want a negotiated outcome that promotes a long-term relationship” (Darley & Blankson, 2008, p. 380).

Our findings also reveal that Nigerian buyers derive value from the brand's commercial value (resalable factors), trust, and brand guarantee. According to Leek and Christodoulides (2012), brand value has both functional and emotional qualities and can help to foster relationship building. Functional characteristics include characteristics related to quality, technology, capacity, and infrastructure, etc., whereas emotional qualities include risk reduction, reassurance, and trust. Notably, Nigerian buyers place precedence on emotional qualities of brand value, which accentuates the importance of perceived brand value in establishing social and emotional connections, and ultimately in building strong supplier-buyer relationships.

While emotional triggers equally affect B2B buying in Western societies, the emotions are different from those highlighted in our findings. For example, organizational buyers in the United States are influenced by both positive and negative emotions at different stages of the buying cycle (Kemp et al., 2018). Positive emotions such as excitement, hope, and surprise are key triggers for U.S. buyers (Kemp et al., 2018). In contrast, Nigerian buyers are not motivated by surprise or other positive emotions. In fact, risk reduction and certainty are critical in their decision-making process. A reason for this may lie in the preference for uncertainty avoidance by Africans in favor of relational consistency, trust and social network endorsements (Darley & Blankson, 2008).

Another aim of this research was to determine what impact country-of-origin brand preferences (indigenous vs. foreign) have on the B2B purchase decision-making process. Findings from our study indicate that in addition to brand features, the origin of the brand carries significant weight with Nigerian buyers. Foreign brands are often trusted and accessible when a local brand is not available. Supplier country-of-origin or image can be an important extrinsic cue used by purchasing managers to evaluate the perceived risk or quality of a product (Dobruçali, 2019). Buyers may especially favor products designed in a developed country over a newly industrialized country (Ahmed et al., 1994). Thus, despite arguments that country-of-origin effects might be eliminated due to globalization of markets and subcontracting, foreign brands looking to gain a footing in emerging African markets may have a marked advantage if they can demonstrate superior quality and engage buyers by developing strong social connections through relationship building. However, like buyers in some Western nations, Nigerian buyers also hold ethnocentric beliefs or sentiments that homemade products should be purchased over foreign-made products (Ferguson, Dadzie, & Johnston, 2008; Yagci, 2001). This often results when there is reassurance of the quality of the local product, the need for local content/materials, and accessibility to the product. The preference for foreign brands can be explained by African's need to avoid risks associated with buying local products, often considered subpar to foreign brands regardless of the quality and costs of the products (Blankson et al., 2020). African buyers have an aversion to making mistakes to save face among members of their organization, particularly superiors. Purchase mistakes by buyers can lead to embarrassments from superiors and potential job termination. To maintain self-pride (Orubu & Oboreh, 2016) and diminish risk, African buyers are more inclined to buy foreign brands.

Many of the brand features preferred by Nigerian buyers, including value for the money, experience with the brand, and credibility are also important to buyers in Western societies (Almquist et al., 2018). However, credibility, originality and authenticity are a crucial part of the decision-making process for African buyers who are concerned about fake and counterfeit brands. In fact, trade in counterfeit and pirated goods has steadily risen with 80% of products sold in Nigeria believed to be counterfeits (Okonkwo & Abiala, 2021). Many African countries have fallen victim to the sale of counterfeit goods due to unregulated commercial activity (Mwai, 2020). Thus, in an effort to avoid purchase mistakes such as buying fake brands, buyers will rely on the originality and origin of the brand to inform their purchase decisions.

Like most B2B markets, our findings demonstrate that buyers in emerging African economies benefit from continued engagement. The buyers in our research shared what their expectations from suppliers were regarding how the brand could meet their needs through promotion, discounting, and strategic marketing efforts. Specifically, participants were interested in firms that could help them design and co-create new products. They wanted to be involved in the creative process and desired for suppliers to take a role in helping to shape customers' experiences. Distinctively, Africa's fast-growing markets present important opportunities for

brands; however, innovation and investment from businesses will be essential in such a developing environment with unfulfilled demand. Co-creative partnerships requiring the collection of customer information to gain insight into the unique needs of these burgeoning markets is essential. This is quite contrary to Western organizational purchase models where guidelines for successful industrial brands emphasize the importance of the industrial marketer's profitability whereas in African economies, the focus is on the industrial buyer's profitability as depicted in the buyer-reseller value.

In the following sections, leveraging insights from our findings as well as our comparative analysis with Western B2B buying practices and models, we present theoretical and managerial implications.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This research offers several theoretical contributions to the B2B branding literature in fast-emerging markets. First, it sheds light on the role industrial brands have in the purchase decision making process in fast-emerging markets by addressing key factors in B2B purchase decision-making related to social, economic, and marketplace considerations. Specifically, social considerations are reflected in the relationship that the firm has with the brand. This research underscores the role that human connections play in organizational decision-making. In fact, in fast-emerging markets such as in Nigeria, relational duration becomes increasingly important as it can reduce ambiguities and buyer-seller conflict. African buyers prefer familiarity as a breeder of consensus. This differs from existing purchase decision-marketing models which argue that conflict is unavoidable between buyers and sellers and that conflict management should remain an important factor in the organizational buying process (Johnston & Lewin, 1996).

The model in our research does corroborate some elements of organizational buying behavior postulated in previous models. For example, our model found variables such as economic considerations and social motivation, which are both elements of the Webster and Wind Model, to be aspects of organizational decision-making. Though previous models do not provide a comprehensive platform to understand organizations' buying decisions in Africa, the environmental and individual dimensions of the Webster and Wind Model explains some aspects of the organizational buying decisions in Africa. Johnston and Lewin (1996) integrative framework also shares several overlaps with our grounded model. Specifically, Johnston and Lewin's seller characteristics of price, product quality, service, and image, match the economic considerations used by buyers in evaluating the brand.

Our findings also revealed the role of country-of-origin brand preferences in moderating purchase decision-making. In terms of brand origin preference, we advance scholarly work in this area (Ahmed et al., 1994; Dobrucali, 2019) by illustrating how support for a local brand, alongside perceived brand foreignness, can influence organizational buying. Our findings suggest that reasons why some firms choose to support local brands in their countries could be born out of ease of product accessibility, patriotism, and regulatory requirements. This finding is useful in contextualizing the role of perceived brand localness in the B2B literature. Interestingly, the results reveal a strong preference for foreign brands in B2B buying contexts by Nigerian buyers, which also renders support to previous studies that found the notion of brand foreignness or what these authors broadly labelled as “country-of-origin effects” to be relevant for the Chinese context (Chen, Su, & Lin, 2011) as well as in developed economies (cf. Dzever & Quester, 1999). Notably, B2B buyers in Africa have an affinity for foreign

products and as a result, prefer to buy imported goods even when local products are available. In this context, we argue that organizational buyers prefer foreign over local brands in some instances because of perceived superior quality and authenticity. Finally, unlike other previous B2B studies in this area, our research unpacks the notion of brand origin preference by revealing its perceived duality in terms of foreignness vs localness and how it eventually contributes to B2B brand purchase decision-making in an emerging market context in Africa. This further implicates the country-of-origin literature in new ways than previously discussed in the B2B literature (Chen et al., 2011; Dzever & Quester, 1999).

Our research also offers insight into the differences between brand-based purchase decisions in fast-moving African economies and Western economies. B2B brands influence purchasing in African economies and constitute the most important factor for many buyers in the purchase decision-making process, primal to product pricing, quality, and other buying considerations. Furthermore, African buyers derive value from the brand's commercial value, trust, and brand guarantee. Specifically, Nigerian buyers hold in high regard emotional qualities of brand value and the establishment of social and emotional connections, as well as relational consistency. In addition, risk reduction and certainty are critical in decision-making (Darley & Blankson, 2008).

This research also contributes to the literature by underscoring the outcomes of the dyadic relationship between the brand manufacturer and reseller in fast-emerging markets (Glynn, Motion, & Brodie, 2007; Gupta & Wright, 2020). Specifically, this research suggests that B2B buyers should also be seen as playing a sales role, especially with the intention to resell an already purchased product (e.g., electronics and mattress) to end-customers. While this research concurs with previous work (i.e., Anaza et al., 2020) regarding the dual role played by B2B buyers in Western markets, and more specifically the reseller firm, our study highlights the perceived brand value created by the reseller, especially in fast-emerging African economies. This suggests that, with reference to the (value-added to) reseller firm, decision makers must take adequate steps in ensuring that products procured from suppliers are in alignment with end consumers' (retailer and wholesaler) requirements. Indeed, not doing so can have negative repercussions on the reseller, especially in eroding trust. In a similar vein, research findings indicate that buyers anticipate being able to gain brand trust when they make the correct purchase decisions. Put differently, brand trust and functional guarantees are attendant benefits from a well-thought-out purchase decision.

5.1.1. Managerial implications

This research provides direction for B2B supplier brands in Nigeria and fast-emerging African markets. Drawing from our grounded model, findings indicate that decisions to purchase B2B brands are initially motivated by the supplier's ability to design robust brands. An integral part of creating a strong brand involves being able to sell a strong brand message. Brand messaging must be current, consistent, relevant, and differentiating. Positively differentiating a brand from competitors is crucial to forming connections. Moreover, differentiators should be credible. Companies should use multiple channels of communication and work to strengthen their brands by promoting and emphasizing brand quality, brand origin, and positive brand features identified in this study.

Furthermore, in an effort to build a strong brand, companies can strategically implement discount pricing that enlists clear and effective guidelines. For example, firms might offer discounts at different times of the year. Discount policies can also be based on turnovers and/or

volumes ordered by the buying firm. Suppliers may also choose to give discounts to their customers based on reciprocal concessions. Firms that place orders at earlier times before delivery dates could receive more favorable discounts than others.

Findings from this research also indicate that buyers are motivated by marketing collaborations with the supplier firm. In this regard, brands might enlist both conventional and digital media platforms. Buyers may lack sophisticated marketing tools and knowledge (e.g., marketing research, digital marketing tools) and assisting them with marketing efforts can be advantageous for both parties.

Moreover, our model proffers that motivations give rise to economic and social considerations regarding the brand in emerging African markets. Specifically, social considerations, including relational ties, play a significant part in decision-making. This underscores the importance of placing the buyer at the center of every aspect of the business to drive engagement and build long-term relationships. Companies should invest in learning the buyer's challenges and ensure they are available to address the buyer's needs. Further, in managing relationships, companies must maintain consistent contact, promote transparency, and be willing to take risks in the interest of the buyer when necessary. Firms can also foster strong brand relationships by showing a serious commitment to building co-creative partnerships with buying firms. This can be in the form of co-creating new products and/or experiences with the firms.

With respect to economic considerations, firms must be careful to not compromise quality standards and/or product/service excellence. Maintaining product excellence is paramount, as it helps to foster growth and increase brand equity. Firms must make efforts to overcome the challenges of working in various markets (i.e., product availability and pricing fluctuations) that impede efforts in retaining product quality.

Brand considerations can be strengthened by intervening conditions such as brand origin effects and brand features. For example, insight from buyers in this research indicate that suppliers in the consumer goods sector should use brand positioning strategies that highlight the foreignness of the product's origin. Unlike in the U.S. market where there is a push to buy American-made products, such a push may not be as successful in African markets if a foreign industrial supplier uses local brand positioning strategies. Specifically, for companies that resell consumer products (i.e., wholesalers, retailers), message framing and positioning on the brand's country of origin can become very important at all levels of the communication strategy. Reinforcing consumer beliefs that foreign brands signify originality can help to engender an upscale image for consumer goods, which can influence pricing strategies. With the proliferation of substandard and fake products in Nigeria, companies should avoid buying counterfeited local products by buying foreign brands. As such, framing a message in terms of originality due to the foreign source of the product enriches the resell value to retailers.

Finally, B2B buyers in Nigeria and fast-emerging African markets should embark on a comprehensive appraisal of the brand in the purchase decision-making process. The framework outlined in the grounded model in this research underscores the importance of presenting a strong brand to buyers. Understanding that objective economic criteria (i.e., price, quality performance) as well as social elements will be important considerations in the purchase decision process, along with the ability to mitigate risk through brand origin effects and communicate important brand features will prove beneficial to firms. Ultimately, the consequences of strategically planned efforts to shape a strong offering can manifest into enhanced brand value and trust.

6. Limitations and future research directions

B2B research on the buying process in general is extremely limited in African markets. As such, future B2B research conducted within the African marketplace/place will exhibit tremendous potential given the accelerating growth of foreign direct investments and burgeoning business demand across all sectors of the economy. This study utilized data from B2B purchasers in Nigeria. While one in four Africans is Nigerian due to the sheer size of the country, we cautiously refrain from drawing generalizability in relation to industrial buying across the continent. While it would be a logistical challenge to pursue a cross-cultural quantitative inquiry involving nations from the northern, eastern, and southern parts of Africa, we believe that such an investigation will address the issue of generalizability. Moreover, while our aim in this research was not to generalize, we recognize that our grounded model may be limited to the interviewed respondents in the study. Accordingly, we call for future research to subject our findings to additional testing using a quantitative-based approach.

The present study does not explicitly focus on different stages in the buying process and the type of buying situation, such as a modified rebuy or a straight rebuy. In addition, the role of cross-department coordination between different departments such as engineering, purchasing, sales, and manufacturing did not emanate from the findings. It would also be interesting to identify if distinctions occur in the buying process of buyers purchasing retail products, raw material components, investment goods, or support services. Given our general focus on B2B buyers, differences in brand decisions were not identified by industry. These are limitations that should be addressed in future studies because they can further elucidate ways in which purchasing is organized in African companies. Although the present study was intentional in our focus on buyers, future studies may want to consider approaching B2B buying from a holistic perspective where other members of the buying center such as initiators, deciders, users, gatekeepers, and influencers have a voice in the branding discussion.

Finally, this study revealed the role of brand origin preference as an enabling factor to B2B purchases; however, future research might examine how to quantify foreign brand origin itself because foreign brands can originate in Africa. A follow-up extension to this research would be an exploration of B2B foreign brand preference by delineating between African foreign brands (such as Anbessa, Airtel, M-pesa, and Tigo Money) and non-African foreign brands (such as John Deere, Samsung, and Tecno Mobile).

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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