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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFFECT OF THE RETAIL ENTERPRISE ADOPTED COVID-19 PROTECTIVE PROTOCOLS ON CUSTOMER'S PURCHASING INVOLVEMENT

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Manuscript Info	*Abstract*
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	The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has altered how many things are done in every aspect of the world. The retail enterprise is an essential component of the business ecosystem that depends heavily on face-to-face and in-person interaction for an efficient transaction. However, the measures instituted against the spread of the virus can potentially disrupt consumers' shopping routing. The present study sought to examine the effect of the protective measures established by the retail enterprise against the COVID-19 disease on the customer's purchasing involvement. A convenient sample of two hundred and forty-eight potential consumers selected from various locations in Enugu State, Nigeria, participated in the study. The regression analysis performed on the data revealed that the COVID-19 measure adopted by the retail enterprise positively predicted customer purchase involvement. The finding provides valuable data to researchers and retail practitioners to develop a framework that could stabilize customers' purchasing participation in a positive direction.

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Introduction:-

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic reflects an unprecedented global health situation that has introduced a new paradigm in every domain of human existence. The virus has proved to be tragic due to its rapid contagious nature (Chan et al., 2020; Prentice et al., 2020). There isa growing insinuation that the coronavirus outbreak emerged from Wuhan city, in the Republic of China (Akin & Gözel, 2020; Allam, 2020; Dariya & Nagaraju, 2020; Frater et al., 2020; Gautam, 2020; Sahu, 2020; Shah et al., 2020). Due to its rapid spread (Dhall & Singh, 2020), the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020; Ducharme, 2020). The widespread of the disease created an unprecedented socioeconomic predicament across the world (Béland et al., 2020; Bodrud-Doza et al., 2020; Chernysh & Roubík, 2020; Dani & Menéndez, 2020; Gratz et al., 2020; Safonov & Borshch, 2020; Schubert, 2020). In addition, the outbreak initiated an enormous personal and public health insecurity (Chokroverty et al., 2020; Hancher-Rauch et al., 2021). Similarly, numerous reports have underscored the high mortality rate (Anaele et al., 2021; Dean et al., 2020; Depalo, 2021; Horwitz et al., 2021; Lawal, 2021; Signorelli et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021), mental health impact (Goyal & Selix, 2021; Haider et al., 2020; Mancini, 2020) occasioned by the coronavirus. Nevertheless, the burden of the pandemic extended to the retail business ecosystem.

In a bid to curtail the spread of the coronavirus following the unavailability of effective treatment, the World Health Organization (WHO) and governments stipulated some standard guidelines to limit the spread of the virus (Asita, 2020). Preventive measures such as partial or total lockdowns, self-isolations, social distancing, and curfews were

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adopted to curtail the massive spread of the disease. In Nigeria, the Federal Government, through the Federal Ministry of Health, aligned with the global COVID-19 preemptive measures such as regular handwashing with soap or hand sanitizer, evading handshaking, the frequent wearing of nose masks, social distancing, coughing into disposable tissues or a flexed elbow and self-isolating, avoiding gatherings and nonessential travel to affected areas. However, these stipulated standards have negatively impacted the global economy (Idris, 2021; Nicola et al., 2020). Consequently, the retail enterprises, primarily reliant on high levels of physical interaction, were among the worst affected (Hoque et al., 2020).

The retail ecosystem in Nigeria is predominantly dependent on informal sales channels such as local and street markets, including kiosks, which were primarily affected by the restriction of in-person shopping in response to the pandemic. Perhaps, the nature of retail businesses, such as the face-to-face interaction, was perceived as a risk factor for transmitting diseases (Munster et al., 2018). Thus, recognizing these implications, retailers in Nigeria were urged to adopt specific standard measures, including compulsory nose masks, social distancing, mandatory hand sanitizing for customers, creating a barricade that limits the number of people at a time, and adopting cashless channels. However, literature abounds, suggesting that the retail enterprise adopting these preemptive measures created shopping anxiety and led to severe disruption in the usual customer's purchasing routine (Berezka et al., 2021), affecting consumer purchasing motivation.

Similarly, research in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic indicated considerable alteration in consumer behavior due to the preventive measures and the prolonged lockdown (Alessa et al., 2021; Baicu et al., 2020; Eriksson & Stenius, 2020; Jo et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2020; Muresan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2021; Patil & Patil, 2020; Valaskova et al., 2021). Perhaps, the situation introduced various new trends in consumer purchasing patterns in response to the perceived threat of virus contamination (Cohen, 2020; Laato et al., 2020). Additionally, a recent study reported a decline in consumer trust for shopping in the pandemic era due to the perceived threat of contagion, impacting their satisfaction (Lu et al., 2020).

Numerous literatures within consumer behavior have also indicated that disasters and emergencies usually trigger enormous effects on consumer attitude and safety (Addo et al., 2020; Kaswengi & Diallo, 2015). Conceivably, research in this direction has indicated the need to understand this scenario since people are aware that involving in a gathering increases the possibility of being infested (Cameron & Shah, 2015). Moreover, research in recent times revealed that consumer purchasing attitudes have changed in the ongoing coronavirus outbreak (Di Crosta et al., 2021; Güngördü Belbağ, 2021; Sheth, 2020; Vázquez-Martínez et al., 2021). Thus, there are increased health and safety concerns among consumers at the thought of shopping due to the rapid infestation of the disease, which significantly affects their purchasing involvement.

Purchasing involvement (PI) is central in the consumer behavior literature because it is an essential mediator of consumer purchasing patterns, fundamentally influencing consumer attitudes and buying routines. PI reflects a general measure of self-relevance of buying activities to the consumer. In other words, purchasing involvement describes an enduring individual difference variable (Karaatli, 2015), different from product and situational involvement. PI is related to buying efforts and favorable response to marketing appeals (Ohanian & Tashchian, 2011) and predicted by various factors, including self-esteem (Dong & Cao, 2006). Thus, purchasing involvement varies by the consumer, and the level of involvement reflects the consumer's interest and assessment of the product and the situation. Hence, consumers might be highly involved in purchasing activities regardless of the associated uncertainties and risks. Some consumers might be less engaged with purchases because they are highly concerned about being exposed to the COVID-19 virus. In particular, the measures adopted in mitigating the spread of the virus impact the consumers and their purchasing involvements, as stated earlier. Thus, the primary purpose of the present paper was to examine the influence of these safety measures adopted by retailers on consumers 'variations in purchasing involvement.

Hypothesis:
COVID-19 protective protocols would significantly predict consumer purchasing involvement.

Method:-
The target population for the study included individuals within the age range of 18 to 50 years of age who have patronized a retail shop at least once in the wake of the prolonged lockdown in Nigeria. The survey was conducted between August to November 2021. The participants were conveniently pooled from different locations in Enugu State, Nigeria, and comprised males and females. A total of 285 potential participants were approached and asked to

participate in a study to understand their purchasing pattern amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In all, 262 respondents out of the 285 approached agreed to participate in the study. Hence, the instruments were administered to them. Two hundred and sixty-two (262) copies of the scale administered were completed and retrieved on the spot. Nevertheless, only the satisfactorily filled questionnaires (i.e., 248) were used for the study. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design.

Measures:-
A self-report measure was developed following a review of the literature. The questionnaire consisted of items aimed to assess the overall perception of adopted COVID-19 protection protocols by the retail stores and the perceived safety during shopping amidst the high contagion of the virus. The questionnaire contains ten items answered in a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to (5) strongly disagree. A higher score indicates an increased understanding of the COVID-19 measures. Cronbach's alpha .88 was recorded for the instrument following a pilot study in this study.

The Purchasing-Involvement Scale initially developed by Slama and Tashchian (1985) was modified to fit the present context. The five-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Not certain or undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree) was used to measure consumer purchasing involvement. The scale is designed to ascertain the importance of a consumer placed on purchasing activities. The scale has proved to be reliable in assessment. A reliability coefficient of 0.87 was recorded on the scale for the current study. The scale score ranges from 33 to 198, with the higher score indicating a high level of purchasing involvement.

Result:-
A simple regression analysis to test whether the COVID-19 protective protocol would significantly predict consumer purchasing involvement was performed. The investigation revealed that COVID-19 protective protocol statistically significantly predicted customer purchasing involvement F (1,246), 36.56, P<.000. Thus, the outcome indicates that the assumption that COVID-19 protective protocol would significantly predict consumer purchasing involvement was affirmed. In addition, the R^2 showed that the COVID-19 protective protocols explained about 43.1% of the variance in consumer purchasing involvement, as shown in the table below.

Table 1:- Table showing the simple regression result for COVID-19 protective protocol and consumer purchasing involvement.

	B	SEB	β	t	Sig
Constant	1.83	.036		56.62	.000
COVID-19 protocols	-.74	.047	-.77	-16.71	.000
R^2	.431				

Note. B = Unstandardized regression coefficient; SEB = Standardized error of the coefficient; β = Standardized coefficient; R^2 = Coefficient of determination. *P<.000.

Discussion:-
The present study aimed to develop a conceptual framework that illustrated the potential effect of the protective measures implemented by retail enterprises against the spread of the COVID-19 virus on customers' purchasing involvement, encompassing safetyconcerns during shopping, anxieties, intentions to revisit, and willingness to pay more to be safe while shopping. Two hundred and forty-eight potential shoppers participated in the study. The results indicated that the protective measures against COVID-19 had significant positive effects on the customers' purchasing involvement. In addition, the constructs of COVID-19 protective protocols as utilized in the present study (i.e., use of mask, hand washing and sanitizing, spacing, and cashless payment) were found to contribute 43.1% of the variation in consumer's purchases involvement, which has not been previously revealed in the Nigerian context. Thus, the findings underscored the critical role of adopted measures against the coronavirus by the retail enterprises on the consumer's shopping engagement, which filled a gap in the existing consumer behavior literature relative to the COVID-19 pandemic. From a business perspective, retailers can use the results to develop efficient marketing

strategies to improve consumers' involvement in shopping in the era of a pandemic, which would lead to a decrease in negative thoughts and an increase in purchasing intentions.

Practical Implication
The severe effects of pandemic-induced business patterns changed numerous consumers who have established shopping routines. There is a need to recognize the impact of these protective mechanisms on customers' buying involvement and develop immediate, severe course corrections. Thus, the present study provided valuable data for the retail practitioners and entrepreneurs in the post-COVID-19 business era. The study further implies that the COVID-19 outbreak negatively impacted consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral correlates of purchasing dispositions.

Conclusion:-
This study focuses on the correlation between the protective protocols adopted against the COVID-19 by the retail enterprise and consumer purchase involvement. It is concluded that the COVID-19 adopted preventive measures are an essential factor in consumer purchasing involvement. Thus, the present study contributes to the literature by revealing the retail enterprise adopted measures against the widespread of the deadly virus as an essential factor that account for the variance in customer's purchase involvement. However, caution is advised relative to the generalization of the result due to the sample size and data collection method. Thus, future research should use a more comprehensive sample from diverse entities and try other means of data gathering to mitigate the issue of common variance. However, it is recommended that the retail practitioners prepare for many consumers whose purchasing involvement has been altered due to the COVID-19 protective measures adopted.

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