



RENAISSANCE OF LEATHER: TRANSFORMING BRANDING FOR MODERN LEATHER PRODUCTS

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This paper emphasizes the critical need to revitalize branding practices within the leather industry, focusing particularly on the global production landscape and the potential for growth in Africa, with Nigeria as a primary case study. It advocates for the adoption of technological innovations and contemporary manufacturing methods to foster the development of competitive modern leather product brands capable of enhancing Africa's share of the value chain. Additionally, the paper highlights the significance of intensive product branding, especially within educational institutions dedicated to leather value creation. To address the disparity in Africa's share of global production, particularly in Nigeria with only a 1.3% share, the paper stresses the importance of embracing technology and innovative manufacturing techniques to create modern leather product brands that can compete on a global scale. Moreover, it underscores the need for comprehensive product branding across all sectors of the leather industry, including within training institutions. The paper proposes integrating product branding as a core course in academic curricula to equip students and staff with essential industry expertise, while also advocating for collaboration with industry experts to enhance training programs and cultivate a culture of branding excellence. Furthermore, the paper reiterates the importance of rebranding existing leather products through strategic deployment of branding models. It calls for intensified research and development efforts to improve raw materials and design, as well as provide upgrades to product sales and customer service units to effectively showcase branded products. By implementing these strategies, the leather industry can experience a renaissance, positioning itself as a dynamic and competitive player in the global market. This holistic approach to branding and rebranding efforts holds the potential to drive significant growth and innovation within the industry.

KEYWORDS

Leather industry, branding, renaissance, global production

ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received: September, 2023

Received: in revised: October, 2023

Accepted: November, 2023

Published online: December, 2023

INTRODUCTION

The resource base of the leather industry in Nigeria has positioned the country for growth with the potentials to become a sustained player in the global leather industry. Thus, without doubt Nigeria possesses some degree of competitive advantage in comparative terms in leather and leather goods production. However, the competitive advantage in terms of abundance of leather resource base is grossly undermined by the fact that the domestic production of leather goods and allied products weakly competes with leather goods imported from China and other Asian countries. Specifically, Nigeria is a net exporter of raw hides and skins, and semi-finished leather; and is a net importer of finished leather goods whose estimated value is placed at over \$500million per annum as at 2017 (NESG, 2017). This is in the face of concerted efforts put in by local producers to supply leather goods and allied products to the local markets. Such leather goods produced locally have been unable to match the competition from cheaply imported synthetic leather and other related materials, thus, undermining employment opportunities and the amount of value that is retained in the domestic economy (Mohammed, 2022).

The relevance and strategic position occupied by the leather sector in the Nigeria economy is well established and documented. The foreign exchange earning capacity of the leather sector is only second to the crude oil sector, with a total export of tanned leather estimated at \$240 million in 2015, that grew to steadily to \$272million in 2021 contributing about 24 per cent of the total agricultural sector contribution to the GDP in Nigeria (Asabor, 2021). The industry is projected to tan between 40million and 50million skins per annum estimated at \$600 to \$800million (Mohammed, 2022). The projected earning capacity of the leather industry in Nigeria is expected to increase by 70 per cent to the tune of \$1billion by 2025 (Leather International, 2021). The current employment carrying capacity is about 750,000 workers, comprising of about 500,000 workers in the finished leather goods subsector in Nigeria (Premium Times, 2021).

Felsner and Schmel (2002) had earlier confirmed Nigeria to be the largest producer of livestock in Africa, this was corroborated by food and agricultural organization (FAO, 2005) to be on the trajectory of rapid increase and confirmed by NESG (2017) to have risen by 113%

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(Mohammed, 2022). NESG (2017) further showed that Nigeria has 61million units of goatskin and kidskins, which is 46 per cent and 18 percent of the total population in West Africa and Africa respectively. All these point to the fact that Nigeria is a dominant producer of hides and skins in Africa. These facts summarize the conclusion that the leather industry in Nigeria has a resource base to strongly and effectively compete at the global stage that affords enormous market opportunities with huge revenue and employment potentials. The leather industry both at the local and global stage is a guaranteed means of social and economic empowerment of the teeming youth population that would put the Nigerian economy on a surefooted part to growth in gross domestic product (GDP). However, Nigeria's current earning from the leather sector is scandalously small when compared to the global value chain of the industry.

Irrespective of the huge potentials for employment, sustained income and revenue generation, foreign exchange earnings, export and growth in the leather industry in Nigeria; the sector is lagging far behind in innovative and technology based leather goods production and creative capacity. Also, weak value addition, poor marketing strategy and lack of innovative branding mechanism is a bane in the leather industry. It is against this backdrop and context that the consideration of leather renaissance with the target focus on transforming branding for modern leather products has become imperative for us.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Renaissance is a French word meaning "rebirth". It refers to a period in European civilization characterised by a resurgence in classical learning and wisdom (Britannica, 2023). Generally, it implies a revival or renewed interest in something. According to Wells (2008) renaissance is a period in history and a cultural movement marking the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity, characterized by an effort to revive and surpass the ideas and achievements of classical antiquity. In this context, we need to note the key issues raised by Wells (2008) definition of renaissance in relation to the leather industry.

First, is the issue of cultural movement. This implies the evolving ways in which relationship and values are appreciated. On this wise, is there a growing and evolving appreciation of the value chain in the leather industry? This is a critical question that must arouse and revive

our interest and focus in the leather industry. What will drive the response to this question depends on our capacity to appreciate the global value chain of leather made obvious by the quantum of value that is currently appropriated by the industry in Nigeria. In other words, how much of the global value of leather and allied products is retained in Nigeria by Nigerians? What defines value addition in the leather industry? This question is intended to assess and evaluate the value added to leather and allied products in Nigeria. The second issue is modernity; this implies a transition process, improvement in quality and functional diversity to meet the most recent aspirations of end users. This raises the question of the ability of the industry to keep track of the changing valuations, tastes and fashions, trends and style clichés of the end users of leather and allied products in Nigeria and the global space. The final issue of interest to us raised by Wells (2008) is the efforts geared towards reviving and surpassing previous ideas and achievements of classical antiquity. This is a pointer to the fact that the moment an idea or a brand emerges, the race to improve on it and surpass its present acceptance and usefulness must be constantly pursued.

The implication of renaissance of leather as our present concern is that there must be a rebirth, revival of a growing and evolving interest in the global value chain of leather and allied products. This must be with a clear intent to appropriate an ever growing percentage of the global leather value chain in Nigeria by Nigerians. It is worth noting that a greater percentage of private sector investment in the leather industry in Nigeria is foreign dominated. Thus, the driving and sustained incentive for export of primary and semi-finished leather products from Nigeria. The need for the resurgence of greater and sustained interest in improvement in quality and functional diversity to meet the most recent aspirations of end users; and keep track of the changing valuations, tastes and fashions, trend and style clichés is a matter of urgency requiring immediate response. The immediate devolvement of current innovation and technology to improve and surpass present brands of leather and allied products must be rebirthed and pursued with vigour in the leather industry.

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION IN LEATHER

The complexities of the existing traditional methods cum techniques of leather product manufacturing has overtime forced a rethinking of the procedures involved. Granted that the traditional method of producing leather though complex in nature has provided us with high-

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quality leather products over the years; it is however fraught with huge limitations. The traditional process involves pre-treatment of the animal hides that could take several days to complete; this is followed by tanning using natural or synthetic agents such as vegetable tannins or chromium salts; again, this can take several weeks of careful monitoring to ensure appropriate tanning of the hides. The next stage is dyeing; which can be done using natural or synthetic dyes; and to achieve the desired shade of colour could take several coatings. The final stage in the traditional method is the finishing; executed through various coatings to get the target texture and outlook. The finishing process may include buffing, embossing, or the addition of a coating to protect the leather surface. In all of these processes precision is often difficult to attain.

The traditional method of manufacturing leather products is grossly limited in the following ways; limited design options in terms of texture, patterns and colours; which makes it difficult to achieve product uniqueness and differentiation in a competitive market environment; high cost in time and budget; it is time consuming and less cost competitive in view of alternative low cost processes; and environmental issues in terms of chemical wastes generated from the process. It is these challenges and constraints arising from the traditional methods that has been driving the constant need for innovative techniques in the manufacture of leather and allied products in the global leather industry.

The use of technology and innovation in leather products manufacturing has emerged as a veritable means for producers to achieve product differentiation in the market place. Manufacturers now use advanced technology and sustainable materials to mass produce varieties of leather goods of high quality that are unique. Increasingly, a critical innovation that has gained ground in leather products manufacturing is the use of sustainable materials such as vegetable-tanned leather to produce leather goods. Specifically, this method uses extractions from plants as natural tannins to preserve and soften the leather. This process makes it possible to avoid the use of toxic chemicals like chromium and consequently mitigate the impact on the environment.

Leather and allied products marketing opportunities both at the local and international levels is a function of technology and innovation. Technology and innovation in leather tanning, processing and upgrading, leather products manufacturing (foot wears, bags, garments, etc.) is indispensable to achieving top notch quality, diversity and uniqueness of products, increasing

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market share, sustained revenue and employment opportunities. For instance, Deselnicu *et al.* (2014) established that Chrome tanning is the most common type of tanning in the world. Chrome tanned leathers are characterized by top handling quality, high hydro-thermal stability and excellent user properties. However, it has been proven that Chrome tanning has the unfavourable consequence of toxic waste as effluent. Innovative research has led to the discovering of a clean and eco-friendly technology as alternative to Chrome tanning (also known as wet-blue); and valorisation of leather waste derived from this technology (Deselnicu *et al.*, 2014).

The alternative technology comes with the use of new tanning agents (knowledge-based tanning agents; KTA) that leads to the production of a new tanned leather called wet-white. There is the possibility of transforming the valorised wet-white leather solid waste into raw materials that are inputs for developing bio-composites that can be used in making fertilizers, cosmetics and allied products. This is a classic case of how technology and innovation in leather industry creates market opportunities that are non-existent. Thus, there is a need to re-evaluate the leather value chain again with critical focus on innovation and technology as key driver for reinventing the leather industry; and new market opportunities would be created in the process (new markets in the chemical and cosmetic industries; agricultural sector provides market for fertilizer produced from tanning waste).

It must be brought to our attention that a critical opportunity for marketing is the possession of the capacity for leather manufacturers to differentiate their products. In a highly competitive market environment of today, to simply produce leather products as a basis for attracting sales is grossly insufficient. Leather goods manufacturers must seek innovative means by which they can differentiate their products from others. Innovative production techniques must be employed in this regard. Availability of cutting-edge technology in the manufacture of leather products is what drives product differentiation that in-turn drives market opportunities and create increase in share of market, brand recognition, consumer satisfaction, sustainability and the value (profit) from the industry globally. Cutting-edge technology (e.g. digital sewing and printing; and laser etching, high-tech finishing, sustainable training, and biotechnology: is an emerging field that makes available raw materials such as Mycelium leather produced in the laboratory from mushroom roots) enables manufacturers to create unique designs and patterns that create custom-made,

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preferences and unique options for end users; thus, driving up market access and income. Without doubt, the use of innovative production techniques allows for product differentiation that gives competitive edge and adds value to each brand.

Innovation and technology in leather products manufacturing has enabled differentiation in very unique ways such as costume-made design, high-tech finishing and unique texture, exclusivity and status symbols. This is a sustainable means to creating new market opportunities, while leveraging competitiveness and increasing consumer demand options. A number of leather manufacturers have achieved huge success on a global scale through product differentiation by means of technology and innovation: Eccolo (this company has used digital printing to create unique leather products such as journals, passport holders and wallets as customized products that provides them outstanding with unique market opportunities among diverse consumers); acne studios, Muul, Trusting, and Stuart and Lau. These modern leather products manufacturers have used a combination of traditional and innovative aesthetics and sophisticated designs, 3D printing to create stylish and functional products that have created worldwide marketing opportunities with huge profits.

PRODUCT BRANDING

What is it that makes the world's most popularly recognized leather products compelling in the market place? While it is arguably true that the world's most popular leather products are of high quality standard, quality alone does not guarantee product success in the market place (Decker, 2023). These recognized leather products in the world have something constantly going in their favour: world-class product branding that is a result of research, development and innovation. It goes without saying that product branding is central to the broader perspective of bringing life, personality and identity to your product. Successful product branding will compel consumers and sustain their patronage on a consistent basis in the market place. On the other hand, poor or weak product branding can damage the reputation of an otherwise high quality and valuable product and hurt the sales, revenue generation; the organization's image internally and publicly.

Generally, branding is the process of creating a strong, positive perception of your product on the minds of the end-users. The target is to create and manage an identity that will help your product to be known, loved and preferred (Decker, 2023). Product branding is the associating of a symbol, name, and design with a product in order to create a recognizable identity for that product (Hoelscher, 2021). Branding is your business name, logo, colour, voice and imagery. It represents the intangible feeling the purchasers of your product carry on their minds whenever they come in contact with your product (Decker, 2023). In Decker's (2023) view companies don't sell products; they rather sell experiences, feelings, and ideologies. As far as Decker (2023) is concerned businesses with popular brands such as Coca-Cola know exactly what experience they want customers to have when they choose any of their brands. The ability to control the preference experiences of consumers is the underlying power of branding (Decker, 2023). In other words, branding forces you to think and feel exactly the way product owners want you to think and feel to select their brand in the market place. Branding has the capacity to compel you to believe in the product leaving you with no option but to choose it.

Decker (2023) further argued that a brand is the identity of a business that differentiates it from its competitors who produce and sell the same products or services. The goal is to earn space in the minds of the target end-users of your product as a matter of the preferred option in the market place. Branding should be understood as a process that involves researching, developing and the application of distinct features to your organization in order to persuasively compel end-users to easily associate your brand with your products or services. Branding is in the social or conventional media captions, billboard colour palettes, and the packaging materials used to present the product. This is what enables the identity of any brand to achieve a wider reach and live across society spaces; and create the necessary enticements that leads to consumer choice of the product.

Product branding is a key component in corporate and marketing strategies of businesses. The opportunity for leather product differentiation made possible through the use of innovative techniques of producing leather goods makes branding a critical component of both corporate and marketing strategies as far as the leather industry is concerned. Branding is so strategically critical to business successes and survival that sustained market opportunities and profits are gained or lost with or without it. Again, we can perceive the fact that product branding is the application of

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branding strategy principles to a specific product to create a differentiating identity among competing products.

Is product branding worth the efforts and investment? Product branding requires enormous efforts in terms of finance and time spent on research, development, and innovation. Certainly, product branding is worth whatever investment that goes into it; and if a business fails to invest in it, the consequences will show in poorly defined products without identity and the sales will show it.

HOW TO BRAND A PRODUCT

How do you make your product stand out in view of a number of competing alternatives in the market place? So, it is critical that a business brands its product appropriately to make it stand out against other products offered by competitors and compel ample customer followership that would be compelling against all odds. Product branding requires all hands in the organization to be on deck to allow for a cross breed of ideas and opinions from different perspectives: from raw materials to production and sale of the final output. There are key important principles to consider in product branding.

First, you need to determine your target end-users/niche. The target end-users are the specific group of people that are most likely to buy the product you are offering. As a matter of first step you need to design or create your branding materials that reflects their personal beliefs (religious, tribal, sociocultural, trends and fashions, etc.), values and interests in order to draw their attention in a compelling manner. You may also need to breakdown the target market into sub-markets of smaller and more specific persons that are likely to buy specific products. This will give you easy, gradual and cautious entry into the market, that will enable your product to gain market foothold overtime.

Note that product identity/recognition, trust and accruable revenue from sales come from the consumers. In the first principle, it is not just any consumers; but targeted consumers by design. You must have a clear idea and vision of who your primary consumers are. Because your brand should speak specifically to defined sect of consumers. If your product does not resonate with your target consumers, it can hardly achieve recognition, acceptance, create its own awareness and

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command revenue. What you know about your target consumers' experiences will certainly influence the product branding decisions you would be taking for the present and future. So, you need to have an idea of who your target consumers are to create personalized experience. This is the first priority when it comes to product branding.

Second, the next important step to take after identifying your product niche or end-users is to carry out a research on your competitors. According to Meeks (2021), the two most critical factors in product branding are identifying your target consumers and studying your competitors. Meeks (2021) strongly counselled that once you obtain the information about consumers and competitors, you can proceed to construct a branding strategy that both addresses what your target audience wants, as well as finding out where your competitors are falling short, and then focusing on these elements in your promotions, which, in turn, brands your product's identity. This implies that you need to step out and carry out survey interviews on potential customers, shop owners and get feedback from the market. You need to find answers to the following questions from the target consumers: what is the purpose of my product? What are the tastes and preferences of the target consumers? What is it that will make them feel seen, valued, and cared for? How can my product connect with them on a deep emotional level? What promise will my product deliver to consumers? Will it deliver? How do the target consumers see my business and product line at the moment? How do I want them to see my business and product line going forward? What the problems with competing products? How can I remedy and improve on them? These constitutes the critical information you need to have in your possession before taking other important product branding decisions.

Third, create and establish the mission statement of your organization that specifically focus on your products. Such mission statement constitutes a building block for your products; as it points to the reason for which consumers should prefer your product. Product recognition, valuation and trust by consumers stems from the understanding of what your business mission is all about.

Fourth, create unique product qualities, values and functionalities. Every leather goods producer must realize that he or she operates in a competitive space. You are simply competing with similar leather products in the same market. Therefore, you must do a product

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competitiveness analysis. The critical question to ask is what is it about your product that cannot be easily and perfectly replicated by other producers? It is on the basis of this question that you must ensure that your product is inspired, crafted and designed or made from materials that are predominantly or preferably created through your own research, development and innovation efforts. The products of such research, development and innovative efforts will create unique quality, value, and functionality. The focus is to discover how your products or services contribute to improvement in living life.

Fifth, create the visual design of the product under consideration. This is a key aspect of product identity that can be seen or vocalised. Visual design includes name, logo, colour palette, labels, typography (in terms of font type), iconography and packaging. These must be carefully selected by professionals with relevant experiences in order to create the needed effects on the target consumers. All the visual designs must resonate with the mission statement and impresses on the target consumer the uniqueness, quality, value and functions of the product. Note that design can be intimidating and compelling, and at the same time exciting to the consumer. There may be need to provide brand or style guidelines that will enable appropriate use of the product.

Sixth, create the voice of the product and strong consumer appeal. In the determination of a brand name, it is important that the pronunciation is unique and enforces easy remembrance. In other words, how the product communicates with the target consumers is a critical aspect of product branding. The producer must determine a brand voice that will connect easily with the target end-users to draw their attention sustainably. This is reflected in strong advertising campaigns and captions in the print and electronic media (TV, radio, Instagram, twitter, now known as X, Instagram, blog posts, etc.). This will provide opportunities for your product to speak and interface with your target consumers and familiarize them with your products and enable them to recognize your voice in an entertaining atmosphere that consumers will always look forward to.

Seventh, you need to put your brand to work as soon as product branding is completed through sales and customer service. First, create an effective and up to date sales unit where the product can be displayed under the supervision of trained professional salesmen and saleswomen with adequate customer service experiences. Note that a brand is only as powerful as the people behind it, and if you do not have the right people that are vested with the requisite skills and

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experience to put the brand to work in the market space; the product will die a natural death. Sales and customer service personnel should be well informed about the product guidelines and should use the product, particularly when in the sales environment and when they engage with target consumers. The product name, logo and other imagery and brand voice (Jingles and music) should be deliberately used and displayed.

Finally, you must endeavour to create or establish consistency. It is imperative to be well acquainted with the fact that leather product branding requires that you establish consistency in terms of quality, design, texture, images and the theme message of your products at all times. Lack of consistency is the bane of most leather goods producers in Nigeria. Consumers often recognize and recall very easily products after seeing or feel such items and seeing them between five and six times with consistency in quality, design, texture, images and theme message (Hoelscher, 2021). Consistency is the key to retaining your target consumers and make them stay connected to your brand.

CONCLUSION

The focus and key take home from the conversation is to create a rebirth and revival in us that will drive a renewed process of branding and rebranding our institution and its products. The value chain of the global leather industry is huge. For instance, Asian countries account for about 82.8% of the total production of leather products including footwear estimated at 12.03 billion pairs, while Africa accounts for only 1.3% of the global production. If this is the figure for Africa, then Nigeria's share of global footwear production is better imagined. There is an urgent need to change this narrative. This I believe, we have the capacity to do by simply embracing and taking advantage of technology and innovative manufacturing techniques in order to create current modern leather product brands that can compete adequately in the global market; with capacity to increase our share of the value chain.

Also, we must engage in intensive product branding across all the products created in this unique institution. The products of this institution in my view is first and foremost the manpower that is trained and equipped with skills and competencies in the various facets of the conglomeration of leather value creation. While this institution has done well and is presently

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doing well in leather value creation in terms of human capital development; there is still room to rebrand all the training opportunities in this institution by deploying some of the branding strategies discussed above. In my humble submission, product branding should be introduced as core course in the training/academic curriculum of this institution. If need be industry experts and professionals can be engaged in collaborating terms to provide key industry expertise needed to train students and staff of the institution in this regard.

Existing products from leather and chemical processes should be rebranded by deploying the product branding strategies above, intensify research and development efforts towards raw materials and design improvement, and upgrade the product sales and customer service units to deliberately show case products and make brands to work.

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