



B2B brand positioning in emerging markets: Exploring positioning signals via websites and managerial tensions in top-performing African B2B service brands

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ABSTRACT

This research explored important questions concerning how top-performing African B2B service brands position their brands in this increasingly globalised, technology-driven and competitive digital ecosystem. In Study 1, we performed a content analysis of the homepages of the websites of 140 top-performing African B2B service brands to explore the most frequently used positioning signals. In Study 2, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 managers to understand the processes, challenges and, ultimately, the tension involved in managing their brands. Our analysis revealed tensions around curating a sense of professionalism, building a sense of trustworthiness and being proud of African roots. The research contributes to the literature on B2B brand positioning to show how the alignment between the signal on delivered positioning on brand websites and managers' perception in developing brand positioning may shape different positioning strategies. In addition, the study offers practical implications for managers of B2B service brands in Africa on how to develop their brands, decide the possible signals to include in their websites and manage the branding tension within their business operations in the best way.

The African market is recognised for its dynamism and creativity (Leke & Yeboah-Amankwah, 2018) and is fast growing, with a popular phrase such as 'Africa rising' coined for it (Amankwah-Amoah, Boso, & Debrah, 2018; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018; Taylor, 2014). Yet, top-performing African business-to-business (B2B) service brands are continually facing intense competition from local and international firms within the digital services ecosystem (Blankson, Iyer, Owusu-Frimpong, Nwankwo, & Hinson, 2020; Omokaro-Romanus, Anchor, & Konara, 2019) in various forms, such as the trend to work for tech developers outside Africa, the growing competition from other service providers within the African countries and the emerging gig economy and freelancers, who operate at lower costs due to low overheads (Mogaji et al., 2021). The spotlight has, therefore, fallen on B2B managers to face the uncertainty around competition, assess the debate between localness and globalness (Davvetas, Diamantopoulos, & Halkias, 2016; Mohan, Brown, Sichtmann, & Schoefer, 2018) and investigate

how they can sustain their brand's competitive positioning to attract prospective customers, especially the customers who use their websites.

In a fast-paced, resource-constrained, digitally driven and technologically connected environment, a website presents an integral part of communicating B2B brand positioning (Alkire & Hammedi, 2021). Yet, firm websites are often underutilised, especially in this consumer-centric age (Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021; Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2019). Brands use websites as an information 'dump' and miss the opportunity to engage with wider stakeholders and directly communicate their real benefits. These B2B brands can craft narratives and manage content and information on their websites (Sánchez-Chaparro, Soler-Vicén, & Gómez-Frías, 2022). It is important to recognise that different website features and elements often reflect the strategic decisions made by B2B managers. Yet, the interplay between communicated B2B brand positioning and managers' decision processes is little understood. And any confusion over communicated B2B positioning on

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websites can cost B2B firms.

Previous studies on B2B brand positioning have mostly focused on strategies highlighting specific and effective competitive positions and attributes (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2019; Iyer, Davari, Zolfagharian, & Paswan, 2019). However, little research has been conducted on the strategic approaches managers take, especially from an African perspective, as previous studies have often focused on B2C and B2B service brands in Europe and North America, highlighting a gap in the knowledge about how and why African B2B service brands position themselves in the way they do. Moreover, despite the growing digitalisation, few studies have examined the value of websites as a digital brand identity in conveying trust, information and signal capabilities, instead often focusing on social media platforms. The few studies exploring B2B service brand positioning through websites, including the studies conducted by Williams, Lueg, Hancock, and Goffnett (2019) and Panda, Paswan, and Mishra (2019), focus on only developed countries. Important questions concerning how African B2B companies position their brands in this increasingly globalised, technology-driven and competitive context remain unanswered. Specifically, this research project aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How is African B2B brand positioning communicated in an online environment, especially on firm websites?

RQ2. How do African B2B brand managers perceive their positioning strategies, and what are the tensions they face in developing their intended brand positioning?

To answer these questions, this research adopted a multi-study approach. In Study 1, we performed a content analysis (CA) of the homepages of the websites of the 140 top-performing B2B service brands featured in the 2020 Clutch list to explore the signals most frequently used by African B2B service brands and as the main vehicle for the front-end communication of the corporate brand promise. In Study 2, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 managers from the brands mentioned in the 2020 Clutch list to learn more about and understand the processes, challenges and tensions involved in managing their brands, especially in the context of using websites as digital gateways for prospective clients and the localisation and globalisation challenge. Our analysis revealed tensions around curating a sense of professionalism, building a sense of trustworthiness and being proud of African roots.

The present study is theoretically positioned on and contributes to studies on B2B brand positioning literature by using signalling theory to show how alignment between the signal on delivered positioning on firm websites and managers' perception of developing brand positioning may shape different positioning strategies. We also found space for considering both external positioning signals (e.g., via websites) and internal perception of positioning strategies (through managers' perspective) as a way to deal with the sales-led culture of many B2B firms. Superficially, we showed the paradoxical tension around African roots positioning that can both elevate and hinder B2B firms' desires and intentions to reach multiple customers. In addition, the study offers practical implications for B2B service brand managers in Africa on how to develop their brands, decide on the possible signals to include on their website and manage the branding tensions within their business operations in the best way.

This paragraph discusses the structure of this paper. We begin by reviewing three relevant literature strands: B2B brand positioning in the service context, the role of websites and the emerging economies. Based on the literature review, we identified a significant gap in the positioning process for B2B services, which is particularly relevant in the African context due to Africa's unique competitive landscape. The methodology section details Study 1 (CAs of the homepages) and Study 2 (semi-structured interviews with managers). Following the results section, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of the study before concluding with the study's limitations and further research

directions.

1. Literature review

1.1. Brand positioning in the B2B service context

Brand positioning is defined as the 'act of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market' (Kotler & Keller, 2003, p. 867). The main dilemma B2B marketers face is that many B2B firms are sales-oriented and focus on operation improvement, thus ignoring the consideration of brand positioning as meaningful (Kalafatis, Blankson, Luxly Boatswain, & Tsogas, 2020; Iyer et al., 2019). B2B firms market and brand a wide range of offerings, such as products, services, hybrid offerings and solutions (Hutt & Speh, 2017), as well as 'ingredient' products and services (Helm & Özergin, 2015). This can be partly understood from customer perceptions that most industrial markets are viewed as commodity markets and that the customers have a clear idea about the product category and competition (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Yet, some studies have identified a shift in the understanding, such that brand positioning is being regarded as an increasingly important strategic decision (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011a; Blankson & Kalafatis, 2019). This shift has largely been caused by increased competition, similarity in offering and a higher level of imitation from traditional as well as non-traditional competitors. Therefore, a distinctive B2B brand positioning can enable a firm to convey its differentiation (Beverland, Napoli, & Yakimova, 2007; Jalkala & Keränen, 2014) and project a credible image of itself to relevant stakeholders.

Leek and Christodoulides (2011) have identified several benefits provided by B2B brands to buyers and suppliers, such as 'higher confidence, uncertainty reduction, increased satisfaction, greater comfort and identification' (p. 831) for buyers and 'quality, differentiation, higher demand, premium price, brand extensions, distribution power, barrier to entry, goodwill, loyal customers, customer satisfaction and referrals' (p. 831) for suppliers. Yet, the unique characteristics of services such as intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, perishability and unobservability can present further challenges to B2B service providers' positioning activities (De Chernatony & Riley, 1999; Guenther & Guenther, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Buyers typically perceive a higher level of complexity when purchasing services rather than products (Smeltzer & Ogden, 2002). According to the taxonomy given by Fitzsimmons, Noh, and Thies (1998), not all service purchases are equally complex, as complexity depends on the interplay between a service's focus (property, people or process) and its value to the buyers (low or high). As Åhlström and Nordin (2006) underlined, purchasing services often entails difficulties in 'defining, pricing, evaluating and controlling the service delivery' (p. 78), which significantly influences the perception of quality of such B2B offerings. Such complexity in services means that B2B marketers need a creative brand positioning and messaging to stand out.

Numerous calls have been made to advance the understanding of brand positioning in a B2B context (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2019; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011), with significant gaps in the research, especially in the context of B2B services (Keränen, Piirainen, & Salminen, 2012; Williams et al., 2019). Iyer et al. (2019) took the first step to understanding the different types of brand positioning strategies. Some examples of brand positioning services are - using intangible elements such as trust and expertise as sources of differentiation (Beverland et al., 2007), focusing on service quality and relationship (Roberts & Merri-lee, 2007), developing brand personality elements (Herbst & Merz, 2011), enhancing service quality capabilities (Jalkala & Keränen, 2014), giving importance to human values (He, Huang, & Wu, 2018) and ensuring sustainability (Casidy & Yan, 2022). By focusing on internal processes and behaviours within an organisation, compared to the image-led approach of positioning, Iyer et al. (2019) further highlighted that B2B researchers need to go deeper into the organisational process

viewpoint of positioning strategies. Interestingly, few studies have explored the congruence between both the front end and the backstage of the brand positioning process. With an exception, Blankson, Kalafatis, Coffie, and Tsogas (2014a, 2014b) examined the congruence between managers' intended positioning strategies (Level 1), the firm's actual or delivered positioning strategies (Level 2) and consumers' perception of the positioning strategies (Level 3). They recognise feedback loops among the different positioning levels and underline the importance of maintaining congruence between them.

In addition, the shift to digital marketplaces has allowed B2B firms to use websites to transmit effective signals and shape customers' perceptions of their intended brand positioning (Williams et al., 2019). The literature offers many anecdotal suggestions for B2B marketers in utilising websites, including acting as a face for the firm (Coulter, 2012), providing a direct link to customers (Williams et al., 2019), promoting credibility (Virtsonis & Harridge-March, 2009), reaching potential customers cost-effectively (Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2022), influencing customers' perceptions of service quality (Cretu & Brodie, 2007) and promoting user interactivity (Ellinger, Lynch, Andzulis, & Smith, 2003). Yet, the complexity of the value customers seek means that different segments need different positioning signals and that how B2B managers choose brand positioning strategies for communicating on their websites remains a challenge, especially in the multi-faceted context in Africa (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011).

1.2. Positioning B2B service brands in Africa

Investigation of B2B marketing issues in an international context has a long history (e.g., Korkmaz & Messner, 2008; Spyropoulou, Skarmas, & Katsikeas, 2010). However, B2B marketing has only recently broken 'the frontiers of traditional [developed] markets, reaching emerging economies' (Cortez & Johnston, 2017, p. 92). With their rapid economic development and government policies directed towards economic liberalisation (Arnold & Quelch, 1998; Sheth & Sinha, 2015), emerging economies in South America, the Middle East and Africa confront marketers with new challenges.

Mirroring this market evolution, the research on branding and positioning initiatives in Africa has witnessed major growth. Brand positioning strategies developed in Western contexts apply to the African context too, with Indigenous African companies likely to replicate foreign firms' positioning tactics (Blankson et al., 2020). As per Koch and Gyrd-Jones (2019a, 2019b), most studies on branding and positioning in Africa appear to have focused on positioning strategies (Blankson et al., 2020; Blankson, Ketron, & Darmoe, 2017). On the other hand, the positioning process has received less attention, with notable exceptions found in some studies about managers' views on positioning practices (Coffie, 2016; Coffie & Owusu-Frimpong, 2014). Significant emphasis has been devoted to the retail sector (Adokou & Kyere-Diabour, 2017; Blankson, Ketron, & Coffie, 2017), while positioning studies looking at the broad service context do not appear to have clearly distinguished between B2C and B2B companies (Coffie, 2016; Coffie & Owusu-Frimpong, 2014). In B2B domains, such as architecture, domestic African brands appear to have been affected by a negative perception due to their origin (Verster, Petzer, & Cunningham, 2019), while brand orientation has been found to enhance brand loyalty in a B2B industrial holding context (Dludla & Dlamini, 2018). Most studies have a single-country focus, especially on Ghana (Blankson et al., 2020; Coffie, Blankson, & Dadzie, 2018; Coffie & Owusu-Frimpong, 2014) and South Africa (Dludla & Dlamini, 2018; Verster et al., 2019). To the best of our knowledge, no multi-country study has been conducted on B2B service positioning, which could reveal potential similarities and differences among B2B service brands in different African countries.

1.3. Signalling theory

Signalling theory is becoming increasingly popular among marketing

scholars (e.g., Connelly et al., 2011; Helm & Özergin, 2015; Kirmani & Rao, 2000), as the theory directs attention to the core problems managers face, namely, how to use signals to reduce the uncertainty associated with making a selection among a choice set in situations that have incomplete and asymmetrically distributed information (Spence, 1973). For example, the decision around B2B positioning strategies via websites (Williams et al., 2019) may be wrapped in incomplete information and can create uncertainty for both providers and buyers. Service buyers value reputation and experience when purchasing B2B services (Fitzsimmons et al., 1998). Hence, B2B service providers are expected to convey such signals, alongside cues to service quality, in their communicated actual positioning (Mccoll, Truong, & Rocca, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Firms avail of different tools to signal their actual positioning in physical and digital spaces. Advertising has long been considered a prime tool in both developed and emerging economies (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999; Blankson et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2020; Ries & Trout, 1986). In an increasingly digital global marketplace, positioning efforts, for example, are now moving online through brands' websites and social media presence (Magno & Cassia, 2020; Williams et al., 2019). Developed by firms and/or according to their guidelines, these websites provide a reliable indicator of the key messages transmitted to prospective and current buyers.

Successful brand positioning involves 'a competitive frame of reference in terms of the target market and the nature of competition' (Keller, 2005, p. 705). Hence, our investigation explores managers' perception of competition, which can be defined in multiple ways (e.g., industry-, firm-, manager- or customer-focused; Gur & Greckhamer, 2019) and at different geographical levels (e.g., domestic, regional or international level; Hutt & Speh, 2017; Omokaro-Romanus et al., 2019). Given brand positioning's increasing level in emerging economies (Alkire & Hammedi, 2021; Arnold & Quelch, 1998; Coffie & Owusu-Frimpong, 2014), it is crucial to understand how managers of African B2B service brands incorporate competitive considerations into their brand positioning process. Thus, in this study, we use signalling theory to explore how and why African B2B firms communicate their brand positioning signals via websites in the way they do.

2. Methodology

Considering the exploratory nature of our research, we deemed an inductive multi-study approach appropriate to understand the intended and actual positioning of B2B service brands in Africa through their websites as digital dimensions for reinforcing their brand identities. The first stage of the research design involved a data-driven examination of the homepages of the websites of the top-performing B2B service brands in the Clutch, 2020 list. The second stage utilised semi-structured interviews with 32 managers from the top-performing B2B service brands mentioned in the Clutch, 2020 ranking to understand the process behind their intended positioning through their digital dimensions. Fig. 1 provides a graphical overview of the research design and the following sections provide details on each study.

2.1. Study 1 – website content and thematic analysis

The first study aimed to identify the visible features used on the homepages of the websites of B2B service brands as key messages illustrating top-performing B2B service brands in a digital environment. Websites have been used as B2B brand positioning vehicles by Williams et al. (2019) in their study of B2B carriers' service and by Panda et al. (2019) in the context of franchisors. The homepages were chosen as the unit of analysis because they are the gateways to information on brands. As customers land on the homepage of a brand's website, they are likely to associate the homepage's features with the corporate brand.

For the analysis, 140 top-performing African B2B service brands published by Clutch (2020) were used as a sample. Clutch is a global B2B research organisation that has been covering Africa since 2019. Clutch

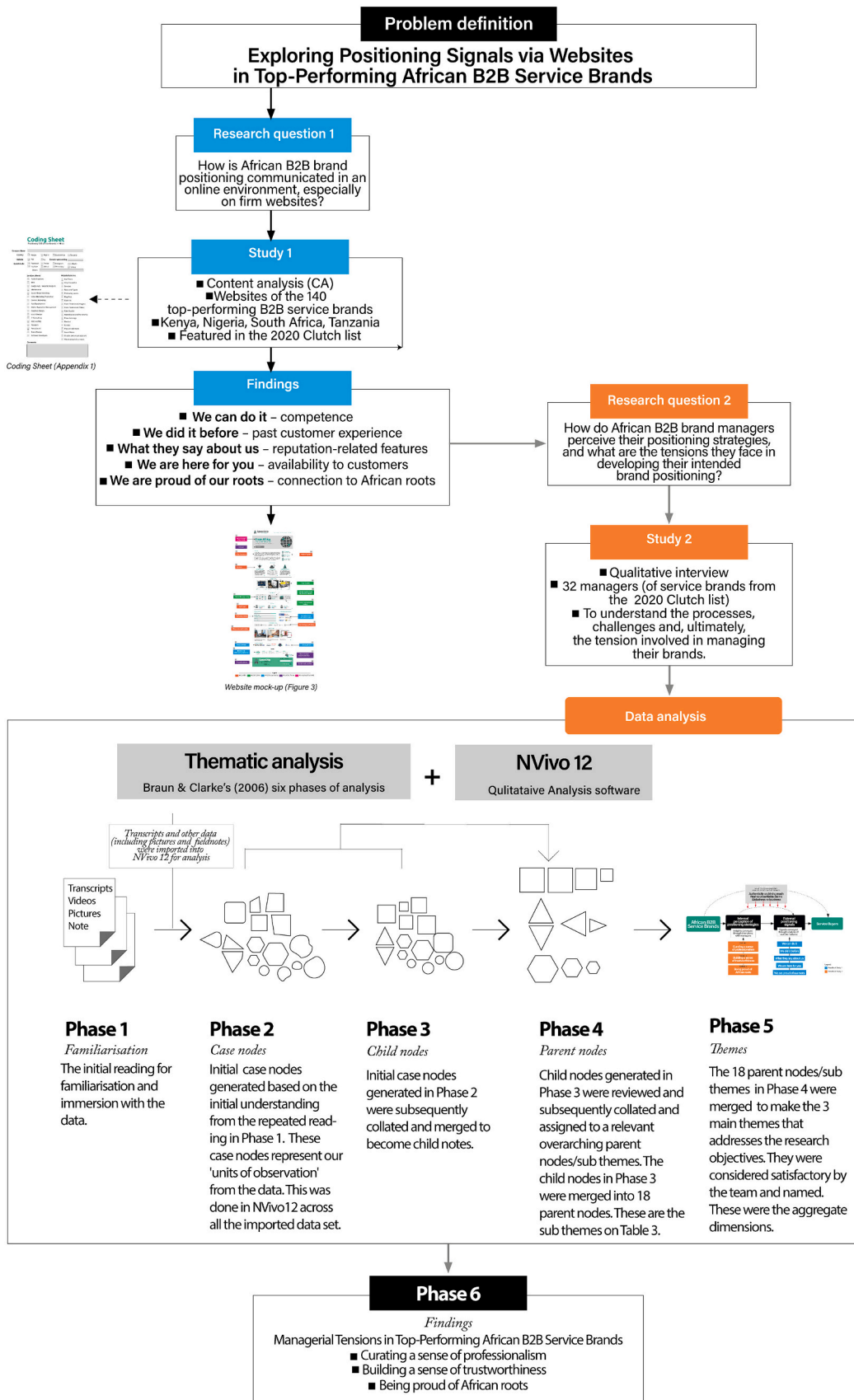


Fig. 1. Research Design. Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006), Badejo, Charles, & Millisits (2022) and Kaur, Mogaji, Wadera, & Gupta (2022).

analyses each brand in terms of the services offered, awards received, online presence and reviews on Clutch. Clutch's selection methodology ensures that the winners represent the 'best of the best' (Clutch, 2020). Although this sample has limited temporal coverage (i.e., only for the year 2020), it ensures the study's consistency, validity and replicability. The latest cohort of the leading B2B brands in Africa was presented by Clutch in August 2020 and included 140 brands from four African countries: Kenya ($n = 28$, 20%), Nigeria ($n = 54$, 38.6%), South Africa ($n = 49$, 35%) and Tanzania ($n = 9$, 6.4%). The CA provided insights into the frequency of the key features on the websites, while the thematic analysis grouped the key features into significant relevant themes.

Following standard CA procedures, an emerging coding scheme was developed (Landrum & Ohsowski, 2018; Panda et al., 2019), starting with the definition of our objective: to gain an understanding of the brands' actual positioning via their websites and of the sample to be analysed, the top-performing brands in the 2020 Clutch ranking of African B2B service brands. A coding sheet was developed to facilitate data collection and analysis, starting with a sample of two randomly selected homepages of the B2B service brands mentioned in the Clutch, 2020 ranking for each country, adding to eight homepages. Iteratively, features were extracted from the website content (e.g., contact and blog post), and the process stopped when no new features emerged. The final coding sheet identified 18 types of objective features that could be present on the homepage of the website of a B2B service brand in Africa (Appendix 1). As per Camprubí and Coromina (2016), 'CA will perform better when studies use more than one judge or when judges are independent from authors' (p. 139). This approach, which was recently used in B2B positioning research (Panda et al., 2019), was retained in our study, with the recruitment and training of two independent coders (Czarnecka & Mogaji, 2020). Along with the coding sheet, the coders were provided with a coding book that included a description and actual examples of different website features. A pre-test was conducted to establish intercoder reliability, with a coefficient ranging between 0.98 and 1, indicating an acceptable level of reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977). Following the pre-test, all 140 websites were coded by the two coders. Based on the coding, we determined the occurrence of each feature on the brands' homepages. Through an inductive thematic analysis, the research team then generated overarching themes by grouping the features coded by the independent coders and found to be conveying a similar signal.

2.2. Study 2: managers' perception of intended positioning strategies and processes

While Study 1 is more about the delivered positioning strategy on the websites, Study 2 focuses on the processes underlying intended brand positioning activities by engaging with high-ranking management team members of the top-performing B2B service brands on the Clutch (2020) list. We emailed all 140 brands on this list to introduce our project and invited their representatives for interviews. Following clarifications, 32 of the 58 companies that expressed interest confirmed their participation. Consistent with previous studies (Iyer et al., 2019; Mogaji, Czarnecka, & Danbury, 2018), our data collection used a key informant approach. The companies' designated representatives (hereafter referred to as participants) to interact with the research team and the interview appointments were then arranged. As shown in Table 1, the companies in our sample provided mostly professional services, and the participants included chief executive officers (CEOs), chief operating officers (COOs) and marketing managers. Nigeria ($n = 15$, 47%) was the most represented country, followed by South Africa ($n = 9$, 28%), Kenya ($n = 5$, 16%) and Tanzania ($n = 3$, 9%).

To structure the data collection, we developed an interview guide and protocol (see Appendix 2). Drawing from Koch and Gyrð-Jones (2019a, 2019b), we created an initial set of questions to discern the actors, activities, context and drivers of corporate brand positioning for African B2B service brands. A pilot study was run to (a) better

Table 1
Profile of participants for the semistructured interviews.

Label	Country	Gender	Position	Service provided
P1	Kenya	Female	Chief Executive Officer	Digital Marketing
P2	Kenya	Female	Chief Marketing Officer	Branding Agency
P3	Kenya	Male	Chief Marketing Officer	Marketing Agency
P4	Kenya	Male	Chief Operating Officer	App Developer
P5	Kenya	Male	Chief Operating Officer	Software Developer
P6	Nigeria	Female	Chief Operating Officer	Digital Marketing
P7	Nigeria	Female	Chief Operating Officer	Website Developer
P8	Nigeria	Female	Managing Director	App Developer
P9	Nigeria	Female	Co-Founder	Digital Marketing
P10	Nigeria	Female	Head of Marketing	Branding Agency
P11	Nigeria	Male	Managing Director	Marketing Agency
P12	Nigeria	Male	Chief Operating Officer	Marketing Agency
P13	Nigeria	Male	Chief Executive Officer	Video Production
P14	Nigeria	Male	Chief Executive Officer	Social Media Marketing
P15	Nigeria	Male	Chief Marketing Officer	Digital Marketing
P16	Nigeria	Male	Marketing Director	Branding Agency
P17	Nigeria	Male	Chief Executive Officer	Marketing Agency
P18	Nigeria	Male	Co-Founder	Website Developer
P19	Nigeria	Male	Chief Executive Officer	Web Hosting
P20	Nigeria	Male	Chief Consultant	IT Security
P21	South Africa	Female	Marketing and Sales Director	Marketing Agency
P22	South Africa	Female	Chief Technology Officer	Marketing Agency
P23	South Africa	Female	Human Resources Manager	Marketing Agency
P24	South Africa	Female	Chief Executive Officer	Marketing Agency
P25	South Africa	Male	Chief Operating Officer	Marketing Agency
P26	South Africa	Male	Marketing Manager	Digital Agency
P27	South Africa	Male	Creative Director	Advertising Agency
P28	South Africa	Male	Creative Director	Branding Agency
P29	South Africa	Male	Co-Founder	Digital Marketing
P30	Tanzania	Male	Chief Executive Officer	App Developer
P31	Tanzania	Male	Co-Founder	Website Developer
P32	Tanzania	Male	Co-Founder	Digital Marketing

comprehend and capture the context of the participants; (b) refine the wording and the order of the questions and (c) check the duration of a typical interview. Five managers participated in the pilot, and they were excluded from the final sample of the participants ($n = 32$). After the pilot study, the updated interview guide included 12 open-ended questions, beginning with background information about the company and the participant and progressing to actual corporate brand development and positioning activities on the websites. The first author conducted all interviews between April and May 2021.

The interview sessions were designed to be highly convenient for the participants. Due to the multi-country nature of this research, the interviews were conducted via Zoom or Skype software. In line with the ethical approval obtained at the first author's institution, the participants were assured of anonymity and protection of personal and business-sensitive information. The interviews lasted between 48 and 64 min (median = 54). The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber (132 single-spaced pages in total) and imported into Nvivo, a qualitative analysis software, for data analysis.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, our inductive data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis (Fig. 1). The first phase involved immersion in the data through repeated reading of the transcripts. Inductive coding followed it, with the growing number of codes being collated and assigned to a relevant overarching theme (Farinloye, Mogaji, Aririguzoh, & Kieu, 2019; Mogaji & Nguyen, 2022). 18 sub-themes emerged and finally merged into three

main themes (aggregate dimension; fifth phase of a thematic analysis), which will be discussed in the manuscript with relevant participant quotes. See Fig. 1 for detailed data analysis.

To ensure the study's credibility and authenticity, several measures were put in place. Before the coding, a member check (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was performed: the transcribed interviews were sent to all the participants for verification and returned with their approval. Following Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013), we employed a rigorous peer debriefing process, code-checking and ongoing comparison of the researchers' findings. In addition, interview quotes were used to illustrate each point, in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommendation to provide a 'thick description of the sending context, so that

someone in a potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and the study' (p. 125). Finally, an audit trail (Shenton, 2004) documented this study's methods, procedures and decision points. As evidenced by the audit trail, the data were not used arbitrarily, and the researchers' positions did not overpower the participants' voices.

3. Findings

3.1. Study 1 – signals used on firm websites and positioning strategies

The website analysis goal was to gain insights into the actual

Table 2
Summary of content analysis findings, with totals and subtotals by country (Study 1).

s/ n	Theme	Website feature(s)	Description	Country subtotals				Total (n = 140)
				Kenya (n = 28)	Nigeria (n = 54)	South Africa (n = 49)	Tanzania (n = 9)	
1	'We can do it'	Staff Team	This category includes information about staff members within the company, with their pictures and job title. It provides information about the team's composition, proficiency and diversity.	3 (11%)	4 (7%)	10 (20%)	1 (11%)	18 (13%)
2		Why Choose Us	This category covers key features about the company's business operations and provides reasons why they should be hired. The rationale for the choice could be grounded in their working process, the services they offer, their team, level of expertise and awards received.	10 (36%)	15 (28%)	15 (31%)	0	40 (29%)
3		Services	This category provide summary about the services of the company. They are often represented with relevant icons, and prospective customers are expected to click for more information about those services.	11 (48%)	23 (43%)	24 (49%)	3 (33%)	61 (44%)
4		Facts and Figure	Facts and figures are presented on the website to provide insights into the firm's operations. These can be objective (e.g., number of completed projects, number of clients, and staff) or more humorous (e.g., cups of coffee made in a year).	4 (14%)	8 (15%)	4 (8%)	3 (33%)	19 (13%)
5		Proficiency Levels	This category includes information presented in slide bars or percentages highlighting the firm's proficiency with specific technology, tools or business operations.	3 (11%)	4 (7%)	2 (4%)	2 (22%)	11 (8%)
6		Blog Post	Blog posts are provided on the home page or a separate page. Companies use this form of content creation to educate their customers and share knowledge and expertise.	10 (36%)	7 (13%)	16 (33%)	1 (11%)	34 (24%)
7	We did it before	Client list	Information about past customers is presented in the list format, with the number and type of clients. Often the logo of these clients is displayed.	23 (82%)	37 (68%)	36 (73%)	7 (78%)	103 (73%)
8		Client Testimonial (Images)	This includes verbatim quotes from a past satisfied customer. The person's image, name, job title, and company might be provided.	9 (32%)	28 (52%)	23 (47%)	4 (44%)	64 (46%)
9		Client Testimonial (Video)	This includes a video-recorded testimonial with feedback about the service provider. The video might contain their names and relevant information.	4 (14%)	0	1 (2%)	1 (11%)	6 (4%)
10		Case Studies	Detailed information about a specific project brought to completion. Information in the case study might include the client, the brief they worked on and the final product.	19 (68%)	37 (68%)	36 (73%)	7 (78%)	99 (70%)
11	What they say about us	Accreditation and Partnership	Information about recognitions, accreditations and partnerships are often displayed at the bottom/footer of the website. For digital marketing, they might indicate Google, Microsoft and Facebook partnership. Awards and certifications from third parties are also included.	7 (25%)	14 (26%)	20 (41%)	2 (22%)	43 (31%)
12		Press Coverage	Brands might present their press coverage on their website. Information includes the logo of the press and news organisations, both foreign and domestic.	1 (3%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	0	5 (4%)
13		Reviews	Customer reviews from third-party platforms (e.g., Google, Trustpilot or Clutch) might be integrated into the brand's website through widgets. The reviews provided on these external partners are also shown, often at the footer/bottom of the page.	1 (3%)	9 (17%)	3 (8%)	0	13 (9%)
14	We are here for you	Contact	Brands might use a different way to engage with prospective clients and invite them to keep in touch, including invitations to: subscribe to the newsletter, submit a quote or a free consultation.	0	1 (2%)	7 (14%)	1 (11%)	9 (6%)
15		Physical addresses	Street addresses of the physical officers are provided on the homepage, often at the footer of the webpage. In addition, it sometimes includes telephone numbers and email addresses.	10 (36%)	23 (43%)	21 (43%)	4 (44%)	58 (41%)
16		Social Media	Social media icons are presented at the footer of the website. These icons link to the profile of the company on different social media, including: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, Whatsapp, GitHub, Pinterest, Vimeo, Dribbble, Medium, Behance, Skype and Tumblr, and Google +.	20 (71%)	41 (76%)	32 (65%)	5 (56%)	98 (70%)
17		Chatbot and virtual assistant	Aligned with growing trends of digital transformation, this feature might include a chatbot or virtual assistant.	12 (43%)	19 (35%)	13 (26%)	3 (33%)	47 (34%)
18	We are proud of our roots		This category includes features connecting the brand to its African roots. These features might include country-specific headlines on the websites and the use of African languages.	6 (21%)	9 (17%)	3 (6%)	0	18 (13%)

positioning of B2B service brands, and this section presents five features African B2B brands use to communicate their brand position via websites as follows:

- *we can do it* – competence;
- *we did it before* – past customer experience;
- *what they say about us* – reputation-related features;
- *we are here for you* – availability to customers and
- *we are proud of our roots* – connection to African roots.

Table 2 reveals the similarities and differences among the B2B service brands operating in the four countries included in the scope of this study in their use of various website features in conveying actual brand positioning. (See Table 3.)

3.1.1. Theme 1: we can do it

This theme is about demonstrating competence. B2B service brands reassure prospective clients that they have the expertise to take on and deliver projects, both in terms of resources and capability. These brands flaunt their staff base, skills level and technology proficiency and buttress them with some facts and figures. For example, Blue Matrix from Nigeria boldly presented on their website that they employ cutting-edge JavaScript Technology and 63 WebStudio used facts and figures to indicate that they have ‘300+ projects completed and 20,500+ hours spent on projects’, while South Africa’s Mango5 indicated that they have ‘14+ years in business, 25m+ interactions, 100+ satisfied clients and 250+ consultants’. Several B2B service brands further highlighted key aspects of their business operations and provided reasons why they should be hired, such as their working process, team, level of expertise and awards received, as further evidence of their credibility and capabilities. To illustrate, Blue Light, a Nigerian software development agency, stated that customers should choose them because they ‘provide a dedicated project manager to oversee [client’s] project from beginning to deployment’.

3.1.2. Theme 2: we did it before

This theme signals customer experiences, allowing brands to flaunt their past achievements as an indication of their ability to deliver the services they advertise. The brands showcase lists of past and present clients, testimonials and feedback from clients. For example, the Tanzanian company EvMak displayed their clients’ logos under the caption ‘we have built solutions for...’. In South Africa, Mango5 and Galactic Digital used the headings ‘industries served’ and ‘friends we have made, doing what we love’, respectively, to showcase their client lists. Homepages prominently feature ‘case studies’ ($n = 99$) and ‘client testimonials’ ($n = 64$), including the clients’ company names, along with their key personnel’s images, names and job titles. Some brands went further by providing video recordings of their customers’ testimonials ($n = 6$).

3.1.3. Theme 3: what they say about us

Many African B2B service brands exhibit their recognition, press coverage and partnerships to highlight what external stakeholders say about them. They use these elements to get a form of external validation for their brand, possibly to convince prospective clients that other people find them credible. Reviews are provided on third-party platforms, such as Google, Trustpilot and Clutch, and integrated into the brands’ websites via widgets. B2B service brands also use press releases and press coverages, including ‘as seen on’ features and lists of different foreign and domestic media companies. These companies also provide information about their accreditations and partnerships. Collaborations with global tech companies, such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook, and accreditations with various professional bodies are displayed, possibly to demonstrate that the brand is well connected to significant global players in the industry and can capitalise on such connections.

Table 3
Summary of main themes and sample quotes of participants.

Main theme	Sub themes	Sample quotes from participants
Curating a sense of professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being authentic or driving the reach for the brand. • Website development • Website management and • Content creation • Evaluating internal capabilities • Integrating physical elements into the digital dimensions 	<p>‘We know we needed a new website but we do not have the in-house capabilities to develop this, so we had to look for a web designer to help us’.</p> <p>‘People think because you develop an app, you should be able to develop your website. Yes, I tried this when we started, but now we have outsourced the design’.</p> <p>‘I designed the first website of the company and we have changed it over many years, but it is still done in house.’</p> <p>We had to get everyone dressed in the branded T-shirt of the agency and take a group photograph for the website.</p> <p>We wanted to communicate our strength as a team for people visiting our website’.</p> <p>‘We are in competition with developers in Europe and those freelancers on fiverr, everyone now thinks they can design a website, so it’s important for us to update our website with our certifications, partnership, and client testimonials’.</p> <p>‘We believe our reputation will grow and people can trust us more when we get featured in Forbes. You know Nigerians have a different reputation, but we believe having the Forbes feature on our website will help our brand’</p> <p>‘I haven’t had a client tell me seeing us on Forbes makes them trust us, there is pressure on everyone to appear trustworthy but it’s not always a guarantee’.</p> <p>‘We have junior designers and developers working on projects for a dummy company and we upload these designs in our portfolio on the website, but we often declare that it’s a sample work and not for a real client’.</p>
Building a sense of trustworthiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing clients’ expectations • Emphasising credentials and capabilities • Building trust from a global perspective. • Fictitious information on website (testimonials, portfolios, and case studies) 	<p>People don’t believe something good can come out of Africa. Coupled with the fact that you are competing with outside brands, the persisting notion about Africa and Africans often poses a challenge and a hurdle’.</p> <p>‘Even our brothers and sisters here don’t appreciate our work. They do not see value in what we have to offer, and they want to go to Europe or Asia to get their app developed’.</p> <p>‘Having him on our website showcase that we are provide outstanding service even though we are based in Nigeria, we want to be proudly</p>
Being proud of African roots.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Globalisation versus localisation approach. • Globalisation and competing with global clients • Reinforcing huge credibility within the local markets. • Continent of origin shaping buyers’ perceptions. • Recognising their African roots. • Negative perception of African B2B service brands, • Testimonials of a very popular African businesspeople 	<p>People don’t believe something good can come out of Africa. Coupled with the fact that you are competing with outside brands, the persisting notion about Africa and Africans often poses a challenge and a hurdle’.</p> <p>‘Even our brothers and sisters here don’t appreciate our work. They do not see value in what we have to offer, and they want to go to Europe or Asia to get their app developed’.</p> <p>‘Having him on our website showcase that we are provide outstanding service even though we are based in Nigeria, we want to be proudly</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Main theme	Sub themes	Sample quotes from participants
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influx of large international service providers 	<p><i>associated with the big Nigeria clients we have worked with</i>. <i>'In Kenya, I can say we are the best app developers, we have done many projects and displayed this on our portfolio on the website, but I don't think we are ready to go global now, allow us conquer Africa</i>'.</p> <p><i>'We are seeing an influx of large agencies coming in the form of network agencies and this has presented a huge concern for us on how to reinforce our relationship with our existing local brands, we need to protect our market share</i>'.</p>

3.1.4. Theme 4: we are here for you

Considering the impending competition within the industry and the lack of humanness in B2B service, many of these top-performing brands provide elements on their website to further reassure prospective clients of their availability to offer the service. They provide both virtual and physical contact means and offer various channels of communication to their customers. In the study, 47 B2B service brands provided chatbots and virtual assistants on their homepages, conveyed availability and aligned with recent and rapidly developing digital transformation trends. Prospective clients were also invited by the brands to explore their presence on various social media platforms and use the contact form on their websites. These brands also provided physical office addresses to indicate their availability to meet their customers on their premises, possibly to build trust and connections, especially as they compete with online freelancers and those in the gig economy, who might not have a physical contact office. Some even invite prospective clients to visit their offices to meet the team, explore their resources and learn more about their offerings. Some companies, such as Galactic Digital—a digital agency based in Cape Town—display professional pictures of their open-plan offices on their websites.

3.1.5. Theme 5: we are proud of our roots

The top-performing B2B brands in Africa are recognising their African roots and using them as signals on their websites. While some signals may be expected and usual for digital service providers, the African root signals offer a unique approach to the brand positioning for these service brands. Although only 18 B2B brands used these signals in our study, it illustrated the brands' desires to be associated and connected with Africa, anticipating that this might convince other pan-African clients to work with them, considering their connection to the African roots. On their websites, the brands made notable claims, such as being a 'leading provider of technology solution from a South African base', being 'proudly South African' or 'providing software solutions for businesses in Nigeria'. Alternatively, some companies used words from African languages, such as *Jambo*, which means 'hello' in Swahili. Moreover, 63 WebStudio indicated that they are a digital agency that builds website and mobile app solutions, nurtures African talents and collaborates with both African and international clients. Furthermore, Albanny Technologies claimed that they are 'Nigeria's most reliable web design company', while Madavi Agency used the slogan 'Homegrown Service. Global Thinking'.

3.2. Study 2 – interview insights into intended positioning

The interviews with 32 managers from the 140 B2B service brands

mentioned in the [Clutch \(2020\)](#) ranking led to further insights into the development of a B2B service brand's intended positioning. This section highlights three themes with regard to their approach to managing their websites: curating a sense of professionalism, building a sense of trustworthiness and being proud of African roots. These themes have been discussed in the following sections, and the representative participant quotes have been used to expand on them.

3.2.1. Curating a sense of professionalism

For many managers in our sample, curating a sense of professionalism for their brand through their website creates a state of tension that they deal with. A challenge for a B2B service brand manager is being authentic or driving the reach for the brand. Especially around website development, website management and content creation, managers recognise that they have to manage considerable tension as part of their business operations. In developing their brands' websites, managers evaluate their internal capabilities and explore if they should design the website themselves or outsource it to another agency, especially for brands providing branding, digital marketing or app development and which are not primary website design companies. There is the tension of developing the websites, to show their authenticity even though it might not be visually appealing compared to what the website would be if they outsourced the website development. Most of the participants (93.7%, $n = 30$) recognised the need for developing a clear message when positioning their B2B brands through their websites, but this can be a challenge when they explore their options. P3, the chief marketing officer of a digital marketing agency in Kenya, shared his experience, saying: *'We know we needed a new website but we do not have the in-house capabilities to develop this, so we had to look for a web designer to help us*'. This was also corroborated by P4, the COO of an app developing company, who said: *'People think because you develop an app, you should be able to develop your website. Yes, I tried this when we started, but now we have outsourced the design*'. The experience of P18, the co-founder of a web development company in Nigeria, was different, however: *'I designed the first website of the company and we have changed it over many years, but it is still done in house*'.

Beyond the designs, the content creation strategy was also another area of tension in the managers' perspectives, as they evaluated their options for curating a sense of professionalism. Deciding the website's content to convey a unique brand positioning could pose a challenge. In some situations, the managers explained how they try to integrate some physical elements into the digital dimensions but further questioned if it was necessary for their websites. P10, the head of marketing at a branding agency in Nigeria, shared how they had decided to put staff images on their website, saying: *'We had to get everyone dressed in the branded T-shirt of the agency and take a group photograph for the website. We wanted to communicate our strength as a team for people visiting our website*'. However, P21, the marketing and sales director of a marketing agency in South Africa, was sceptical about showing the graffiti on the wall and the colourful interior of their offices on their website, feeling it could be distracting and possibly not worth it for prospective consumers visiting their website.

3.2.2. Building a sense of trustworthiness

Considering the competition these top-performing service brands face, their managers recognise the considerable tension involved in building a sense of trustworthiness. Twenty participants noted the increasing number of freelancers entering the market and offering lower-cost services. The participants recognised that this alters client expectations and affects their brands' operations, as clients may prefer to engage with freelancers due to the lower overhead costs. As a result, many of the participants often had to emphasise their credentials, professionalism and expertise when positioning their brand for prospective clients. P31, the co-founder of a website development company in Tanzania, said: *'We are in competition with developers in Europe and those freelancers on fiverr, everyone now thinks they can design a website, so it's*

important for us to update our website with our certifications, partnership, and client testimonials’.

While building trust on the home front, managers also contemplate building trust from a global perspective. Although they are not certain it enhances their brand, they feel exploring different options is important. A Nigerian manager shared his experience in trying to get featured in Forbes. He said: *‘We believe our reputation will grow and people can trust us more when we get featured in Forbes. You know Nigerians have a different reputation, but we believe having the Forbes feature on our website will help our brand’*. P25, however, had a different opinion and doubted if the prospective clients care about those elements on the website, saying: *‘I haven’t had a client tell me seeing us on Forbes makes them trust us, there is pressure on everyone to appear trustworthy but it’s not always a guarantee’*.

In further exploring the tension in building a sense of trustworthiness, many managers reiterated the idea of putting fictitious information like testimonials, portfolios and case studies on their brands’ websites to make their brands appear hardworking and productive, even though they may not have many clients. Some participants replied that it was, citing the aphorism ‘fake it till you make it’. Two participants, however, stated unequivocally that they preferred to use a real client, giving the customer’s firm the name and a link to their website to verify the claim. Another manager said it is possible to show works for imaginary brands, which can be uploaded on the website to make it look like current works. He said: *‘We have junior designers and developers working on projects for a dummy company and we upload these designs in our portfolio on the website, but we often declare that it’s a sample work and not for a real client’*.

3.2.3. Being proud of African roots

The managers of these African B2B brands struggle with some tension around their globalisation versus localisation approach. This tension mainly emerges around the topic of recognising their African roots. The managers are aware of the global and digitally driven nature of their services, but they feel challenged about their approach towards globalisation and competing with global clients or reinforcing their huge credibility within the local markets. The managers recognised that they have the certifications and partnerships (with Amazon, Google and Facebook) that allow them to compete and pitch for projects on a global level. Seven of the participants stated that they are keen to showcase their African roots on their websites and that they express pride in being from an African country and displaying their African visual identity and design. This feeling of pride was most prominent among the South African participants, who often included this information on their websites. Two Nigerian participants stated that they incorporate the slogan ‘Proudly Nigerian’ in all of their presentations and customer-facing communications.

Along with their pride in their African roots, several of the participants shared the challenges they face because of operating from Africa and how their continent of origin shapes their buyers’ perceptions. Many of them noted an inherent difficulty with the concept of an ‘African B2B brand’, stating that several clients were often hesitant to work with them. According to several participants, customers frequently have a negative perception of African B2B service brands, expecting them as cheap, and negotiate ‘ridiculous’ pricing. As a result, numerous participants acknowledged the struggles they encounter and highlighted the importance of building a strong B2B firm to transcend these limiting features of the African brand. P8 said: *‘People don’t believe something good can come out of Africa. Coupled with the fact that you are competing with outside brands, the persisting notion about Africa and Africans often poses a challenge and a hurdle’*. This notion was corroborated by P30, who feels that the lack of patronage from Africa makes them question the value of their African roots, saying: *‘Even our brothers and sisters here don’t appreciate our work. They do not see value in what we have to offer, and they want to go to Europe or Asia to get their app developed’*.

The tension managers face regarding this issue is in evaluating the right approach to take – to compete with other service providers from Europe, Asia or America or to intensify their stronghold in Africa. One of

the participants cited how they had to use the testimonials of a very popular businessman in Nigeria on their website. She stated that: *‘Having him on our website showcase that we are provide outstanding service even though we are based in Nigeria, we want to be proudly associated with the big Nigeria clients we have worked with’*. Considering these are the top-performing brands in Africa, the managers feel they have an edge over the competition in Africa, but they think that success is not guaranteed outside Africa for them. This was corroborated by a Kenyan manager, who said:

‘In Kenya, I can say we are the best app developers, we have done many projects and displayed this on our portfolio on the website, but I don’t think we are ready to go global now, allow us conquer Africa’.

According to several participants, the intense competition in the African technology industry presents a tension for them on how to strategically position their brand. The participants were aware of the influx of large international service providers from Europe and North America vying for African clients. This influx often challenges them to strengthen relationships with their customers, highlight their African connection and reiterate that they also provide good service, if not better than the large international service providers. P16, the marketing director of a branding agency in Nigeria, stated:

‘We are seeing an influx of large agencies coming in the form of network agencies and this has presented a huge concern for us on how to reinforce our relationship with our existing local brands, we need to protect our market share’.

In summary, managers of B2B Service Brands in Africa recognise the need to curate a sense of professionalism and build a sense of trustworthiness but also face considerable tension in managing these polarising decisions. The managers recognise that their brands’ websites offer global platforms to showcase their services yet there is a significant amount of tension involved in managing the branding process, especially in the global and local context, the impending competition from global and local brands and the strategic direction, content creation and management strategy of their websites.

Table 2 presents a summary of the themes and additional participants’ quotes.

4. Discussion

B2B brand positioning is largely focused on the relevance of positioning strategies (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2019; Iyer et al., 2019; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011), with little consideration of the interplay between communicated or delivered brand positioning via websites with the role of managers in shaping the market narratives (Williams et al., 2019; Beverland & Cankurtaran, 2022). We showed that signalling theory is a useful lens that weaves its way through many of its communication practices and intended brand positioning. Study 1 included a CA of the 140 top-performing African B2B service brands from Clutch (2020) list. We found that the African B2B service brands use five common signals on their websites to express their positioning strategies around ‘professionalism’, ‘trust’ and ‘African roots pride’. These common signals include competence (i.e., ‘we can do it’), past customer experience (i.e., ‘we did it before’), reputation (i.e., ‘what they say about us’) and availability (i.e., ‘we are here for you’). In study 2, we turned to managerial insights by identifying the tensions that emerge in selecting these relevant brand positioning strategies and brand positioning processes for their firms. See Table 2 and Fig. 2.

We contribute to the B2B brand positioning literature by showing how the alignment between the signal on delivered positioning on brands’ websites and managers’ perception in developing brand positioning may shape different positioning strategies. Specifically, we showed that B2B brand positioning may not always be generic, as suggested by prior research (Blankson et al., 2020; Iyer et al., 2019), but may be distinctive when it is perceived as authentic and linked to

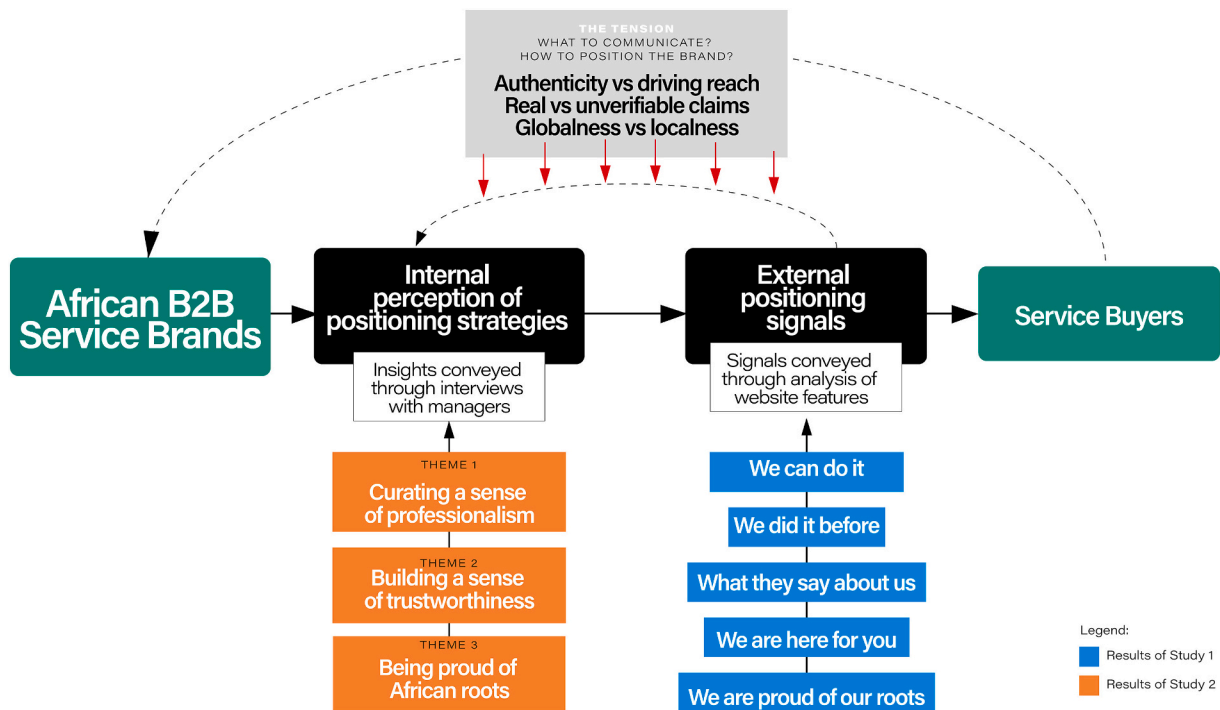


Fig. 2. Summary of findings from Study 1 and Study 2 with key themes and tensions.

organisation-level attributes. Brodie & Benson-Rea (2016) suggested that geographical regions can create a sustained strategic advantage for all network actors, yet we found that such positioning needs to deal with the challenge of ‘reterritorialising’ the brand in the placelessness of globalisation (Beverland & Cankurtaran, 2022). In our study, the participants were proud of their African roots but were also aware that many prospective buyers could associate these roots with substandard quality or cheaper prices. This is consistent with the provenance paradox, where companies from emerging countries are unable to command a fair price because consumers and buyers associate certain geographies with the best product or services. Thus, developing market firms can’t command fair prices even when the quality of their services is on par or superior to that of established players (Deshpandé, 2010).

Indeed, for many companies in our sample, their African roots appear to pose an inherent challenge, especially in the technology domain. While many B2B brands derive value from their country of origin (e.g., ‘Proudly Nigerian’), this could be overshadowed by the buyers’ commonly negative and undermining perceptions of African products and services, as Verster et al. (2019) found for architectural services in South Africa. Based on our findings, the positioning of an African B2B service brand appears to be intertwined with the existing perception of Africa as their continent of origin and their home country as their country of origin. This seems to be a promising topic to explore in other emerging contexts (e.g., South America or the Middle East), where B2B companies experience a tension between brand localness and globalness (Mohan et al., 2018). In other words, our findings suggest that a ‘continent of origin’ effect might exist alongside the well-established ‘country of origin’, which is an important cue for purchasing decisions (Balabanis & Siamagka, 2017; Koch & Gyrd-Jones, 2019a, 2019b). This finding also underscores that the so-called ‘liability of origin’ (Ramachandran & Pant, 2010) or of ‘emergingness’ (Madhok & Keyhani, 2012) might affect not only multinational firms engaged in internationalisation activities in emerging markets in developed countries but also the companies of different sizes engaged in domestic and regional marketing initiatives within their same continent of origin.

Unlike the findings of the study of Iyer et al. (2019) and the wider B2B brand positioning literature (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2019), we also

found space for considering both the external positioning signals (e.g., via websites) and the internal perception of positioning strategies as a way to deal with the sales-led culture of many B2B firms. This approach is consistent with the call for an alignment process, especially in linking the front end of positioning (e.g., websites) with the backstage (e.g., managerial role in determining a brand positioning; Hatch & Schultz, 2008, 2010). In doing so, we argue that B2B positioning, especially in the African context, needs to consider wider stakeholders’ interaction in articulating the meaning of their competitive brand positioning (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021; Iglesias, Landgraf, Ind, Markovic, & Koporcic, 2020). Aware of the fierce competition and the negative aura surrounding African products and services, the managers in our sample converged on the significance of developing clear and multiple messages through their website. In line with Gur and Greckhamer (2019), the managers in our study appeared to use a customer-centred approach to competitor identification, as they considered alternative ways for customers to obtain a service as a starting point (e.g., company versus freelancers). Aside from the challenge these African B2B brands face in competing with large international companies, Anwar and Graham (2020) acknowledge that freelancing has a disruptive impact on the African service industry and, hence, would be a useful actor to engage with. These diverse insights lead to three theoretical contributions.

4.1. Theoretical contributions

This study carries several theoretical contributions. First, given the limited research on B2B brand positioning in Africa compared to that on North America, Europe or Asia (Blankson et al., 2020; Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Odoom, Narteh, & Boateng, 2017), our research contributes to the literature on B2B brand positioning in emerging markets by exploring the relationship between communicated positioning signals in an online environment (e.g., firm websites) and managers’ perception of positioning strategies and activities. Previously, it tended to focus on a single African country or a specific service industry (Blankson, Ketron, & Coffie, 2017; Coffie & Owusu-Frimpong, 2014). Our study specifically uncovers the interplay between positioning signals on firm websites and managers’ perceptions and related tensions. Despite some differences in

specific features, the results of Study 1 indicate that many domestic B2B service providers in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania send similar signals to prospective service buyers to reduce the buyers' perceived uncertainty about the brands. Although sustainability does not appear to be a prominent positioning feature in our sample, our findings support Coffie and Owusu-Frimpong (2014) conclusion that African brands often use case studies, proficiency levels and endorsements to highlight their service professionalism, which is consistent with the findings of Panda et al. (2019) and Williams et al. (2019) in developed markets.

However, some African B2B service brands do not limit themselves to following the generic positioning strategies used in developed markets. They can, and often do, engage in different positioning strategies salient to the geographical proximity to the audience and situational influences. We show that some firms engage with their African roots in their positioning which is consistent with the findings of Beverland and Canturaran (2022). The sense of pride in their African roots goes deep into the values of their audience, even in the placelessness of globalisation. However, we question the extent to which African roots and the brands' sense of pride can continue to be relevant, especially in the technology domain. When these African B2B brands innovate and explore new products and markets, they need to inform and educate buyers in a specific way. Our data suggest that some African B2B brands may not have sufficient resources to promote and change stakeholders' stigma towards African roots.

Second, this research contributes new insights into the dynamic process underpinning the intended positioning for B2B service brands via either website (Blankson et al., 2014a; Iglesias et al., 2020). Previous research indicates that successful B2B brand positioning follows a managerial-driven perspective to ensure consistency in delivering brand promises (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2022). But the current study indicates that having stable and generic positioning strategies as a basis for identification and differentiation may no longer be sufficient to differentiate African B2B brands from competitors or attract multiple stakeholders (e.g., global clients, shareholders, freelancers, local providers) that are of utmost importance to the survival of African B2B service brands. Given the recent improvements in the technological landscape, African B2B service brands need to more adequately embrace their brand positioning as a dynamic social interactive process involving a multiplicity of stakeholders (Guenther & Guenther, 2019; Koch & Gyrð-Jones, 2019a, 2019b). Gustafson and Pomirleanu (2021) highlight that involving actors outside the brand can contribute to the brand's legitimacy in their social roles as language interpreters and storytellers. In reaching the prospective clients, websites offer a great tool to initiate conversations. The current research adds that tensions around African roots and connections with other stakeholders can be explored in greater detail via storytelling to enhance these brands' positioning.

4.2. Managerial implications

Our multi-method exploratory research results provide actionable recommendations for managers of B2B service brands operating in the African context. First, managers can use our findings to get information on website-related decisions. We identified specific groups of website features signalling competence (i.e., 'we can do it'), past customer experience (i.e., 'we did it before'), reputation (i.e., 'what they say about us') and availability (i.e., 'we are here for you'). This approach draws managers' attention to how each website feature conveys a signal about the company's actual positioning. We produced a mock-up design of a homepage (Fig. 3) to illustrate these signals to B2B service brand managers in emerging contexts who are creating or updating their website content. This mock-up is an exemplar based on the best practice insights we have gathered together from evaluating the websites of other relevant African businesses.

Second, managers could also use the interview outcomes to analyse

the activities involved in the definition of their intended positioning – whether they are developing a clear message with prospective buyers across their websites or are building their credibility through their customers, brands or third parties. Moreover, our findings underscore how the evolution of competition pushes managers to continuously redefine their offerings and brand positioning efforts. The way B2B service brands manage their service portfolios (e.g., restructuring their offerings) and considering new forms of competitors (e.g., freelancers) has important implications.

In managing the tension around curating a sense of professionalism, managers must evaluate their business operations. While it may be expected that a web development company may design their websites on their own, an app development or brand agency company should consider their in-house capabilities for designing and managing the website or possibly outsourcing it. As a company grows and many staff members get on board, its managers need to consider their continuity plans, especially allocating responsibilities for managing the websites. Although the founder may have been responsible for designing the website, there should be plans for continuity in the absence of the manager. Content creation strategies in terms of frequency of update, the accuracy of content, the type of content to be uploaded and the people responsible for all this need to be well documented.

Last, but not least, our two studies draw managers' attention to the paradoxical nature of African roots as a source of pride for African B2B service providers, an added value for some buyers and a basis of scepticism for other clients. This finding invites managers to consider both the challenges and opportunities arising from defining and communicating an African-based positioning.

5. Conclusion

This exploratory study addressed critical questions about the positioning of domestic African B2B service brands. Our research highlighted the challenges and opportunities associated with brand positioning that B2B service managers face by uncovering the paradoxical nature of their African roots. Given the growth of the service sector in African emerging economies, this empirical study sheds light on an important topic and provides a more solid basis for managerial action and future research in this area.

The research comes with some limitations, which could provide promising avenues for future research. First, the empirical data for this study does not yield a longitudinal understanding of the brand positioning process, and insights from consumers were also not explored. Therefore, it cannot truly lay claim to the branding process view and co-creation of brand image and identity. To assess the congruence of all brand positioning levels (Blankson et al., 2014b), data gathered from customers would be necessary to tap into the perceived brand positioning. Future studies can explore consumers' perspectives to gain a better understanding of the co-creation and cooperation between a brand and its various stakeholders.

Second, the study's sample came from a pre-existing list of top-performing brands compiled by an international B2B research company, Clutch. As the list is based on a self-nomination process, our sample may include only companies proactively engaged in marketing activities and seeking external recognition for their efforts. Although this sample composition is coherent with the exploratory nature of our study, the Clutch-based sample may portray a limited view of Africa's B2B service sector. Moreover, the Clutch ranking featured only four countries and professional B2B services, which are highly knowledge-intensive and more complex than other types of services (Fitzsimmons et al., 1998; Guenther & Guenther, 2019). Such constraints may affect our ability to generalise our findings. Hence, future replications with a broader set of B2B companies from a wider range of service sectors and more countries (e.g., obtained from scraping the web) would strengthen this study's conclusions.

Finally, our research employed a cross-sectional approach, capturing

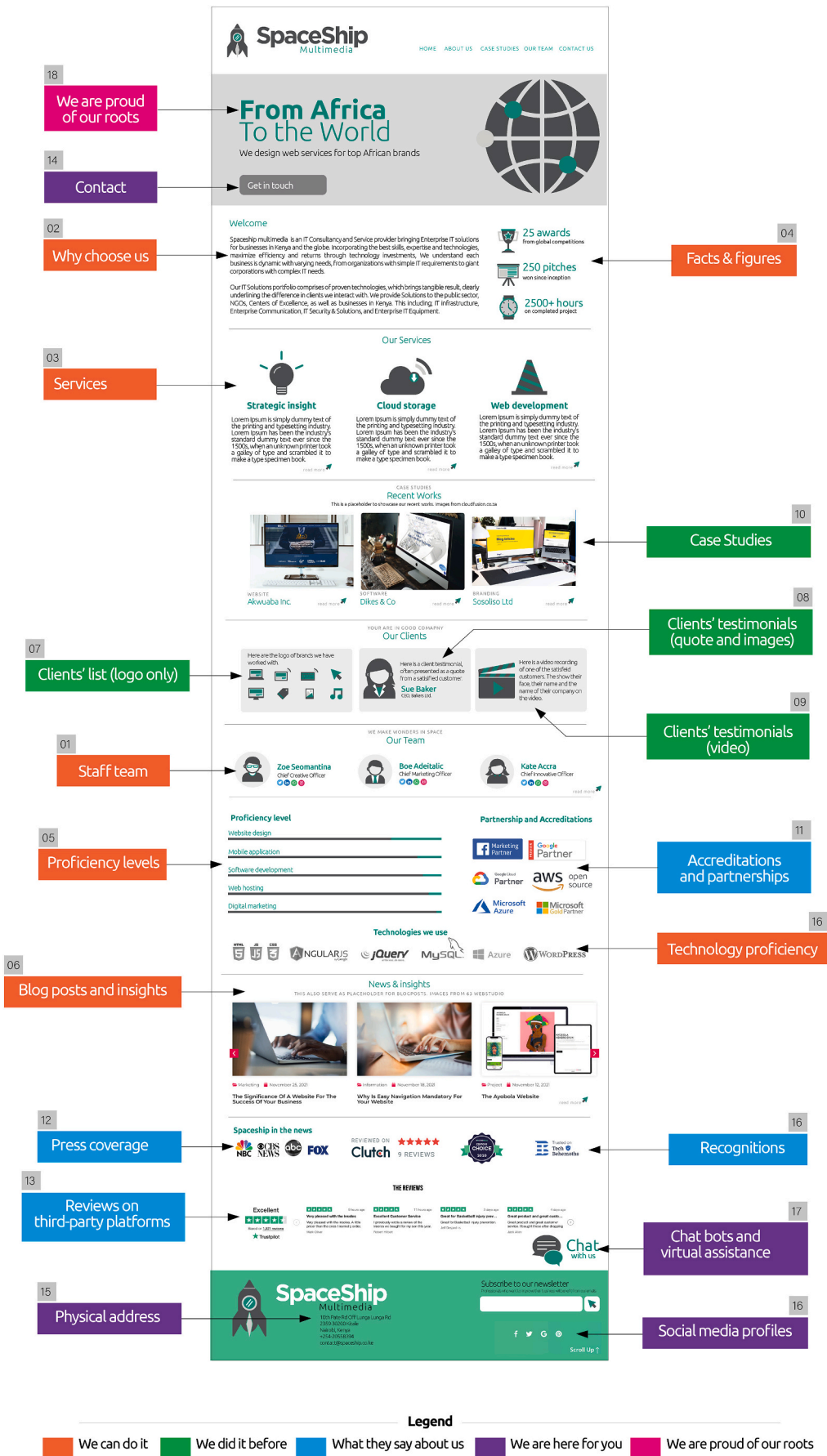


Fig. 3. Exemplar website mock-up based on the best practice insights gathered together from evaluating the websites of other relevant African businesses.

website information at a specific point in time and retrospectively interrogating managers on their positioning-related activities. Positioning is a dynamic process that involves changes and repositioning over time. This is mirrored in the dynamic nature of websites, which often alter over time (Williams et al., 2019). A longitudinal research approach that tracks and compares changes in managers' accounts of their positioning efforts and website content over time could be a fruitful research path to better understanding the dynamic nature of positioning.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.12.003>.

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