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Empowering Nigerian Entrepreneur: Enhancing intellectual property awareness for business Growth

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Abstract

Intellectual Property (IP) is a crucial yet often overlooked asset in Nigeria entrepreneurs. Despite the country's Growing entrepreneurial ecosystem, many business owners lack awareness of how to protect and leverage their IP rights for sustainable growth. This article explores the Importance of IP awareness among Nigerian entrepreneurs, highlighting common challenges such as inadequate education, weak enforcement mechanisms and the high cost of registration. It examines the role of government agencies, legal practitioners and business associations in promoting IP education and protection. Finally, The article offers recommendations on how entrepreneurs can integrate IP strategies into their business models to enhance competitiveness, attract investment, and safeguard innovation in Nigeria's Evolving Market.

Keywords: Intellectual Property Right; Business Growth; Innovation, IP Awareness; Enforcement Mechanism; Legal Framework; Economic Development; Market Competitiveness

1 Introduction

Intellectual property, which embodies the creations of the mind, their protection and commercialization, remains a pivotal source of sustenance for businesses around the world. In fiercely competitive markets, businesses, especially startups owned by entrepreneurs can rely on their intellectual assets to create revenue, drive innovation and gain competitive advantage (WIPO, 2025). These benefits will however remain inaccessible and unexploited, if businesses fail to leverage on their intangible assets/intellectual property, because of gap in IP awareness.

Entrepreneurs in Nigeria are represented by a vast number of innovators who take up the initiative to start and run businesses, with the goal of making profits. Most of these businesses form the micro, small and medium enterprises in the country (SMEs). A survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2018, reveals that SMEs contribute 50% to the Nigerian economy, accounting for over 80% of employments in Nigeria, and over 96% of the entire businesses in the country (NBS, 2018). This is similar to the World Intellectual Property Organization's findings in 2021, with SMEs contributing 49% to the country's GDP and consisting 99% of the entire businesses in the country (WIPO, 2021).

These statistics reveal the indispensability of SMEs to the viability of the Nigerian Economy. Hence, the lack of IP awareness and its associated impacts on entrepreneurs and their businesses, portend great risks that can affect economic stability in Nigeria. To forestall these negative outcomes, this article sets out on a mission of necessity, recommending viable means through which entrepreneurs can be educated on IP, as the much-needed foundation for them to leverage on their IP rights to drive business growth and innovation.

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1.1 The State of IP Awareness in the Nigerian Business Landscape

Awareness connotes both the knowledge and understanding of a particular subject matter (Koko et al, 2023). Within the purview of Intellectual Property, it embodies the knowledge and understanding of IP, their types and the protections afforded to them by law. Generally, the state of IP awareness in Nigeria is best characterized as low (WIPO, 2021). The Business Landscape of the country, is fraught with the low understanding and knowledge of IP, as well as the rights it accrues and how such rights may be protected.

SMEs largely lack the right perception of the accruable benefits from IP protection and the importance of IP in business operations. This gap in knowledge is also shown in the general misconception amongst entrepreneurs that protecting IP assets yields little to no benefits, and as such, tantamount to a waste of resources (Soyombo and Agara, 2021). The reason for this is not farfetched, as most entrepreneurs and SMEs operate in the informal economy as unregistered business entities with little to no interest in embarking on any form of registrations. This inevitably leads to low interest in IP registrations and the lack of proper understanding of the importance of IP to business sustenance.

The gap in knowledge is also widened by the Government's lack of will to sustain public awareness about IP rights and how they may be protected (Olubanwo and Oguntuaese , 2019). The effects of this gap can be described as fatal. It prevents entrepreneurs and businesses from wielding IP as a viable tool to gain competitive advantage. It also stalls them from registering their IP rights, leaving their creations unprotected by law, without the potential returns from them, and highly vulnerable to exploitations (Techpoint, 2021).

The lack of IP awareness is not a problem peculiar to SMEs and entrepreneurs in Nigeria. It affects the country as a whole, resultantly impeding the acceptance, protection and commercialization of Intellectual property in the country (Vanguard Nigeria, 2021). Many citizens as represented by various groups, like traders, students, teachers, civil/public workers, among others, are not aware of the types of intellectual property and the processes involved in ensuring their protection. In all, this gap in awareness makes ineffective, whatever giant strides may have been taken by the government, with regards to extant regulatory frameworks for IP protection in the country.

1.2 Challenges Affecting IP Awareness in the Nigerian Business Landscape

The lack of IP awareness in the Nigerian business landscape, as reflected by the limited knowledge and understanding of business owners including entrepreneurs, regarding what IP is, their types, how they can be commercialized and protected, poses huge risks to the sustenance of businesses, especially SMEs, the prospects of innovation, and resultantly the Nigerian economy at large. Several factors contribute to this gap. It falls within the gamut of this subhead to extrapolate and discuss them accordingly.

1.2.1 Lack of Education

one of the most probable factors responsible for the gap in IP awareness in the Nigerian business context is lack of education. Simply put, the reason, business owners and entrepreneurs are not aware of what IP is and its connecting influence on the sustenance and development of their businesses is the lack of targeted education/enlightenment about IP, its importance and how it can be protected under extant laws (Afolayan, 2020).

Onsite awareness and orientation programs about IP in targeted market areas, like the popular Onitsha market among others, is not encouraged by relevant agencies in the country (WIPO, 2021). While business owners/entrepreneurs in urban areas may possibly access some information about IP on the internet, this may not guarantee understanding. Without lucid articulation and highly organized guides, entrepreneurs interfacing with the subject of IP on their own, can find it too novel and incomprehensible, especially on matters concerning IP registrations and commercialization (Sagacious IP, 2025).

The impact of this factor is further widened, where business owners or entrepreneurs lack access to information sources or internet connectivity, especially businesses in rural areas, or those owned by persons/entrepreneurs with limited formal education.

1.2.2 Inadequate Enforcement of Extant IP Laws

with the widespread woes of counterfeiting and piracy, among other IP infringements militating against the creative sector in Nigeria, it is clear that the country grapples with enforcing intellectual property protection laws (Afolayan, 2020). This as a factor is valid enough to cause disinterest and discouragement among entrepreneurs and other business owners in the country, from learning about IP, its benefits and the procedures embedded to ground IP registrations.

Inadequate enforcement gives zero incentive for entrepreneurs to learn about IP or embark on IP registrations and protection, as such will rather amount to a waste of resources. The existing IPR enforcement frameworks are lucidly too weak, making it very difficult for business owners to rightly adjudge if it actually pays to learn about IP or embark on IP registrations. With regards to enforcement, the Nigerian reality is in conflict with the benefits accruable under IP. Conversely, in locales where enforcement is lucidly strong, unawareness/limited knowledge about IP doesn't surface as a problem (International Trade Administration, 2024).

1.2.3 Practices Influenced by Culture

certain business practices in Nigeria, as influenced by culture, may shape wrong perceptions that affect IP awareness and commercialization. For instance, it is a widespread practice among tailors in Nigeria to freely replicate styles or exactly mimic designs seen in fashion magazines. In fact, certain locally produced fashion magazines, are made for this purpose, customers pick styles directly from them, to be directly remade by the tailors.

These practices contradict the protections afforded under intellectual property rights, and their wide acceptance hinders the development of IP awareness among business owners in Nigeria. This is because IP protections will be difficult to understand and enforced in contexts where IP rights are neither valued nor respected. Invariably, such practices largely affect innovations.

1.2.4 Lack of Political Will

notwithstanding the impact of SMEs and entrepreneurs on economic development, side by side with the influence of IP on business sustenance, no governmental agency in Nigeria is charged with the responsibility of promoting IP awareness. This exegesis deems it rather unpalatable that concerted efforts are not being made by the Government to bridge the IP knowledge gap among businesses in the country.

This lack of will further widens the knowledge gap, leaving the Nigerian business entrepreneurs vulnerable to exploitation and the nation exposed to a dearth of innovation and stunted economic growth.

1.2.5 High IP Protection Costs

The high cost of securing IP protection can largely discourage entrepreneurs from taking interest in IP. The reason for this is not far-fetched, entrepreneurs usually manage SMEs with limited capital, lacking the capacity to afford the high costs of registering and monitoring the protection of their IP rights. Even if they will ordinarily be open to protecting their intangible properties, they can be honestly hindered by the high costs of protection. A report published by WIPO, reveals that a patent application in Nigeria, with the inclusion of legal fees, will cost around 1,500 USD (WIPO, 2021). This amounts to millions of naira.

The problem of high costs also extends to monitoring and enforcing IP rights, especially in the face of infringements. IP infringements in Nigeria is a common menace, owing to the weak IP enforcement frameworks. In the quest to combat it and enforce IP rights, the cost for monitoring and enforcing is usually on the high side. In light of this, entrepreneurs may lose interest in IP.

1.3 Recommendations to Bridge the Gap

Bridging the extant IP knowledge gap among entrepreneurs is central to the sustenance of entrepreneurship, creativity and economic development in Nigeria. Hence, the following can be relied upon, as necessary recommendations to close the knowledge gap.

1.3.1 Driving IP Consciousness through Relevant Bodies

relevant agencies, such as the National Orientation Agency, must be vested with the mandate to raise IP consciousness throughout the country. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns, and educative seminars targeted at entrepreneurs, SMEs, market traders, among other stakeholders in the Nigerian business landscape. Through these mediums, information regarding the importance of IP to business sustenance, IP registrations and protection will be easily communicated to entrepreneurs, bridging the knowledge gap plaguing the Nigerian business landscape.

1.3.2 Improving Access to IP Information

The Government can also improve and increase IP information sources, infusing IP subjects into school curricula and ensuring accessibility to IP information in understandable languages in rural areas. To achieve this, the Government can partner with relevant bodies, such as the WIPO Nigerian Office, a body that recently organized IP awareness programs

for young entrepreneurs couched in the acronym (SALAYE) which means the word “explain” in the language indigenous to the Yoruba people of Nigeria (WIPO, 2024). Fresh graduates from higher institutions, while observing their one-year compulsory service program to the Nation, also benefitted from the awareness programs.

1.3.3 Streamlining IP Processes and Reducing Cost for Enforcements

this work has identified the high cost for IP enforcements as one of the challenges affecting IP awareness among entrepreneurs in the country. To ameliorate this, the Government can help cushion the financial brunt, especially for SMEs. Special legal assistive programs, reduced cost of registration for SMEs are viable means through which this can be achieved. In the same vein, processes involved in IP registrations must be streamlined to ensure ease and efficiency, technology can be of great help in this regard.

1.3.4 Strengthening IP Enforcement Mechanisms

owing to the prevalence of IP infringements, there is an urgent need in Nigeria to strengthen the enforcement of business owners or entrepreneurs’ intellectual properties. This is essential to restore public trust and spark interest among entrepreneurs in intellectual property. Strict enforcement can be largely achieved through necessary collaborations among relevant institutions.

1.3.5 Encouraging IP Culture in Business Practices

IP culture can be largely stimulated and infused into business practices. One of the ways to achieve this is making Intellectual Property, by way of policy, a possible collateral to grant loans to entrepreneurs and SMEs. This in place, will automatically increase IP awareness in the Nigerian business landscape.

2 Conclusion

This work has identified the dearth of IP Awareness among entrepreneurs as a huge concern affecting innovation, business sustainability and economic growth/stability. To close the gap, the work has equally presented viable recommendations. By prioritizing these recommendations, the country will in a little while sustain an environment where innovation thrives, creativity is protected and where entrepreneurs largely contribute to economic growth.

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