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ONLINE MARKETING AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF TELECOMMUNICATION SERVICES IN PORTHARCOURT, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study specifically examined the effects of social media marketing, online advertising and email marketing on customer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research approach. A total of 246 customers from telecommunications companies in Port Harcourt were polled using a structured questionnaire to gather primary data. Descriptive statistics were applied for data analysis and interpretation, while the hypotheses developed for the study were tested using multiple linear regression. The study revealed that employing marketing strategies via social media, mobile devices, Internet ads, and email had a substantial effect on the growth of client base for telecommunication services in Port Harcourt. Therefore, it was recommendations, among others, that telecommunication companies should expand the use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to advertise available service packages to customers and to offer customer services like conflict handling, enquiry services; mobile-based functions like airtime recharge, data subscription, and account management should be made more customer-friendly and affordable to encourage customers to use telecommunication mobile software to access services conveniently.

Keywords: Online marketing, Social media marketing, Mobile marketing, Online advertising and Internet marketing

Introduction

In recent times, the Nigerian telecommunications industry has become one of the most viable sectors of the Nigerian economy dominated by private companies. As of August 2023, the Nigerian telecommunications industry had a total subscriber base of 220,715,961 million active subscribers buying and using telecommunication services on a daily basis (Dambatta, 2023). With the advent of improved communication technology, especially with the introduction of mobile phone devices, there is a growing desire among consumers and organizations for effective linkage. This connectivity enhances interactions among consumers, companies, among others. These advantages have resulted in business

opportunities for many marketing and telecommunication companies. To harness the huge potential of the Nigerian telecommunications industry, companies are engaging in competitive operations to gain market share and dominance using various marketing strategies, including online marketing (Lawal, Binuyo & Oyebisi, 2021). The promotion of goods and services using the medium of the World Wide Web is known as "online marketing" (Emeh, Ahaiwe & Okoro, 2019). The term refers to the practice of promoting a product or service via the use of the Internet and other forms of electronic media. Online marketing companies adopt various internet-based platforms for marketing purposes; however, the focus of this study centers on the application of social media marketing, email marketing and online advertising by telecommunications companies and there influence on customers patronage.

The application of online marketing strategies in the Nigerian telecommunications industry is driven by factors such as intense competition; companies' desire to expand their market share; technological dynamism; and the unforeseen disruptions such as Coronavirus pandemic, which led to the digitization of scores of businesses in Nigeria (Ifediba & Ogochukwu, 2021). Nigerian telecommunications companies have adopted many strategies such as online advertising, social media marketing, and mobile marketing to enhance their marketing effectiveness in response to fierce industry rivalry. Telecommunications firms are increasingly utilizing social media, mobile communication devices, and online advertising platforms to market their products and services to clients. The platforms encompass Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, along with websites, blogs, affiliate partners, and search engines. However, there is no empirical data to substantiate the assertion that internet marketing has enhanced consumer loyalty to telecommunication services in Port Harcourt. Consequently, it is challenging to determine if these techniques have genuinely resulted in an increase in client patronage in Port Harcourt, Rivers State in terms of its ability to positively influence customer demand for telecommunications services. This study was conducted to fill this gap.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Dynamic theory of innovation

Taylor, together with Burrows and Logan, proposed the dynamic theory of innovation in 2002. According to the dynamic theory of innovation, organisations must continuously innovate to sustain a competitive advantage in the rapidly changing business environment of today. The reason for this is that organisations function within a dynamic and ever-changing environment, as stated by the theory (Taylor, Burrows & Logan, 2002). The concept posits that organisations may adapt and innovate in four distinct ways: by using technology, implementing new techniques and procedures, aligning corporate direction, and investing in individuals. According to the notion, a corporation may enhance its ability to adjust to changing environmental conditions and exploit environmental chances for a competitive advantage by innovating in four areas: technology, techniques and processes, corporate orientation, and personnel. The fundamental principle of the dynamic theory of innovation posits that commercial entities, such as telecommunications businesses, function within a constantly shifting and developing environment, making it very pertinent to this field.

According to the concept, in order to sustain a competitive advantage (as assessed by heightened customer loyalty) in a dynamic market, they need to adapt and innovate technologically using marketing strategies such as social media marketing, mobile marketing, online advertisement, and email marketing to enhance patronage of telecommunication service.

Conceptual framework

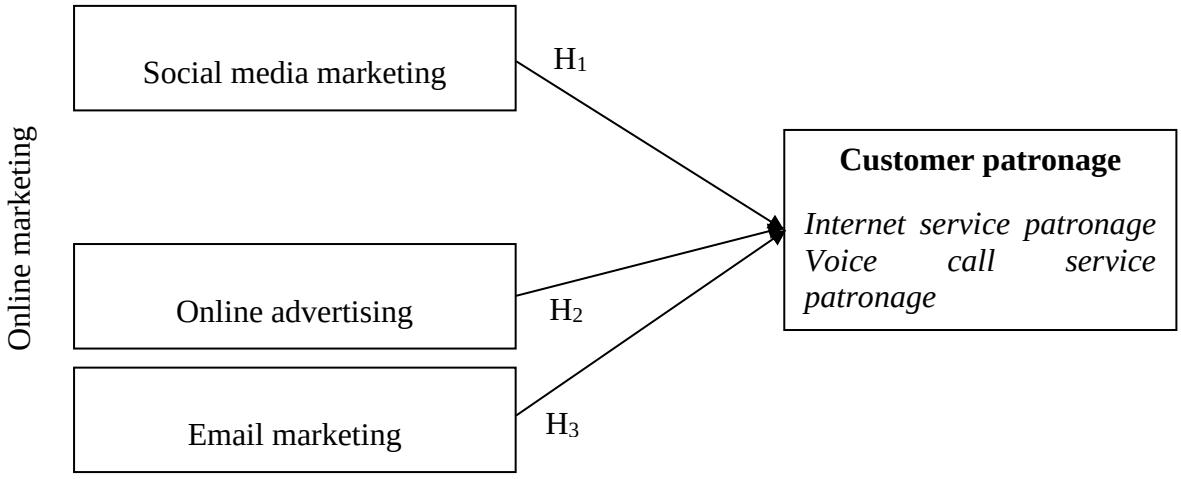

FIG. 1: Conceptual model of the study

Source: Researcher's model (2023)

Online marketing

Shaltoni, West, Alnawas, and Shatnawi (2018) define "online marketing" as the act of advertising and selling goods and services using the Internet. Online marketing is the practice of promoting a company's products or services using different digital channels. Online advertisements, electronic mail, wireless media, and any other technological means that enable companies to connect with clients are all components of marketing in this context. According to Adede (2017), The term "online marketing" describes the practice of advertising and promoting products and services using the World Wide Web. Because there are more marketing channels and methods accessible on the Internet, it encompasses a broader spectrum of marketing components than conventional commercial marketing. According to Singh (2019), in Online marketing, customers and prospects are targeted with the hopes of achieving profitable exchanges using electronic devices and the Internet. Using the Internet to reach out to consumers, meet their wants, form relationships, and ultimately increase the company's bottom line is what online marketing is all about.

Speed, adaptability, interactivity, cost-effectiveness, worldwide reach, customer privacy, message distributing ease, and campaign measurable success are all benefits of internet marketing (Ngugi, 2013). Electronic marketing encompasses a wide range of activities, including but not limited to those conducted over the Internet, e-mail, and wireless media

(Ndulue, 2024). Among its many other management-related tasks, it incorporates the administration of digital client data and ECRM (Yousaf, Sahar, Majid & Rafiq, 2018).

Customer patronage

According to Olayinka and Odunlami (2018), customer patronage refers to the consistent favouring of a business's products and services by consumers, as opposed to those offered by competing enterprises. Customers are more inclined to be attracted to and remain loyal to a firm that employs efficient marketing strategies and provides exceptional products and services. Customer patronage refers to the consistent influx of purchasers within a certain market for a company's products or services. Customer loyalty is an invaluable asset for any organisation as it guarantees a consistent influx of cash through sales and earnings. These monetary resources are used to support the production and operation of company activities, payment of workers and wages, settlement of corporate debt and shareholder dividends, and proper replenishment and storage of inventory goods.

Social media marketing and customer patronage

Social media is a collection of websites and online platforms that enable users to create communities based on similar interests, viewpoints, and activities (Strauss & Frost, 2018). This category encompasses computer-mediated technologies that enable users to engage in interactive communication through online networks and communities. The purpose is to facilitate the creation and sharing of material pertaining to personal hobbies, occupations, and other areas of interest (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Parker (2016) states that businesses employ social media marketing to engage in online communication with their intended audience using platforms that enable interactive conversation, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It provides an online platform where people may routinely interact, exchange ideas, and send messages to one other. According to Jantsch (2012), social media marketing is essential for businesses since it enables improved customer communication and the fostering of social interactions on e-commerce platforms. Integrating loyalty programmes with social media may facilitate the building of relationships and enable the distribution of targeted, timely, and exclusive promotions and discounts to potential consumers, therefore aiding in the promotion of products and services.

The potential for service providers in social media marketing is boundless as a result of the rapid expansion and extensive use of mobile phone technology and social media platforms (Tatar & Eren-Erdoğmuş, 2016). The reason is that service providers may regularly interact with both existing and potential clients through social media, which is a convenient, cost-effective, efficient, and adaptable platform. This contributes to enhancing brand awareness, stimulating curiosity, and eventually, boosting sales.

Online advertising and customer patronage

Public relations is the strategic use of online channels to distribute information about a company's products and services to certain audiences, aiming to generate positive responses from those audiences. Abu-Faisal and Buazizi (2020) define online advertising as the process of targeting particular client segments over the internet to provide them with relevant information about items and services that may pique their interest. The objective is to exert influence on their purchase choices. Thanks to the proliferation of internet marketing platforms and technologies, it includes a wider range of marketing strategies compared to

traditional types of advertising. Rodges and Thorson (2016) state that firms gather and retain data on consumers' purchase patterns, including their shopping attitudes, preferred products and services, online platforms and social media sites, expenditure patterns, and lifestyle choices. This data is utilised to construct online advertising campaigns that are tailored to a user's individual interests and preferences. Nwokah and Ngirika (2017) assert that firms worldwide utilise the internet as an important marketing tool. The internet is rapidly supplanting conventional media as the preferred venue for advertising campaigns and other marketing endeavours due to its worldwide reach, dependability, ease of access, and cost-effectiveness. Redjeki and Affandi (2021) assert that online advertising is a widely employed marketing strategy by firms globally for enhancing sales and marketing performance. This is due to the fact that it increases the number of clients that utilise and support the organization's products and services.

Email marketing and customer patronage

Email marketing aims to disseminate information, reinforce consumer awareness, and eventually stimulate sales by showcasing and endorsing products and services to targeted individuals via electronic mail (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). Email is utilised as a medium to strategically plan and execute marketing operations, including advertising. Companies get email addresses from clients through many methods, including registration processes and online purchases from marketers. Subsequently, these addresses are utilised to generate a customised mailing list based on each customer's own interests and habits. Periodically, messages containing information about available products and services are sent to this list. Email marketing, as described by Zhang, Kumar, and Cosguner (2017), is the act of disseminating a promotional message by email to a specific group of persons. Email marketing encompasses any kind of communication between a company and its consumers, both current and potential. The primary objective is to enhance brand awareness, foster customer loyalty, and establish trust by employing email as a means to disseminate promotional content, solicit commercial opportunities, or seek sales and contributions. Marketing emails may be sent using either an established customer database or an acquired lead list.

Nuseira and Aljumahb (2020) argue that organisations frequently establish an email list to effectively communicate with existing and prospective clients. Email marketing is an innovative marketing strategy used by service providers to communicate closely and frequently with both potential and actual customers with the objective of informing, convincing and persuading them to patronize their services (El-Gohary & El-Gohary, 2016). It is cost-effective, has a global reach and the capacity to deliver picture, short audio and video clips, documents and other promotional contents designed to attract customers to take patronage actions in favour of a company’s services.

Empirical review

Adekunle and Nneoyi (2019) conducted a study on the impact of online marketing on consumer loyalty towards SMEs in Nigeria. This study aimed to investigate the influence of different types of online marketing on the customer behaviour of certain SMEs in Aba, Abia State. The study revealed that SMEs in Aba, Abia State, had a significant increase in

customer patronage following the implementation of marketing methods such as social media marketing, mobile marketing, internet advertising, and email marketing.

Ugochukwu and Stephen (2020) conducted a study on the banking industry in Nigeria to determine the influence of internet marketing on client buying patterns. The objective of the research was to investigate the impact of commercial banks' online marketing techniques in Nigeria, specifically focusing on email, mobile, online advertisements, and social media, on customers' awareness, interest, and loyalty towards these institutions. Email marketing, mobile marketing, online advertising, and social media marketing were shown to have a strong beneficial influence on customers' awareness, preference, and patronage of commercial banks in Lagos, Nigeria.

The study conducted by Charlene, Wayne, and Craig (2018) focused on analysing the influence of internet marketing on consumer patronage behaviour in the hotel industry of Singapore. The findings indicate that social media marketing, online advertising, mobile marketing, and email marketing have a substantial impact on hotel patronage in Singapore.

Adeyemi (2018) conducted a study on the impact of internet marketing on customer purchasing behaviour towards cellphones in Oyo State, Nigeria. The study revealed that in Oyo State, Nigeria, the utilisation of smartphones by customers was notably enhanced through the implementation of search engine marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing.
Odo, Chinwe, and Okafor (2018) conducted a study that specifically examined the influence of internet advertising (including search engine marketing, mobile marketing, email marketing, and social media marketing) on customer patronage of United Bank for Africa Plc in Enugu. The study focused on commercial banks in the state. The study's findings indicate that clients of United Bank for Africa Plc in Enugu were much more inclined to make a purchase after participating in search engine marketing, mobile marketing, email marketing, and social media marketing.
Akinnitire and Oluwatobi (2021) conducted a research on the topic of "Online marketing and customer patronage of hospitality firms amidst COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria". The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between customer loyalty to Nigerian hotel firms during the COVID-19 pandemic and online marketing tactics, including mobile marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing. Finding from the study shows that despite the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, there was a significant positive relationship between internet marketing (including mobile marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, and content marketing) and customer support for hospitality firms.

Research Methodology

The researcher in this study used a cross-sectional survey approach to collect primary data from a diverse group of participants all at once. Clients of Port Harcourt, Nigeria's telecommunications providers were the focus of this research. These companies included MTN, Airtel, 9Mobile and Globacom. However, the actual numerical size of their active customers in Port Harcourt was unknown to the researcher due to the absence of accurate

public records on the population of network service users in Port Harcourt. Hence, the research adopted the Topman procedure for sample size determination as shown

$$n = \frac{Z^2Pq}{e^2}$$

Where

n: Sample size required
Z: Tabular statistical unit (1.96)
P: Probability of positive response (0.8)
q: Probability of negative response (0.2)
e: Margin of error (5 percent)

Thirty active subscribers were interviewed in a pilot survey by the researcher. In order to determine which telecom networks these individuals used, we had them name the brands out loud. The following telecommunications networks were patronised by 24 out of 30 respondents, giving a patronage rate of 80%. MTN, Airtel, Globacom, and 9Mobile Plc. Six respondents (20%) said that they did not currently own a mobile phone and so did not patronise any network. It is evident from the findings of the pilot survey that there was a 0.2 percent chance of negative replies and a 0.8 percent chance of positive responses. So, the Topman formula was used by simply substituting the variables.

$$n = \frac{1.96^2\,(0.8 \times 0.2)}{0.05^2}$$

$$= \frac{3.8416\,(0.16)}{0.0025}$$

$$= \frac{0.6147}{0.0025} = 245.88$$

n = 246 subscribers approximately

The researcher adopted a convenience-sampling technique for the study. In applying the technique, the researcher targeted busy areas with high population, where telecommunication subscribers from all walks of life could be found. These areas included Rivers State University Campus, Rivers State Secretariat Complex. Assisted by a 3-member team of research assistants; the researchers visited these selected locations and randomly administered copies of the questionnaire to respondents. The aforementioned technique has several benefits: it was straightforward to execute, required less time to collect data, and involved only participants who were both reachable and enthusiastic about participating in the survey.

To gather the primary data required for the investigation, a meticulously designed questionnaire was constructed. Part A of the survey requested fundamental personal details such as age, gender, marital status, and educational attainment. Part B comprised inquiries on the study's variables, including customer loyalty, social media marketing, mobile marketing, internet advertising, and email marketing. The instrument employed a 5-point Likert Scale as its measurement technique. Through the utilisation of the content validity technique, we

successfully confirmed the authenticity of the study questionnaire. Prior to commencing comprehensive field administration. A draft copy of the instrument was subjected to scrutiny and necessary adjustments to ensure that it was properly worded, structured and designed to effectively measure the study variables**.** The research instrument was confirmed for reliability using the internal consistency approach with the aid of Cronbach alpha which yielded a coefficient of 0.7. Therefore, the instrument was considered reliable for data collection. The research analysed and interpreted primary data acquired from respondents using descriptive statistics. The suggested hypotheses were statistically evaluated using multiple linear regressions with the help of SPSS 23. The regression model states thus:

$Y = a + \beta 1X1 + \beta 2X2 + \beta 3X3 + e.$

The independent variables' coefficients are denoted by β1, β2, β3, whereas the dependent variable is customers' patronage and is the intercept. The internet marketing independent variable is denoted by X. With an error margin of 5%,

Where;

X1: Social media marketing

X3: Online Marketing

X4: email Marketing

Result and Discussion

Test of hypotheses

Ho1: Social media marketing has no significant effect on customer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt.

Ho2: Online advertising has no significant effect on customer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt.

Ho3: Email marketing has no significant effect on customer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt.

Decision criteria: Accept the alternative hypothesis if ($P < .05$) and reject the null hypothesis, if otherwise.

Table 1: Model summary of the effect of online marketing on customer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Model	R	R Square		Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.496[a]	.246		.230	.73043

a. Predictors: (Constant), Social media marketing, online advertising and email marketing

Table 2: ANOVA[a] of the effect of online marketing on customer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt.

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	41.673	5	8.335	15.622	.000[b]
	Residual	128.048	240	.534		
	Total	169.720	245			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer patronage
b. Predictors: (Constant), Social media marketing, online advertising and email marketing

Table 3: Coefficients[a] of the effect of online marketing on customer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.636	.602		4.381	.000
Social media marketing	.317	.175	.352	4.236	.000
Online advertising	.139	.262	.384	1.624	.003
Email marketing	.403	.160	.301	6.668	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer patronage

Interpretation of result

The influence of online marketing on the use of telecommunications services by clients in Port Harcourt, Nigeria is demonstrated by the application of multiple linear regression in Tables 1, 2, and 3. The model summary indicates a significant connection between the research variables, namely the independent variable (online marketing) and the dependent variable (client patronage), with a correlation coefficient of 49.6 percent (as shown in the R column). The R2 score of 0.246 indicates that online marketing accounts for 24.6% of the variability in consumer expenditure. A one-unit variation in internet marketing can have a significant impact of up to 24.6% on customer patronage of telecommunication businesses in Port Harcourt, assuming all other factors remain constant. The F-test result in Table 2 shows that online marketing has a substantial effect on consumer patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt, Nigeria ($F = 15.622$, $P < 0.05$). This indicates that the independent variable has a statistically significant and comprehensive predictive power over the

dependent variable. The ability of each internet marketing technique to elucidate or predict customer loyalty towards telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt is seen in Table 3, specifically in the coefficients table. Table 3 demonstrates that email marketing, social media marketing, and online advertising successfully determined and clarified the patronage of telecommunications companies in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The rationale for this is that the p-values associated with various marketing strategies, such as social media marketing, mobile marketing, internet advertising, and email marketing, were all quite low. Obtaining t-test findings that are both positive and less than the margin of error of 0.05. There is a demonstrable and favourable association between different internet marketing strategies and consumer expenditure. Furthermore, based on the standardised beta coefficient column in Table 3, online advertising emerges as the most significant factor in the model, with a beta value of 0.384, equivalent to 38.4 percent. On the other hand, email marketing has a beta coefficient of 0.301, which accounts for 30.1% of the total and is considered the least significant variable in the model. Therefore, based on the rejection of the null hypotheses and acceptance of the alternative hypotheses, we may conclude that marketing through social media, online advertisements, and email had a favourable effect on the number of people using telecoms services in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

4.4 Discussion of findings

We started by testing the premise that social media ads increase the number of people using telecommunications services in Port Harcourt. Research by Adekunle and Nneoyi (2019) and Ugochukwu and Stephen (2020) provide credence to the conclusion, showing that social media marketing significantly increases brand recognition, consumer loyalty, and preference.

The findings of Adekunle and Nneoyi (2019) and Charlene, Wayne, and Craig (2018), who showed that internet advertising significantly affected consumer patronage in Singapore, were supported by the second hypothesis test. In addition, their study found that internet ads had a substantial impact on Port Harcourt residents' use of telecom services.

The third hypothesis was also examined, and the findings demonstrated that email marketing indeed enhances the utilisation of Port Harcourt's telecommunications services by individuals. The research conducted by Charlene, Wayne, and Craig in 2018 provided more evidence by demonstrating a strong impact of email marketing on the spending behaviour of consumers in Singapore. Further evidence supporting this conclusion may be found in Adeyemi's (2018) study conducted in Oyo State, Nigeria. The research revealed a substantial rise in customer patronage as a result of email marketing.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine how client patronage of telecommunication services in Port Harcourt, Nigeria was affected by internet marketing. It zeroed in on the telecommunications industry in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, and its customers to see how much of an effect various forms of digital marketing had on their spending habits.

This study's results provide credence to the idea that telecommunications companies in Nigeria could greatly benefit from implementing an online marketing strategy in order to increase customer loyalty to their packages.

Recommendations

1. Telecommunication companies should expand the use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to advertise available service packages to customers and to offer customer services like conflict handling, enquiry services, among others. This will enable them to inform and persuade customers to patronize service packages and enhance their competitive position in the industry.
2. In view of the cost-efficiency, effectiveness, reach and scope of online advertising, telecommunication companies should integrate more internet-based channels like affiliate websites, content creators, and influencer marketers to advertise their brands to customers in order to enhance customer patronage and sales. Online advertising is less expensive, has a large reach and is adaptable to the audience; hence its effective utilization will improve customer patronage of telecommunication services on a massive scale.
3. Given the growing population of active email users in Nigeria, telecommunication companies should integrate email marketing into their marketing mix strategy in order to target and persuade more customers to patronize their brands. Electronic mail has a global reach, it is easily accessible and cost-efficient; hence it can serve as an effective marketing channel for encourage customer patronage of telecommunication services.

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