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Brand Association and Customer Satisfaction of Fast Food Firms in Rivers State

Mackintosh, Ashton Chukwumela[1] and Didia, James U. D.[2]
Department of Marketing, Rivers State University
[1]godwinkattey@gmail.com
[2]didia_jud@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This study examined the connection between brand association and customer satisfaction. The population of the comprised customers of fastfood firms in Rivers State. The explanatory research design was adopted in the study; while a structured questionnaire designed in Likert scale served as the instrument of primary data collection. Data collected from three hundred and sixty-nine (369) respondents was used in the final analysis of the study. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation served as the test statistic. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 aided the data analysis. The study found that brand association significantly relates to customer satisfaction of fastfood firms in Rivers State. Particularly, the study found that brand association has a positive and statistically significant correlation with repeat purchase and customer retention of fastfood firms in Rivers State. The study concludes that customer satisfaction of fastfood firms in Rivers State is influenced by brand association and that brand association predicts customer satisfaction in terms of repeat purchase and customer retention. The study thus recommends that fastfood firms in Rivers State that seek increased customer satisfaction should invest in brand communications that plant symbols, cues and other brand attributes that consumers can associate to their brands.*

Keywords*: Brand association, customer satisfaction, customer retention, repeat purchase*

INTRODUCTION

Fastfood firms in Rivers State, much like others anywhere in the world, compete intensely for consumers' attention. This competition is exacerbated by the similarity of their core offerings. Indeed, the difference among fastfood firms is mostly in their branding. Branding thus constitutes one avenue through which fastfood firms improve their marketing performance and achieve gainful competitive advantage. The urge to improve marketing performance primarily, dictates marketing decisions and programmes of firms (Ateke & Iruka, 2015), because marketing performance is essential to the wellbeing of businesses and their survival in the business-scape. Marketing performance thus enjoy unending attention from business practitioners and theorists; and concerted efforts have been made to determine how individual marketing programmes affects various aspects of marketing performance (Ateke & Iruka, 2015; Adejoke & Adekemi, 2012 among others). This is especially so, as marketers increasingly realize that business sustainability no longer rely only on providing offerings to a market and amassing tangible assets; but also on brands as significant intangible assets (Liu, Hu, & Grimm, 2010). Thus, Ateke, Onwujiariri, and Nnennanya (2015) aver that branding is consequential to business performance because it modifies customers' attitude towards a firm and its products. Petek and Ruzzier contend that strong brands strengthen a firms' brand equity by increasing consumers' willingness to evaluate additional communication from the firm positively, and recall the communication or its accompanying cognitive or affective reactions easily (Ateke & Nwulu, 2017).

Mustapha, Fakokunde, and Awolusi (2014) hints that consumers may not be satisfied with the offerings of a brand, yet continue to patronize the brand because they: (1) are unaware of the existence of other brands; (2) do not possess adequate knowledge of the expertise of other brands; or (3) do not feel the strength of the presence of other brands. Such brands that are unknown to consumers cannot be recognized or recalled easily; their existence and availability is totally lost on consumers. This buttresses the position of Keller (2003) that building a strong brand requires right knowledge structures in the minds of consumers, so that they respond positively to a firm's marketing programmes. Through effective branding, brand awareness and positive brand image is built (Keller, 2003); these then, form brand knowledge structures that trigger differentiated responses that constitute brand equity (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005). Brand equity represents the value of a brand, as determined by consumers' perception and experience with the brand. Jalilvand, Samiei, and Mahdavinia (2011) conceive brand equity as the incremental utility or added value to a product from its brand name which contributes to a firm's sustained profitability.

Brand equity may be positive or negative. A brand enjoys positive equity if consumers think highly of it; and suffers negative equity if consumers feel disappointed by its value delivery and abstain from recommending it to others. Brand equity is a multidimensional construct that has enjoyed vigorous research attention. The model of brand equity developed by Aaker (1991) which has brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty as dimensions, is however the most popular and most researched. In this study, we focus on brand association, the second dimension in Aaker's model. A good number of prior studies have dwelt on how the brand equity dimensions of brand awareness, perceived quality and brand loyalty impact various aspects of marketing performance. However, the brand association element of brand equity has not enjoyed as much research coverage. This study thus seeks to complement extant literature by investigating the connection between brand association and customer satisfaction. Fig. 1.1 below conceptualises the study. Brand association is the predictor variable while customer satisfaction, which is measured as repeat purchase and customer retention is the criterion variable.

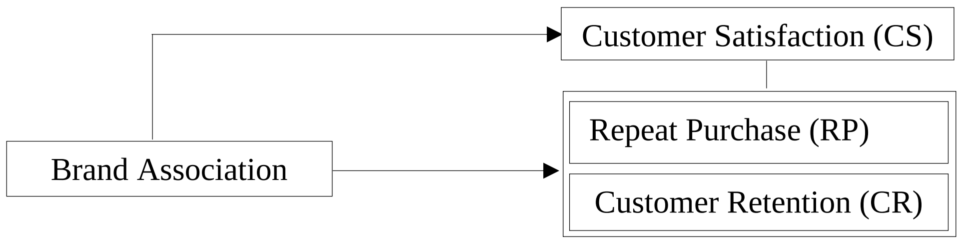

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the relationship between brand association and customer satisfaction
Sources: Researchers' conceptualization from literature review (2020).

The Concept of Brand Association

Brand association is anything in the memory of consumers that is linked to a brand (Aaker, 1991). Any deep-seated cue in customer's mind about a brand; or attributes of a brand that come into consumers mind when the brand is talked about may be regarded as brand association. It relates to implicit and explicit meanings consumers associate with a specific brand name. Aaker's (1991) brand equity model has brand association immediately after brand awareness, because consumers are thought to develop association only when they are aware of the brand. Feelings, thoughts, experiences, perceptions, images and beliefs that are linked in memory to a particular brand are brand associations (Aaker, 1991); and they form the foundation of purchase decisions (Aaker, 1991). Brand association is also related to positive or negative information that consumers have in mind about a brand. A set of associations, usually organized in some meaningful way, forms a brand image. Consequently, brand image is costumer's perception about a particular brand as a result of their association with the brand.

Brand association is categorized into product associations and organizational associations (Jalilvand *et al*., 2011). Product associations include functional attribute associations and non-functional associations. Functional attributes are the tangible features of a product consumers link to a brand (Fayrene & Lee, 2011). If a brand fails on its promises, it will enjoy low brand equity (Jalilvand, 2011). Non-functional attributes include symbolic attributes which are the intangible features that meet consumer's needs for social approval, personal expression or self-esteem. Organizational associations include corporate ability associations, which relates to a firm's expertise in producing and delivering value and corporate social responsibility associations, which include organization's activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations (Fayrene & Lee, 2011).

Brand association acts as an information-collecting tool to execute brand differentiation and brand extension (Aaker, 1991); and is key to developing brand relationship, because it produces brand loyalty and enhance brand-word of mouth (Mohammad, & Anisa, 2017). Keller (2003) argues that any information that comes across in brand association is connected to the brand name in consumer recall, and reflects the brand's image. Brand association is the platform of brand relationship development which guides brand managers on how to use the sources of brand equity to develop brand relationship with customers (Mohammad, & Anisa, 2017). Unique brand associations are essential sources of brand equity that drive customer behaviour. Mayer (2003) suggests that brand association is not only an individual brand theory, but also has measurable feature to test the effectiveness of brand equity. This is because customers' feelings and cognitive capacity produce their brand association toward the performance of a brand in the market (Mohammad, & Anisa, 2017).

Although a brand may be related to a category of product, there are associations in some categories that may be related to the brand in terms of either the overall attitudes or beliefs. Jalilvand *et al*. (2001) contends that brand associations are visible in all product aspects or features that are independent on it. Brand associations aid in the processing, retrieval and differentiation of a brand. It creates positive feelings and feedback that provide customers with a reason to purchase (Aaker, 1991). Social responsibility associations are those associations that are perceived by customers as societal obligations (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2011). Corporate social responsibility is important especially in dealing with corporate brands. This is because the public would like to know how, where and what brands give back to society. Thus firms have realized that corporate social responsibility can improve or reduce their value. Aaker (1991) suggest that brand associations are formed through (1) ccustomers' contact with the organization and its employees; (2) advertisements; (3) word of mouth publicity; (4) price at which the brand is sold; (5) celebrity/big entity association; (6) product quality; (7) competitors' products and schemes; (8) product class to which the brand belongs; and (9) point of purchase displays; etc.

Customer Satisfaction

Today's customers are quite sophisticated in their needs and desires; they are versatile in information gathering; more demanding, and expects more benefits from the services they buy (Achumba, 2006). In order to satisfy customers and ensure survival, firms must adapt to changing environmental conditions, including changes in consumers' requirements, by instituting market-oriented policies. Satisfaction is individuals' feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance in relation to expectations (James, 2003). Customer satisfaction thus measures how products supplied by an organization meet or surpass customers' expectation. Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, and Hogg (2006) defined customer satisfaction in terms of the overall feeling an individual has about a product after having purchased it.

In competitive markets, customer satisfaction is a key differentiator and a key element of business strategy (Farris, Neil, Phillip, & David, 2010). Customer satisfaction is enhanced by placing the needs of customers at the centre of a business and by integrating customers into the business processes, people, strategy and technology of the organization. Customer centrism has thus evolved as the most viable approach to contriving marketing, programmes, policies and strategies. The significance of customer satisfaction is also captured in the statement that "happy customers constitute free advertising". Drucker (1954) opine that the principal objective of an organization is to create satisfied customers; while Anderson, Fornell, and Rust (1994) observe that increased customer satisfaction lead to higher future profitability, as satisfied customers willingly pay premiums, provide referrals, increase patronage (Morgan & Rego, 2005) and are likely to be retained and loyal. Dissatisfaction on the other hand, causes brand switching, damages a firm's image, reduces its ability to make profits and erodes its competitive advantage (Kihoro & Kepha, 2014). The customer satisfaction construct has been operationalized variously. Marco (2008) advanced five measures of customer satisfaction namely: Repeat purchase, customer retention, customer loyalty, resistance to switching and profitability. In this study however, we adopt repeat purchase and customer retention as indicators of customer satisfaction.

Repeat purchase

Repeat purchase involves routinely or habitually re-patronizing the same product or brand. Nwiepe and Ateke (2016) construe repeat purchase as "customers' propensity to return to a particular firm for more business after a trial". Wirtz and Lwin (2009) define it as the willingness of individuals to re-patronize a firm. Repeat purchase is manifested when customer place series of orders for a given product or to a particular firm. Repeat purchase often happens when customers derive emotional, social, or functional satisfaction from a brand and its products and feels a connection to the brand's offerings. Wirtz and Lwin (2009) suggest that repeat purchase is a measure of a customer loyalty, and a principal goal companies strive to attain. Caudill and Murphy as cited in Nwiepe and Ateke (2016) contends that repeat purchase is a reflection of trust, commitment and respect customers have for a brand and its products. Repeat purchase is reinforced by favourable purchase experience: Customers return to a band for further business only if, and as long as they continue to get favourable experience with the brand (Nwiepe & Ateke, 2016). Repeat purchase customers seek quality, value, good customer service, convenience and are often price insensitive. They thus contribute to company profitability.

Customer retention

Customer retention represents customer's liking, identification, commitment, trust and willingness to stick with a brand (Stauss, Chojnacki, Decker, Hoffman, 2001). It implies a long-term commitment on the part of customers to maintain an on-going relationship with a brand (Cook, 2002). Customer retention is crucial because the cost of acquiring new customers can be five times greater than that of keeping current ones (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990); also, retained customers pay less attention to the antics of competing brands, they are less price-sensitive and spread favourable word-of-mouth. Customer retention therefore constitutes an easier and more reliable source of superior performance (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Customer retention has been focused upon as a primary goal of marketing. The precise meaning and measurement of customer retention can vary between industries and firms, there is however, a general consensus that focusing on customer retention can yield several economic benefits (Dawkins & Reichheld, 1990; Reichheld, 1990); as the volumes of purchases grow, and customers churn and replacement costs with customer retention. Customer retention could be strengthened by erecting high switching barriers or by delivering higher customer satisfaction. Kotler and Armstrong (2008) posit that losing a single customer does not mean losing a single purchase; rather it entails losing the entire volume of purchases that the lost customer would have made over their lifetime of patronizing the seller.

Brand Association and Customer Satisfaction

Brand association is useful in differentiating a firm and its products and standing them out in the marketplace (Keller, 2003). Brand images like consumer's trust on the brand and service quality are very favourable associations linked to a brand. Thus, scholars have carried out studies to ascertain the impact of brand association on customer satisfaction. Ashraf, Sulehri and Abbas (2018) investigated the impact of brand association on consumer buying behaviour of footwear industry in Punjab, Pakistan; and found that the components of brand association have positive impact on consumer buying behaviour. Also, Yoo *et al.*, (2000) found in their research that brand associations have a positive influence on consumer choices, preferences and purchase intention, willingness to pay a price for the brand, accept brand extensions and positive word-of-mouth. Also, the study of Harcourt & Ikegwuru (2018) on brand equity and market performance of food and beverage firms in Rivers State revealed that brand association which a dimension of brand equity has positive impact on marketing performance. The study also revealed that brand association can connect to positive attributes which customers can hold firm, and engage in successful business with the firm, thereby enhancing the company's performance. Based on the foregoing, the current study hypothesizes that:

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship between brand association and repeat purchase.

Ho_2: There is no significant relationship between brand association and customer retention.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigated brand association and customer satisfaction of fastfood firms in Rivers State. The explanatory research design was adopted to explain the relationship between brand loyalty and customer satisfaction. The population of the study comprised customers of fast food firms in Rivers State. A structured questionnaire, designed in Likert scale was the instrument used to collect primary data from three hundred and sixty-nine (369) respondents. To determine the reliability of the research instrument, a pilot study was conducted and the data were subjected to Cronbach's Alpha reliability test with a threshold of 0.70 set by Nunally (1978). Table 1 shows the Cronbach's Alpha reliability results of all the variables in the study. To test the significance of the relationships between the variables, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test the two alternate hypotheses stated in the study with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of Items on All Variables

S/N	Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients
1	Brand Association	4	0.919
2	Repeat purchase	4	0.922
3	Customer retention	4	0.915

Source: Simulation from SPSS output of data analysis on brand association and customer satisfaction (2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2: Relationship between Brand Association and Metrics of Customer Satisfaction

		Brand Association	Repeat Purchase	Customer Retention
Brand association	Pearson Correlation	1	.732**	.851**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	369	369	369
Repeat Purchase	Pearson Correlation	.732**	1	.741**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	369	369	369
Customer Retention	Pearson Correlation	.851**	.741**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	369	369	369

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Simulation from SPSS output of data analysis on brand association and customer satisfaction (2019).

Table 2 shows a P(r) of 0.732** which indicates a strong, positive relationship between brand association and repeat purchase with a p-value of 0.000 which is less than the critical value of 0.01. This indicates that a statistically significant connection exists between brand association and repeat purchase in the studied population. Table 2 also demonstrates a Pearson correlation coefficient (r) of 0.851 on the link between brand association and customer retention. This very high correlation coefficient indicates a very strong relationship between the variables. The positive sign of the correlation coefficient suggests that the relationship between brand association and customer retention is positive; while the p-value of 0.000 which is less than the critical value of 0.01 indicate that the relationship between the variables is statistically significant. Therefore, we reject the two null hypotheses earlier stated.

Our findings support that of Ashraf *et al*. (2018) that brand association have positive impact on consumer buying behaviour and that of Yoo *et al*. (2000) that brand associations positively influence consumers' choices, preferences and purchase intention, willingness to pay a price for the brand, accept brand extensions and positive word-of-mouth. Also, the current findings corroborate the observation of Harcourt and Ikegwuru (2018) that brand association connects to positive attributes customers hold strongly, and successfully engage in business with the firm, thereby enhance the company's marketing performance. Furthermore, our findings align with that of Sweeney and Swait (2008) which observe that brand credibility has a significantly, positive relationship with customer satisfaction and commitment; and that this relationship enhances word-of-mouth and reduces switching behaviours among customers. Furthermore, our findings are coheres with that of Grappi (2016) which report that brand love positively impacts brand performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the relationship between brand association and customer satisfaction of fast food firms in Rivers State. The empirical analysis reveals that brand association relates to customer satisfaction; as brand association posted positive and statistically significant correlations with both repeat purchase and customer retention which were used as measures of customer satisfaction. The study concludes that customer satisfaction of fastfood firms in Rivers State is influenced by brand association or that brand association predicts customer satisfaction in terms of repeat purchase and customer retention. The study thus recommends that fastfood firms in Rivers State that seek to deliver customer satisfaction should invest in brand communication that plants symbols, cues and other brand attributes that can consumers can associate to their brands.

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