

EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION ON CUSTOMER PREFERENCE FOR SMES IN UYO METROPOLIS, AKWA IBOM STAT

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Abstract

The study focused on product differentiation on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study specifically looked at the following Determine the effect of product design on customer's appeal in Uyo, Akwa ibom state. Investigate the effect of packaging on customer's appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. The survey design was adopted in the study where the structure questionnaire was used to elicit information from the target respondents who are owners of SMEs in Akwa Ibom State. The population of the study was 2970 entrepreneurs, in which Taro Yamene's formula was used to derive the sample size of 352. Two hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The study made the following findings; that, product design has positive and significant effect on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Packaging has positive and significant effect on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made; Product design has a significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This implies that the firm should continue to improve in their product quality, design in the market place since it has shown the positive effect on the customer appeal. By doing so, more customers would be attracted to any form of appeal that the company will want to embark on from time to time. Packaging has significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This implies that the managers of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria are encouraged to extend the tentacles of packaging and embark on competitive pricing through product and service modifications.

Keywords: Product differentiation, product design, packaging, and customers' appeal.

INTRODUCTION

Product differentiation is a competitive business strategy whereby firms attempt to gain a competitive advantage by increasing the perceived value of their product and services relative to the perceived value of other firms and services (Akpan and Okoro, 2020). Product differentiation is prevalent throughout the SMEs in the world. Within most production zones, a wide range of differentiated products are available in the market place. This is evident when

one works into a store or warehouse. One encounters different product for instance table water which comes in different varieties like round bottle, with different design and shape, customized bottle with different

packages all being sold by different companies. A table water sale unit for instance a table water agent has different table water types which comes from different companies.

According to Ibok and Etuk (2018), a homogenous product is one that cannot be distinguished from competing products like table water, bakery products, among others from different suppliers. The opposite of a homogenous product is a differentiated product.

Olise and Ojiaku (2020) state that while there are numerous ways to differentiate brands, identifying meaningful product driven differentiators can be especially fruitful in gaining and sustaining a competitive advantage. Firms in the same industry, for example a table water industry, produce products that differ in performance and/or quality leading to production of low cost/low quality table water and bakery product or higher cost/higher quality table water and bakery products. Often the same firm sell a range of different products that defer in performance or quality and even service support from the table water and bakery product. Thus, the product design and packaging are very essential to competitive firm who try to distinguish their product from that of competitors, especially, the product which have the same shape and the same product design like table water and bakery. The product performance will appeal better to the customers. Therefore, for table water industry and bakery to continue to maintain the perceived value of their product and services relative to the perceived value of other firm's product and services, there is need for continuous checking of product design and packaging from time to time (Ibok and Agu, 2019).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Business firms worldwide have attempted to imitate product of their competitors or make slight changes to their product, to convince or confound their customers. This may bear fruit in a short run but the long-term effect may not realize the intended objective. Product differentiation in business is not given by nature, but a firm's choice for the purpose of enhancing its business performance. Most firms had their customer appeal dwindle or fail to grow because of challenges in product differentiation and inadequate strategies to enhance product differentiation. Table water and bakery firms are closing in on Uyo metropolis with the market leadership being reduced by high percentage (Etuk and Akpan, 2019).

Thus, for a product to make appealing statement to customer, product design and packaging must be arranged in a way that must attract the customers. Product design and packaging speak volume about the product. Often time we have seen how product design and packaging were done in a manner that we find it difficult to attract the customers. It is against this backdrop that study seeks to investigate the effect of product differentiation on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo metropolis, Akwa Ibom State Nigeria to fill the gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to investigate the effect of product differentiation on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria. The specific objectives sought to;

- i. Determine the effect of product design on customer's appeal in Uyo, Akwa Ibom state.
- ii. Investigate the effect of packaging on customer's appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were asked to guide the study;

- i. What is the effect of product design on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State
- ii. How does packaging effect the customers appeal of SMEs inn Uyo, Akwa Ibom State

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The following null hypothesis were formulated to guide the study

Ho₁: Product design has no significant effect on customer's appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.

Ho₂: Packaging has no significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo Akwa Ibom State.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW Product Differentiation

In marketing, product differentiation is the process of distinguishing a product or service from others to make it more attractive to a particular target market. This involves differentiating it from competitors' products as well as from a firm's other products. However, product differentiation is the process of identifying and communicating the unique qualities of a brand compared to its competitors (Yusuf, Zuikamaini & Anisa, 2019).

Thus, product differentiation is the key aspect distinguishing of company's product or services from its competitors. Successful product differentiation leads brand loyalty and increase in sales (Okon, Horstall and Ekpo, 2022). Product differentiation goes hand in hand with developing a strong value proposition so that a product or service is attractive to target market or audience (Yusuf, Zulkarnaini & Anisa, 2019). Product differentiation is a process used by businesses to distinguish a product or service from other similar ones available in the market (Lau Ronald, 2019). This tactic aims to help businesses develop a competitive advantage and define compelling, unique selling propositions (USPS) that set their product apart from competitors. In addition, organizations with multiple products in their portfolio may use differentiation to separate their various products from one another and prevent cannibalism (Joseph, 2021).

PRODUCT DESIGN

Product design is the process of creating new product for sale businesses to its customers. It involves the generation and development of ideas through a systematic process that leads to the creation of innovative product (Attih, 2019). Thus, it is a major aspect of new product development. In addition, the product design

process is a set of strategic and tactical activities from idea generation to commercialization used to create a product design (Roger, Steven and William, 2019). In a systematic approach, product designers conceptualize and evaluate ideas turning them into tangible inventions and products (Ekot, 2020). Product designers role is to combine art, science and technology to create new products that people can use. Thus, their evolving role has been facilitated by digital tools that now allow designers to do things that include communicate, visualize, analyze, modeling and actually produce tangible ideas in a way that would have taken greater human resources in the past (Prinka, Pankaj and Sarita, 2019).

PACKAGING

Packaging is the science, art and technology of enclosing or protecting product for distribution, storage, sale and use. Packaging also refers to the process of designing, evaluating and producing packages (Attih, 2019). Thus, packaging can be described as a co-ordinated system of preparing goods for transport, warehousing, logistics, sale and end use. Packaging contains, protects, preserves, transport, informs and sells (Ibojo, 2019). In many countries it is fully integrated into government businesses, institutional, industrial and for personal use.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was anchored by Resource-Based Theory. The Resource-Based Theory is a managerial framework used to determine the strategic resources with the potential to deliver competitive advantage to a firm during a succession period. These human resources can be exploited by the firm in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Barney's (11) work on "Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage" is widely cited as a pivotal work in the emergence of the resource-based view. However, some scholars such as (Osborne, 2011; Nikagova, 2016) argued that there was evidence for a fragmentary resource-based theory from the 1930s. Resource based theory proposes that firms are heterogeneous, because they possess heterogeneous resources, meaning firms can have different strategies because they have different resource mixes to help in their planning processes.

The RBT focuses managerial attention on the firm's internal resources in an effort to identify those assets, capabilities and competences with the potential to deliver superior competitive advantages. RBT focuses attention on an organisation's internal resources as a means of organising processes and obtaining a competitive advantage. Barney stated that for resources to hold potential as sources of sustainable competitive advantage, they should be valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and not substitutable (now generally known as variable rate imitable and non-substitutable (VRIN) criteria). The resource-based theory suggests that organisations must develop unique, firm-specific core competencies that will allow them to outperform competitors by doing things differently.

The theory went further to analyse the component of entrepreneurial marketing strategies to include product strategy (product differentiation), place strategy (transportation), pricing strategy (competitive pricing) and promotional strategy (online advertising) which are the key components of this research work. Hence, the study adopts the resource-based theory.

Although the literature presents many different ideas around the concept of the resource advantage perspective. At its heart, the common theme is that the firm's resources are financial, legal, human, organisational, informational and relational; resources are heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile and that management's key task is to understand and organise resources for sustainable competitive advantage by looking inward. Therefore, SMEs in South-south are expected to see their human resources as their most vital tools to be mentored and trained.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Kusum, Bari, Jacques & David, (2023). The effect of product design and product quality on consumer satisfaction in micro, small and medium enterprises (msmes) in Denpasar, Bali. The purpose of this study is to analyze the effect of product design and product quality on consumer satisfaction at MSMEs in Denpasar, Bali. This study uses a descriptive type of research with a quantitative approach. The sampling technique was random sampling using a questionnaire.

Respondents in this study amounted to 100 respondents who are MSME consumers in Denpasar, Bali. The analytical method used is SPSS 21 with multiple linear regression analysis. The results of this study indicate that all hypotheses have a positive and significant effect.

Sana, (2024) Does product design stimulate customer satisfaction? mediating role of affect. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics. Product design is a dynamic factor that triggers customers' experiential value which eventually escalates their satisfaction. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of product design dimensions on customer satisfaction with the mediating role of affect. A survey on 225 smartphone users has been conducted to test the conceptualization empirically. Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling were performed using SPSS Amos-22.0 to confirm the hypotheses. The results indicate that affect fully mediates the relationship between symbolic dimension and satisfaction. Whereas, partial mediation of affect is observed in the relation between functional dimension and satisfaction. The framework of this research contributes towards the practice by facilitating managers in evaluating the impact of experiential value which product design dimensions create to influence customer satisfaction. This study is first of its kind to analyze how design dimensions create experiential value to influence customer satisfaction. It contributes to the literature by giving empirical evidence that affective responses like pleasure and arousal play an important role in assessing product design dimensions that influence customer satisfaction.

Shaheen, (2022). The Effects of Product Quality on Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty: Evidence from Malaysian Engineering Industry. Organizations today are operating in an environment in which little is certain, the tempo is quicker and the dynamics are more complex. The customer is central to the organization and assessing customer satisfaction is a vital element in any strategy for business performance improvement. This makes customer satisfaction a driver for survival, competitiveness and growth. The key determinant for a sustainable business is customer loyalty as loyal customers not only increase the value of the business, but they also enable businesses to maintain costs lower than those associated with attracting new customers. By creating and preserving customer loyalty, organizations develop a long term, mutually beneficial relationship with the customers. The purpose of the research is to study the factors that can assist a company to build a sustainable competitive advantage through the effective enhancement of customer satisfaction and ultimately customer loyalty. The proposed conceptual model consists of the different dimensions of product quality as the independent variables with customer. Satisfaction. Garvin's eight dimensions of Product Quality in Performance, Features, Reliability, Conformance, Durability, Serviceability, Aesthetics and Perceived quality are dimensions of Product Quality that affect Customer Satisfaction which impacts Loyalty. The results provide insights to understand the dimensions of Product Quality that affect customer satisfaction and higher satisfaction leads to higher customer loyalty in the engineering industry in Malaysia.

Sana & Muhammad, (2023). Determine role of packaging on consumer's buying behavior. The objective of this study is to determine role of packaging on consumer's buying behavior. The purpose of this research is to examine the essential factors, which are driving then success of a brand. This research also identified the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. This is the primary research and data has been collected through questionnaire and for analysis purpose SPSS software has been used. In this study samples of 300 respondents have been collected and tested the reliability of the model. According to the finding of the research study, it has been observed that the packaging is the most important factor. It is further concluded that the packaging elements like its color, Packaging material, Design of Wrapper and innovation are more important factors when consumers making any buying decision. Finally, it has also been concluded that the Packaging is one of the most important and powerful factors, which influences consumer's purchase decision Ahmed, Gammudi & Ananda, (2020). The effect of Packaging, Satisfaction and Image on Customer Loyalty of the El Rayhan Company. This study is aimed at investigating the effect of packaging, satisfaction, and image on customer loyalty to The El Rayhan Company, Libya. The questionnaires are employed to collect the data. The result reveals that packaging has a positive effect on customer loyalty. Moreover, satisfaction and image affect directly on customer loyalty. However, the highest effect in this study is the packaging effect on customer loyalty.

Attih, (2022). The effect of service quality, innovation towards competitive advantages and sustainable economic growth: Marketing mix strategy as mediating variable. The purpose of this paper is to determine the effect of service quality and innovation on competitive advantage and sustainable local economy, with marketing mix strategy as the mediating variable (Study in small and medium enterprise (MSME) in Java and Sumatera). The study population of this paper is the MSME in Sumatera and Java Islands in Indonesia, as the highest population in Indonesia in 2010–2016 (portion of MSME in Indonesia: Java 58.29 percent and Sumatera 22.22 percent, or total 80.51 percent), and total 16 province in Indonesia: Aceh, Sumatera Utara, Riau, Sumatera Barat, Jambi, Sumatera Selatan, Bengkulu, Lampung, Kep Riau, Kep Bangka Belitung (Sumatera Island), and Banten, DKI

Jakarta, Jawa Barat, Jawa Tengah, Jawa Timur, DI Yogyakarta (Java Island). The analysis used in this study is a quantitative approach, namely, structural equation modeling based on variance, also known as the Warp PLS method. The findings of this study are as follows: first, service quality has an influence on marketing mix strategies, meaning the application of service quality according to customer needs will create satisfaction. In other words, the better the quality of service provided, the higher the customer satisfaction will be. Second, the quality of service has a direct influence on creating a sustainable local economy, meaning that improving service quality to understand customer needs can enhance sustainable economic growth and competitive advantage through marketing mix strategies. This means that improving service quality in accordance with customer needs will improve the marketing mix strategy leading to a sustainable local economy. Third, the marketing mix strategy has a positive influence on the sustainable local economy, meaning that the higher the marketing mix strategy, the better the strategy for sustainable economic growth and competitive advantage will be. The effect of marketing mix strategy as mediation (using the Sobel test) on the influence of service quality and product innovation on sustainable local economy and competitive advantage is shown in this study. No previous research studies this relationship at the research location: MSME in Indonesia, especially in Java and Sumatra Islands. Hence, this is one of few studies comprehensively evaluating the effect of service quality and innovation, toward competitive advantages and local sustainable economic: marketing mix strategy as mediating variable (study in MSME in Java and Sumatera).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted survey design. The questionnaire was used to collect information from target respondents who are employees of Table Water Company in Uyo, Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria. The population of the study was 2970 employees of Table Water Company in Uyo, Akwa-Ibom State in which Taro Yamene's formula was used to derive the sample size of 352. The data for the study were primarily collected through the use of

questionnaire. This is because the study makes use of primary data that were collected to elicit the opinion of respondents.

The study adopted Cronbach Alphas method to test the reliability of the research Instrument during the research process. The content reliability test was measured using the test re-test reliability method at 0.5 percent level. The study hypotheses were analyzed using simple regression. However, the SPSS was adopted 2.22 version. Hypothesis 1-2 were achieved using simple regression model.

4. Data Presentation and Analyses Testing of Hypotheses

H₀₁: Product design has no significant effect on customer's appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.

Table 4.1: Model Summary of simple Linear Regression Analysis of Product design has no significant effect on customer's appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.

Variable	Parameters	Coefficient	Std error	Tcal – value
Constant	β_0	1.308	0.198	6.616***
Product design (X ₁)	β_1	0.665	0.046	5.247***
R-Square (R ²)		0.368		
Adjusted R – Square (R ⁻²)		0.366		
F – Statistics		205.198		
F – Probability		0.000		
Durbin-Watson stat		1.997		

Note: If calculated value > tabular value, reject null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. Otherwise accept the null hypothesis. (** = 5%) denotes significance of coefficient; t-tab value = 1.968, def. = 353, Dependent Variable: customers' appeal, Predictors: (Constant), product design

Source: Field Survey, 2023 (Version 22 of SPSS Computation)

The coefficient of Product design (X₁) was statistically significant and positively related to customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria at 1% probability level. This implies that, increase in Product design, holding other variables constant, leads to increase in customers' appeal to SMEs by 0.665 units. Statistically, the calculated value of Product design is 5.247 and tabulated value of 1.968, since the calculated value is greater than the tabular value in absolute terms, the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of alternative hypothesis thus, Product design has positive and significant effect on customers' appeal to SMEs. This means that when products in terms of quality, size, and shape are highly distinctive, it attracts customers to make purchase.

The result further showed that R^2 (coefficient of multiple determination) was high with a value of 0.368%, implying that 36.8% changes in the dependent variable was explained by changes in the independent variable, while 63.2% was unexplained by stochastic terms in the model. Thus, the independent variable (product design) can only explain 36.2 percent of changes in customer appeal, leaving 63.2% unexplained. The R^2 adjusted was 36.6% indicating a goodness of fit of the regression model adopted in this study which is statistically significant at 5% probability level. The Durbin-Watson statistical value of 1.997 was observed which falls within 1.8 to 2.5, implying that there is no evidence of autocorrelation in the data analysis. More so, the f-statistical (calculated) value of 205.198 was observed in the analysis which is greater than 1.968 t-table value; and f-probability value of 0.000 was observed from the analysis which is less than 0.05 (95% of freedom), indicating that estimated regression model adopted in this study is statistically significant at 5% level. Thus, there is 36.8percent relationship between product design and customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. With this, the researcher rejected the null hypotheses and accept alternative hypothesis which states that product design has significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

HO₂: Packaging has no significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo Akwa Ibom State.

Table 4.2: Model Summary of simple Linear Regression Analysis of Packaging has no significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo Akwa Ibom State.

Variable	Parameters	Coefficient	Std error	Tcal – value
Constant	β_0	-1.286	0.172	-7.482***
Packaging (X ₁)	β_1	1.225	0.046	26.902***
R-Square (R^2)		0.672		
Adjusted R – Square (R^2)		0.671		
F – Statistics		723.721		
F – Probability		0.000		
Durbin-Watson stat		1.975		

Note: If calculated value > tabular value, reject null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. Otherwise accept the null hypothesis. (** = 5%) denotes significance of coefficient; t-tab value = 1.968, df = 353, Dependent Variable: customer appeal, Predictors: (Constant), packaging.

Source: Field Survey, 2023 (Version 22 of SPSS Computation)

The estimated value of packaging (X) was statistically significant and positively related to customer's appeal among SMEs at 1% level. The coefficient of packaging is 1.225, indicating that a unit increase in packaging

lead to 1.225 units increase in customer's appeal among SMEs. Hence, customer appeal is an increasing function of packaging and availability of goods when needed by the customers. Statistically, the calculated value of packaging is 26.902 and tabulated value of 1.968, since the calculated value is greater than the tabular value in absolute terms, the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of alternative hypothesis thus.

The R^2 coefficient of multiple determination was 0.672, which implies that, 67.2% variations in the dependent variable were explained by changes in the independent variable, while 32.8% was unexplained by the stochastic terms in the model. Thus, the independent variables [place strategy (transportation)] can explain up-to 67.2 percent of changes in customers' appeal among SMEs in South-South, Nigeria, leaving 32.8% as unexplained. The R^2 adjusted was 67.1% indicating a goodness of fit of the regression model adopted in this study which is statistically significant at 5% probability level. The Durbin-Watson stat value of 1.975 was observed from the regression analysis which is close to 2.5, implying that there is no evidence of autocorrelation. More so, the f-statistical value of 723.721 and f-probability value of 0.000 were observed from the analysis which are less than 0.05 (95% of freedom), indicating that estimated regression model adopted in this study is statistically significant at 5% level. In effect, there is 67.2% existing relationship between packaging and customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. With this, the researchers rejected the null hypothesis and accepted the alternate hypothesis. Hence, packaging has significant effect on customers' appeal among SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Summary of Findings

The result revealed that, product design has positive and significant effect on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Packaging has positive and significant effect on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study therefore concluded that product design has significant effect on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The packaging has a positive and significant effect on customer appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were suggested:

- i. Product design has a significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This implies that the firm should continue to improve in their product quality, design in the market place since it has shown the positive effect on the customer appeal. By doing so, more customers would be attracted to any form of appeal that the company will want to embark on from time to time.

- ii. Packaging has significant effect on customers' appeal of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This implies that the managers of SMEs in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria are encouraged to extend the tentacles of packaging and embark on competitive pricing through product and service modifications.

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