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The Effect of Brand Image on Customer Perception in Nigerian Telecommunication Companies

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's telecommunications industry is highly dynamic and competitive, with major service providers vying for customer attention in a market where offerings are often very similar. In this context, understanding how brand image influences customer perception is critical, as consumer choices are shaped not only by price and service availability but also by reputation, trust, and emotional connection to a brand. This study investigates the impact of brand image on customer perception among subscribers of Nigeria's leading telecommunications companies, aiming to determine how customers' views of a brand affect their preferences, satisfaction, and loyalty.

The research addresses whether consumers' perceptions of telecom brands significantly shape their attitudes and purchasing decisions in a competitive marketplace. Employing a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 200 subscribers of major telecom networks across selected urban centres in Nigeria. The study utilises established theoretical frameworks, including Brand Equity Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, to explain the connection between brand-related factors and consumer responses.

The findings indicate that brand image plays a significant, positive role in shaping customer perceptions. Corporate reputation, service quality, communication effectiveness, and brand integrity are major determinants of how customers evaluate telecom providers. Customers are more likely to trust and remain loyal to telecom brands that consistently deliver reliable services, communicate transparently, and maintain a positive public image. In contrast, poor service experience and inconsistent brand promises weaken customer confidence and increase the likelihood of brand switching.

The study concludes that in Nigeria's saturated telecommunications environment, strong branding is a strategic necessity for customer retention and competitive success. Telecom companies seeking long-term relevance should invest in building credible brand identities, improving service delivery, and maintaining honest, customer-centred communication. It is recommended that telecom providers strengthen their brand development strategies and align their public image with actual service performance to attract, satisfy, and retain customers effectively.

Keywords: Brand Image, Customer Perception, Telecommunication Industry, Nigeria, Customer Loyalty

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian telecommunications sector has experienced significant expansion, driven by rapid technological development and increased nationwide mobile phone usage. As industry competition intensifies, telecommunications companies emphasise building a favourable brand image, improving service quality, investing in advertising, and maintaining strong customer relationships to attract and retain subscribers. The brand image established in customers' minds plays a crucial role in shaping their opinions, satisfaction, loyalty, and continued patronage.

The Nigerian telecom market is highly competitive, with major operators such as MTN Nigeria, Airtel Nigeria, Globacom, and 9mobile continually striving to gain a larger market share. Since many of these companies

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offer similar products and services, customers' perceptions of a brand have become a key factor in their choice of network provider.

Despite the growing importance of branding in the telecom industry, limited research has explored how brand image affects customer perception in Nigeria. Previous studies have primarily focused on pricing and service quality, with less attention to the broader influence of branding. This study examines the elements of brand image among Nigerian telecommunication companies, evaluates their effects on customer perceptions, and identifies which branding aspects most strongly influence customers.

This study focuses on subscribers of major telecommunication companies in Nigeria, including MTN Nigeria, Airtel Nigeria, Globacom, and 9mobile, with particular attention given to customers residing in major urban centres across the country. The research is limited to examining how brand image influences customer perceptions in the Nigerian telecommunications sector.

This study contributes to both business practice and academic research. Its findings may help telecommunications companies develop more effective branding and customer relationship strategies to strengthen customer loyalty and improve public perception. Additionally, the study provides valuable information for scholars and researchers interested in brand management, consumer behaviour, and marketing within emerging economies such as Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Brand Image

Brand image extends far beyond a company's name, symbol, or visual identity; it represents the full collection of ideas, emotions, and expectations that consumers associate with a brand over time. According to Aaker (1996), a brand embodies a strategic asset that shapes how customers identify and differentiate an organisation from its competitors. Keller (2013) further explained that brand image consists of the perceptions and associations stored in consumers' memories, which influence how they interpret a company's credibility, service quality, and communication style. More recently, Keller (2020) emphasised that brand image reflects customers' judgments about an organisation's trustworthiness, consistency, and ability to deliver value. In this context, customer perception refers to how individuals process and evaluate brand-related signals based on personal experience, social influence, and market information (Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, a favourable brand image can significantly strengthen consumer confidence, while a weak or negative image may reduce trust and satisfaction.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

This study is anchored on several relevant theories that explain the relationship between brand image and customer perception.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991):

This theory proposes that consumer behaviour is largely influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. A positive brand image can shape favourable attitudes toward a company, thereby influencing customer intentions and actual purchasing behaviour.

Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991):

Aaker's theory highlights that strong brand equity is created through positive brand associations, perceived quality, brand awareness, and customer loyalty. When consumers perceive a brand positively, they are more likely to remain loyal and develop long-term relationships with the organisation.

Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973):

Signalling Theory explains that in markets where customers may not fully assess product or service quality before purchase, brand image serves as an important signal of reliability and value. A reputable brand can therefore reduce uncertainty and influence decision-making.

Expectation Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980):

This theory suggests that customer satisfaction depends on the extent to which actual brand performance matches or exceeds prior expectations. If a brand consistently fulfils its promises, customers are more likely to develop positive perceptions and satisfaction.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have examined the influence of brand image on customer satisfaction and loyalty. For instance, Ogunnaike et al. (2017) found that a strong and positive brand image significantly enhances customer trust, satisfaction, and retention in the Nigerian service sector. Similarly, Ladhari and Morales (2022) reported that organisations with favourable brand perceptions often experience stronger customer commitment and competitive advantage. These studies collectively suggest that brand image plays a critical role in shaping consumer responses and organisational success.

Despite these valuable contributions, much of the existing literature relies heavily on secondary data or focuses only on selected aspects of branding rather than offering a comprehensive examination. This creates a gap for more detailed primary research, particularly in Nigeria, where changing consumer behaviour and competitive pressures require updated evidence. Consequently, this study seeks to provide a broader, more current understanding of how brand image influences customer perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate the relationship between brand image and customer perception within Nigeria’s telecommunications sector. The descriptive survey approach was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic collection of data from a broad population, allowing the description of existing conditions, the identification of patterns, and the examination of relationships among variables without manipulating the study environment. By using this design, the research captured subscribers’ genuine opinions, experiences, and attitudes about how brand image influences their perceptions of service providers. This method also provided a practical framework for gathering quantifiable data that could be analysed statistically to produce reliable findings.

Population of the Study

The target population for this research consisted of subscribers of the four major telecommunications companies operating in Nigeria: MTN, Airtel, Glo, and 9mobile. These service providers were selected because they are the dominant players in Nigeria's telecom industry and collectively serve a large share of the country’s mobile users. To ensure broader representation, the study focused on subscribers residing in three major urban centres: Lagos, Abuja, and Kano. These cities were chosen for their large populations, economic significance, and diverse customer bases, which provided a balanced representation of consumer experiences across different regions of the country.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample size of 200 respondents was used for the study. Participants were selected using simple random sampling, ensuring eligible subscribers had an equal chance of being included in the study. This sampling method was adopted to minimise bias and improve the representativeness of the sample. By randomly selecting respondents across the chosen cities, the study ensured that different categories of telecom users were fairly represented, thereby enhancing the credibility and generalizability of the findings.

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Instrument for Data Collection

Primary data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire designed specifically to assess subscribers' views on brand image and customer perception. The questionnaire was divided into sections that measured five key dimensions of brand image: visual identity, corporate reputation, service quality, communication effectiveness, and brand integrity. These dimensions were selected because they are critical to how customers interpret and evaluate a brand. Customer perception was also measured through questions focused on satisfaction, trust, and overall opinion of service providers. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," allowing respondents to express varying degrees of agreement in a structured manner.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure the questionnaire's accuracy and effectiveness, the instrument underwent validity and reliability testing. Content validity was established by presenting the questionnaire to experts in marketing and research methodology, who reviewed the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Their feedback helped refine the instrument and ensured the questions adequately captured the concepts under study. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding 0.78. This result indicated an acceptable level of internal consistency, suggesting that the questionnaire items were sufficiently reliable for measuring the intended variables.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected from respondents were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical tools. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and tables, were used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and general response patterns. Inferential statistics, particularly Chi-square analysis and regression analysis, were employed to test the study's hypotheses and examine the strength and direction of the relationship between brand image and customer perception. These analytical techniques provided deeper insights into whether brand-related factors significantly influenced customer attitudes and decision-making. Through this combination of statistical methods, the study produced findings that were both comprehensive and evidence-based.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of Findings

The analysis of data collected from 200 respondents provided valuable insights into how brand image shapes customer perceptions in Nigeria's telecommunications industry. Demographic findings revealed that many respondents were male, and a significant proportion were in the 18–35 age bracket. This age group is among the most active segments of telecom consumers in Nigeria, largely due to their heavy reliance on mobile communication, internet access, and digital services for social, academic, and business purposes. Their strong representation in the study suggests that the findings are particularly relevant to understanding the views of Nigeria's most commercially engaged telecom users.

When respondents were asked to assess the four major telecom providers based on different dimensions of brand image, each company demonstrated unique strengths. MTN emerged as the strongest brand in terms of reliability and corporate reputation, with many respondents associating it with wider network coverage and dependable service delivery. Airtel was viewed more positively for its affordability and youthful appeal, making it particularly attractive to younger users seeking cost-effective communication options. Glo was widely recognised for promoting national identity and local pride, reflecting its positioning as a proudly Nigerian brand. Meanwhile, 9mobile received stronger recognition for customer service, suggesting that users appreciated its responsiveness and customer care efforts despite its smaller market presence.

Statistical Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

The inferential analysis produced compelling evidence that brand image significantly influences customer

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perception. Regression analysis showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between brand image and customer perception ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that improvements in brand image are likely to be reflected in customers' perceptions of telecom providers. In practical terms, customers are more likely to trust, remain loyal to, and recommend brands they perceive as reputable, reliable, and consistent.

Furthermore, the Chi-square test confirmed a strong association between brand image variables and customer perceptions, reinforcing the conclusion that how telecom companies present themselves and, more importantly, how well they perform directly affects consumer attitudes. These findings validate the study’s core assumption that brand image is not merely a promotional tool but a strategic determinant of customer trust and behavioural intention.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results strongly align with the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study. In line with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), a favourable brand image shapes positive customer attitudes, which in turn influence consumer decisions and loyalty. Similarly, the findings support Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991), which emphasises that perceived quality, strong associations, and trustworthiness are essential for building customer commitment.

A particularly important insight from this study is the dominant role of service quality and communication in shaping perception. Respondents consistently indicated that, beyond logos, slogans, or advertisements, actual service performance such as network stability, pricing transparency, and honest communication plays a decisive role in determining whether a brand is viewed positively. This suggests that customers are increasingly sensitive to the gap between brand promises and actual experience. When telecom providers fail to meet expectations through poor service quality, misleading promotions, or unresolved complaints, their brand image suffers significantly, often increasing the likelihood of customer dissatisfaction and provider switching.

Broader Implications

The findings demonstrate that successful branding in the telecom industry extends far beyond visual identity or marketing campaigns. A strong brand is built through the consistent delivery of promises, ethical behaviour, and customer-centred service. This study not only supports previous research on the importance of brand image but also provides fresh empirical evidence in the Nigerian telecom context, where competition is intense, and customer expectations are rapidly evolving. For telecom firms, this means integrating brand strategy with operational excellence. A company’s public image must accurately reflect the real value it provides for consumers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that brand image plays a critical role in shaping customer perception in Nigeria’s telecommunications sector. The findings clearly demonstrate that customers’ views of telecom providers are significantly influenced by factors such as corporate reputation, service quality, communication effectiveness, and integrity. A strong, positive brand image fosters trust, satisfaction, and loyalty, while a weak or inconsistent image can erode customer confidence and encourage brand switching.

In an increasingly competitive telecom environment, customers do not simply choose providers based on pricing alone; they also consider whether the brand consistently delivers on its promises. Therefore, telecom companies that invest in building and sustaining credible brand images are more likely to maintain long-term customer relationships and achieve sustainable market success.

Recommendations

Prioritise Service Quality:

Telecom providers should place consistent emphasis on improving network reliability, call quality, internet

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speed, and customer support. Delivering dependable services strengthens customer confidence and reinforces positive brand perception.

Promote Transparency and Honesty:

Brands should avoid hidden charges, exaggerated promotional claims, or misleading subscription packages. Transparent pricing and honest communication help build trust and protect corporate credibility.

Strengthen Strategic Communication:

Companies should maintain clear, consistent, and customer-focused messaging across all communication platforms, including social media, customer care channels, and traditional advertising. Effective communication ensures that customers clearly understand what the brand represents.

Continuously Monitor Customer Feedback:

Regular surveys, online reviews, and customer engagement platforms should be used to understand evolving consumer expectations. Listening to customers allows organisations to identify weaknesses early and improve their brand strategies.

Invest in Meaningful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):

Telecom companies should actively participate in genuine community development initiatives, such as educational support, youth empowerment, and social welfare projects. Such efforts can strengthen public goodwill and deepen emotional connections with consumers.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides useful insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size and concentration on respondents from major urban centres may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised to rural populations or the broader Nigerian market. Additionally, because the study relied on self-reported questionnaire responses, some participants' answers may not fully reflect their actual behaviour or experiences.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should increase sample sizes and include respondents from a broader range of geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds to improve representativeness. Researchers may also benefit from adopting mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to gain a deeper understanding. Additionally, as the telecom industry evolves, there is a growing need to examine how emerging technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and digital customer engagement platforms influence brand image and customer perception in Nigeria's dynamic communication landscape.

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