Influencer Marketing Practices and Brand Performance of Selected Smart Phone Firms in South-South Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the effect of influencer marketing practices on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in the South-South Nigeria. The general objective of the study is to examine the effect of influencer marketing practices on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in south-south Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: ascertain the effects of story telling on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria, assess the effect of customer engagement on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria and determine the effect of brand advocacy on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria. The study adopted the survey research design method specifically, a cross-sectional survey design. The population of the study consists of 551 persons to whom the research was generalized. From the population, a workable sample size of 231 was derived. The study adopted the stratified simple random sampling technique. The study used structured questionnaire as instruments of data collection. To establish the reliability of the instrument, a test-retest method was used. The descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple regression analysis were used to analyze the data collected. The data collected was analyzed by using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software version 25.0. Finding showed that story telling (β =0.134, p=0.005< 0.05), customer engagement (β =0.198, p=0.002< 0.05), and brand advocacy (β =0.143, p=0.004< 0.05), have significant positive effect on brand performance. Findings showed that influencer marketing practices was responsible for 53% of the changes in brand performance. The study concluded that influencer marketing practices has significant and positive effects on brand performance in the Nigerian smart phone industry. The study recommended amongst others that when making decisions on influencer selection, marketers should take into account multiple data factors. These include the influencer's area of expertise within the sector, the extent of their audience engagement, the platform they operate on, and the overall reach they possess. The study demonstrated that how the brand is mentioned verbally by reputable personality creates brand image.

Key Words: Influencer marketing practices, Brand Performance, Customer Engagement, Story Telling and Brand Advocacy

Introduction

The utilisation of the Internet in the industrial sector offers notable advantages in terms of development, expansion, and the implementation of internationalisation and marketing initiatives. In contemporary times, individuals possess the capacity to articulate their viewpoints, disseminate their personal encounters, and offer endorsements, not solely among their close acquaintances, but across the entirety of the digital sphere, owing to the advent of blogs, social media platforms, and cellphones. Certain individuals who had previously solely exerted influence within their immediate social circles have now transitioned into the role of influencers, attaining a heightened status and recognition across a larger community of followers (SanMiguel & Sadaba, 2018). Organisations are engaged in a competitive endeavour to identify optimal strategies for exerting influence over consumers. Consequently, marketing approaches have evolved to incorporate methods that seek to conceal influnctial communication inside various contexts. In contemporary marketing practises, influencer marketing has emerged as a prominent strategy employed by marketers to effectively shape consumer behaviour while avoiding the perception of intrusive messaging. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in influencer marketing, which has been identified by various scholars as a promising marketing strategy (Harrison, 2022). Thus, the Nigeria had continuously declined in brand performance as a result of poor adoption of influential marketing practices and the failure to respond to economic challenges, but these earlier studies had not conceptualized the relationship between influential marketing practices and brand performance; as a result, this study was designed to look at influential marketing practices and brand performance in a sample of selected smart phone firms in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The ubiquity of brand management and the exponential growth of influencer content have revolutionized traditional advertising approaches in the Nigerian Smart phone sector. Gone are the days when consumers solely relied on traditional advertisements to guide their purchase choices. Instead, they now look to relatable and engaging influencers, whose opinions and endorsements resonate with their values and preferences. The effectiveness of influencer marketing is heavily dependent on the influencers themselves, posing a significant barrier for brands seeking to collaborate with suitable influencers who align with their brand values and provide them with a certain level of creative autonomy in order to achieve optimal outcomes. Moreover, a significant number of organisations who employ this approach frequently overlook the importance of programme management and control, unaware of its crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of a campaign. Numerous programmes have a deficiency in having clearly defined objectives that are in alignment with brand or marketing objectives.

In addition, due to the increasing variety of products, every consumer, regardless of the type of product, is faced with a huge flood of brands. Brand managers need to make appropriate and comprehensive efforts in characterizing their brands and introducing them as a reliable virtual advocacy that has the ability to become a communication partner. Customers often give them a human dimension by giving brands advocacy, and marketers often create or reinforce these perceptions with the help of positioning. Brand advocacy provide a symbolic concept or emotional value that can lead to customer inference from the brand and make it more sustainable and functional. Successful brand positioning in a product class requires models that are able to distinguish unique brand advocacy from those that are common to all brands in the product class. Companies that properly use brand advocacy as part of their overall positioning strategy can have a much greater impact on consumer perceptions than other gradual and more sustainable ways of communicating strategies

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to examine the effect of influencer marketing practices on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

i. ascertain the effects of story telling on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.
ii. assess the effect of customer engagement on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.
iii. determine the effect of brand advocavy on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Marketing Practices

In the context of marketing, influencer marketing tactics refer to the approaches employed by organisations to leverage the impact of prominent individuals or opinion leaders in order to influence and shape consumers' buying behaviours. The term "influencer" is etymologically derived from the word "influence," which denotes the capacity to exert an impact or effect on individuals or entities (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). It can be inferred that the term "influencer" refers to an individual who possesses the ability to exert an impact on others or certain entities. An influencer can be defined as an individual who exerts influence over the perceptions and disseminates knowledge through various communication channels at their disposal. In the contemporary digital landscape, influencer marketing serves as a manifestation of electronic word of mouth. A significant number of firms want to leverage influencers in order to effectively showcase their products to a wide-ranging audience while simultaneously reducing expenses. This marketing strategy involves leveraging individuals known as influencers (Scott, 2015; Lou & Yuan, 2019) to enhance consumer brand awareness and impact purchasing decisions. These influencers utilise social media platforms to share their content. Ong and Ito (2019) asserted that influencers are seen as the "opinion leaders of the new digital century" who have the ability to shape the behaviours of their followers in relation to specific brands or products (Godey et al., 2016). The influence wielded by individuals with significant social media followings can be attributed to the preferences of modern customers, who exhibit a strong inclination towards companies and products that align with their social identities (Hassan et al., 2021). This phenomenon is further facilitated by the prevalent use of social media platforms in present times.

Story Telling

In today's highly competitive industry, companies are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate them and stand out. The concept of storytelling has been known for decades and has been employed in numerous kinds of communication such as literature, film, and advertising. However, the use of storytelling in marketing has grown in popularity, as firms aim to develop a more emotional connection with their audience. Both technical improvements and changes in customer behaviour are contributing factors to the increased use of brand storytelling. Therefore, brand storytelling has evolved as a valuable tool for developing a distinct brand identity and strengthening consumer relationships. The importance of brand storytelling is built in the concept of brand image, which is the perception of a brand in the minds of consumers, including its personality, reputation, and overall identity. Brand image is important because it influences consumer behaviour, such as attitudes, intentions, and purchasing behaviour. The strength of brand image may be observed in how customers identify

with brands and use them as a means of self-expression and social identification (Escalas, 2017).

Storytelling has its roots in human society since it has been used for ages to convey knowledge, values, and emotions. Storytelling builds on and benefits from the fundamental human desire to listen, comprehend, and share stories. By appealing to consumers' emotions, goals, and needs, brands can transcend traditional advertising approaches and establish meaningful connections with them. (Fournier, 2018) Brand storytelling is a growing marketing tactic in recent years. It entails leveraging storylines to establish an emotional bond between a brand and its customers. Storytelling in branding is not a new notion, but technological improvements and shifts in customer behaviour have made it more vital than ever. With the rise of social media and the growing relevance of the customer experience, brands are seeking for new and innovative methods to communicate with their target audience. Storytelling has developed as an effective strategy for accomplishing this goal.

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement is a recurring interaction that takes place between a customer and an organization; this interaction reinforces the emotional, physical and or psychological relation the customer has with the organization. Based on the above, customer engagement has been linked to improving corporate performance, gaining better competitive positions (Gong, 2018), creating new markets (Storbacka et al., 2016) and, boosting satisfaction of the customer and increasing loyalty and trust in the brand. Customer engagement is also linked to brand performance indicators such as sales development, customer participation and customer feedback (Bowden, 2019) other factors can also be attributed to engagement among them are cost reductions, superior profitability, brand recommendations and improved co-creative experiences (Bijmolt et al., 2010). It has been proven that a customer engagement with a brand is not just the process of interaction between the customers and brands rather it is a fundamental tool in developing deeper customer-brand relationships (Pratomo & Magetsari, 2018). Co-creation is what happens when the customer shows impulsive, unrestricted and flexible behaviors that exclusively customize the customer brand experience (Lusch & Vargo, 2016).

Brand Advocacy

Brand advocacy has long been seen as a holy grail of marketing. Prior research has linked such advocacy to consumer-brand identification Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian, (2012), satisfaction Lee, Hansen, & Lee, (2020), brand loyalty and purchase intent suggesting its importance. It occurs when customers spend time and effort to recommend, promote or support a brand (Maslowska, Smit, & and den Putte, 2016) and is a 'discretionary activity' or 'extra-role behaviour' Majid, & Negin,. (2018). Brand advocacy is made possible by social media, which has revolutionized marketing, creating an increasingly connected world, in which user generated content (UGC) and online consumer-to-consumer (C2C) communications foster rich brand-related exchanges that influence behaviour (Kang, Sun, Liang, & Mao, 2022). Morhart (2019) posited that brand advocacy is one-dimensional and focuses on favourable communication about a brand's values and offerings, therefore the effects of this behaviour have not been isolated. However, Morhart (2019) assumed that the effects of employee brand related behaviours on customer evaluations or satisfaction are universally positive and focused on antecedents, not consequences. Westberg, and Pope, (2014) also noted that brand advocacy increases brand awareness in the market and through brand advocacy consumers tend to perceive companies or organization as credible which help to humanize the brand. Miller (2014) avers that many organizations rely on brand advocacy in brand repositioning and new product launches.

Brand Performance

Studies in different parts of world have been conducted on the argument of strategic marketing practices on brand performance. Many studies have developed and refined research tools for assessing degrees of strategic marketing practices in firms and examining its links with both market and brand performance. In general, strategic marketing practices are found to positively relate to brand performance. In many studies, the relationship has been found to be relatively weak, though significant. Hooley *et al*., (2005) found out that only less than 20% of performance variations between firms are explained through differences in strategic marketing alone. In addition to positive relationship between strategic marketing practices and brand performance, product innovation or and innovativeness have been shown to have positive relationship with competitive advantage and related isolation mechanisms (Hooley & Greenley, 2015).

Components within strategic marketing relate to each other, too. It is for example argued that due to focus on developing information on markets, market oriented firms are sensitive to changing customer needs and therefore are more likely to innovate successfully than other firms (Matsuno, Mentzer & Özsomer, 2002). It is reasonable to assume that same resources, strategies and same service delivery process do not lead to identical performance in different countries and business environments. This is due to differences in, for example, market culture and buyer orientations. Phenomenon may be considered as analogous to differences in market conditions when the entity under examination is an individual offering. Business environments are in a state of continuous change, too. Competitive positions will themselves evolve and change as the resource base and the market environment in which they are created changes. In some markets this change will necessarily be very rapid.

Empirical Review

Azizah (2023), explored the influence of brand love and brand experience on customer engagement and then the influence of customer engagement on brand loyalty directly or mediated by brand attachment and customer trust in cosmetic industry brands in Indonesia. This research was conducted in 2022 by involving 202 respondents using Instagram who is women of the millennial generation in Indonesia. Quantitative research using the Structural Equation Model (SEM) method with data analysis using SmartPLS. Some of the findings in this study are that brand love and brand experience indirectly affect brand loyalty mediated by brand attachment and customer trust. Meanwhile, customer engagement does not have a direct influence on increasing brand loyalty directly. The managerial implications of this research for industry practitioners and researchers are to build strong brand love, and brand experience will be able to create customer engagement, then loyalty to the customer's brand will be higher when the brand can strengthen customer engagement which then creates brand attachment and customer trust

Nwabuzor, Odita and Olannye (2023) examined the effects of brand advocacy on customer loyalty of selected banking industry in Delta State. The specific objectives are to, determine the effects of brand advocacy on customer loyalty of selected banks in Delta State and ascertain the effects of online customer reviews on customer loyalty of selected banks in Delta State. Cross-sectional survey research design was adopted for the study. A sample size of 237 respondents was selected from 5 deposit money banks in Asaba, Delta State. The stratified random sampling technique was used for the study. A structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument for the study. Content and validity were taken into consideration to validate the research instrument. To establish the reliability of the instrument, a test-retest method was used. Descriptive statistics like frequency distributions and inferential statistics like correlation and multiple regressions were used to analyze the data collected for the study. Findings showed

that the dimensions of brand communication accounts for 53% change in customer loyalty. The study concluded that brand communication has significant positive effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks in Delta State Nigeria. Brand advocacy (β =0.106, p=0.044< 0.05), and online customers review (β =0.252, p=0.000< 0.05) has significant positive effect on customer loyalty of deposit money banks in Delta State Nigeria. The study recommended amongst others that banks should regularly monitor online customer reviews across various platforms. Respond promptly to both positive and negative reviews, addressing customer concerns and expressing appreciation for positive feedback. The study established that clear and relevant information empowers customers to make informed decisions, leading to a greater likelihood of choosing and remaining loyal to a bank.

Andhini and Andanawarih (2022), explored the importance of brand story towards Indonesia's Gen Z and how it affected buying decisions and perception towards the brand. It explored if creating a brand story is a central element in creating and differentiating Indonesian fashion brands that becomes a beneficial tool for both business owner and its customer. The research was conducted through an exploratory descriptive approach by using survey on Indonesian collectivist society those who behave communally based on in-group norms including the 84 Gen Z as well as archival research on two similar fashion brands, and interviews on one customer and one brand owner. The research findings point out that brand stories take a positive effect on a customer's perception towards a brand and their purchase decision. While brand stories do have an influence in shaping the image of a brand as well as becoming a factor in a customer's purchase decision process, other brand attributes such as packaging, social media content, and logos also plays an important role in a shaping brand image, as well as the customer's final purchase decision. Furthermore, the opinions of a key opinion leader about a brand or product greatly matters in this society and that people are more willing to purchase a product if it has already been positively reviewed by a key opinion leader.

Research Gap

Though influencer marketing is something every marketer is talking about, so far definitive research has not been conducted regarding its effect and whether or not it affects brand performance of companies. There has been no study about the appropriate platforms on which influencers can reach their audience depending on the type of content they create, knowing which a marketer might be able to reach a more appropriate audience. Another area found was that no conclusive evidence was drawn regarding the difference in effect caused by influencer marketers when the content is sponsored versus when it is not. Therefore, the study aims to fill this gap in literature by examining the effect of influencer marketing practices on brand performance of smart phone companies.

Methodology

The study used the survey research design method, specifically employing a cross-sectional survey design. This approach was employed to gather data for the goal of empirical analysis, focusing on a single point in time. The rationale for employing the cross-sectional survey research design method is in its ability to gather data from respondents at a certain moment in time. The customers of six distinct smart phone companies in South South, Nigeria made up the study's population. The study's population consists of personnel who have been specifically chosen from smart phone organisations. A sample size of 231 was obtained from the population using Taro Yamane's formula. The formula developed by Taro Yamane offers a streamlined approach for determining the appropriate sample size. The researchers employed the simple random sampling technique in order to categorise the sample size. The research employed structured questionnaire as the primary tools for data gathering. The questionnaire

used a Likert scale style consisting of five points, and it was distributed to participants within the chosen sample. In order to ascertain the validity of the instrument used for data collection, the questionnaire was administered to esteemed experts affiliated with the Faculty of Management Sciences at Delta State University, Abraka. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were used to ascertain the nature of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The study data underwent analysis using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software, specifically version 25.0

Results and Discussion
In this section, analysis was conducted on the data collected to draw a conclusion and create generalisations. Additionally, the hypotheses proposed in the previous chapter were tested.

Table 1: Inter-Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	N
1. Story Telling	1				222
2. Customer Engagement	0. 160*	1			222
3. Brand Advocacy	0.018	0.303**	1		222
4. Brand performance	0.133*	0. 569**	0.131	1	222

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

Table2: The guideline for Pearson correlation coefficients

S/N	Coefficient value	Strength of association
1	< r < 0.3	Small correlation
2	0.3< r < 0.5	Medium/moderate correlation
3	r > 0.5	Large/strong correlation

Source: Based on Cohen (1988)

Table 2 showed theinter-correlations and descriptive statistics for study variables. The correlation model exhibited the extent of valuable relationship that exists among the variables in this study. Story telling showed a positive correlation coefficient with brand performance (0.286**) which means that influencer reach is a good measure of influencer marketing practices. Customer engagement showed a moderate positive correlation coefficient with brand performance (0.460**) which implies that interactivity quality is a moderate and good measure of influencer marketing practices. Brand Advocacy showed a positive correlation coefficient with brand performance (0.112*) but extant literature showed that personality effect is a strong and good measure ofinfluencer marketing practices.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Influencer Marketing practices and Brand Performance Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	.995	2.300		.433	.666		
Story Telling	.228	.080	.134	2.842	.005	.952	1.051
Customer Engagement	.195	.061	.198	3.187	.002	.544	1.839
Brand Advocacy	.118	.041	.143	2.889	.004	.855	1.170

a. Dependent Variable: Brand performance

The model below shows the study hypotheses formulation:

$$Y = \beta0 + \beta1ST + \beta2CE + \beta3BA + e \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots (iii)$$

BP = .995+ (0.228× ST) + (0.195× CE) + (0.118× BA)

Table 3 showed that story telling has significant and positive effect on brand performance (β =0.134, p=0.005< 0.05), customer engagement has significant and positive effect on brand performance (β =0.198, p=0.002< 0.05), brabd advocacy has significant and positive effect onbrand performance (β =0.143, p=0.004< 0.05).

Test of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H$_{O1}$: Story Telling has no significant effects on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in the South-South Nigeria.

Since the p-value critical is at 0.05 (5%) i.e. the level of significance is lesser than the calculated level of significance (0.005< 0.05) in table 3, the null hypothesis was rejected while the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This implies that story telling has significant and positive effects on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two

H$_{O2}$: customer engagement has no significant effects on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.

Table 3 showed that the calculated level of significance, which is (0.002<0.05), is less than the p-value of 5%. Based on this result, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted implying that customer engagement has significant and positive effects on the brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.

Hypothesis Three

H$_{O3}$: brand advocacy has no significant effects on brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.

The level of significance that was calculated in table 3 is lesser than the established p-value (0.004< 0.05), therefore the null hypothesis was rejected while the alternate hypothesis was accepted which states that brand advocacy has significant and positive effects on the brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria.

Discussion of Results

Table 3 showed that influencer reach has significant and positive effect on brand performance (β =0.134, p=0.005< 0.05). Test of H1 showed that story telling has significant and positive effects on the brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria (0.005< 0.05). Table 3 showed that customer engagement has significant and positive effect on brand performance (β =0.198, p=0.002< 0.05). Test of H2 showed that customer engagement has significant positive effects on the brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria (0.002<0.05). Table 3 showed that brand advocacy has significant and positive effect on brand performance (β =0.143, p=0.004< 0.05). Test of H3 showed that brand advocacy has significant positive effects on the brand performance of selected smart phone firms in South-South Nigeria (0.004< 0.05).

Conclusion

As compared to other empirical studies discussed in the second section, on the research done by various scholars and researchers to determine the effect of the study concluded that

influencer marketing practices have significant and positive effects on brand performance in the Nigerian smart phone industry, the results of the regression analysis shows that the dimension of influential marketing practices identified in this study contributes significantly to brand performance. From this study we can conclude that:

Story telling was found to have significant effect on brand performance. Stories are one of the tools that allow customers to receive an experience that is appealing to their emotions and dreams. A brand's core value acts as building blocks for the construction of the brand identity, which are then delivered to customers through brand stories in the hope that customers will assign the brand a personality that would lead them to construct either a positive or negative brand image.

Customer engagement has a significant positive effect on brand performance. Customer engagement serves as social proof for potential customers to enhance the firm brands. When customers read positive reviews about a products, services, or customer experience, it builds trust and confidence. Positive engagement from fellow customers act as endorsements, validating the firm's value proposition and creating a positive perception

Lastly, brand advocacy indeed has a significant positive effect on brand performance. When customers become brand advocates, their positive recommendations and testimonials contribute to building trust and credibility for the brand. Potential customers are more likely to trust the opinions and experiences of existing customers rather than relying solely on the brand's marketing messages. This increased trust strengthens the bond between the brand and its customers, leading to higher levels of loyalty. Brand advocates often develop a strong emotional connection with the brand. They feel a sense of loyalty and affiliation, leading to long-term relationships.

Recommendations

After close examination and analysis of the research findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

i. Managers of Smart phone organizations should continue to encourage competencies to promote influential marketing campaign and assigning tasks to the right individuals and to monitor the brand management process of their products and support services.

ii. Influencers should try to exercise discernment when selecting their collaboration partners, taking into account their personal brand and the expectations of their audience. It is crucial for them to align themselves with brands that they can genuinely promote.

iii. Organisations should try to establish their target market by assessing how customers react to the advice of credible influencers, with the aim of enhancing their market offerings.

iv. Firms should actively seek feedback from customers and encourage them to share their positive experiences. Provide platforms for customers to engage with the bank, share their stories, and become brand advocates.

v. Smart phone companies need to capitalize on online settings including their websites and social media which are the exceptional tools that assist in increasing engagement among their customers to be able to satisfy their customers, build their trust, and gain their loyalty in today's competitive business environment.

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