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CUSTOMERS' IMAGE OF MOBILE TELECOMMUNICATION NETWORK [MTN] IN EKITI STATE NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The study examined customers' image of mobile telecommunication network (MTN) in Ekiti State. It adopted the survey research design and cluster sampling procedure. The sample size was 150. The study was anchored on organisational image theory. Customers' image formation was based on a seven-point parametre. MTN customer relations - 73.9% positive, 20% fair, 5.8% negative. MTN tariff - 47.8% positive, 40.6% fair, 11.6% negative. MTN data plan - 59.5 % positive, 33.3% fair, 7.2% bad. MTN data bonus – 58% positive, 16% fair, 26% negative. MTN service network - 81.2%, positive, 14.5%, fair, 17.4% negative. MTN business environment - 81.2% positive, 17.4% fair, 1.4% negative. 53.6% of respondents did not prefer MTN to other networks. Only 26% affirmed that they prefer MTN to other networks. 20.3% of the respondents were undecided. 87% of respondents subscribed to other networks apart from MTN. Only 31% did not. Customers' image of MTN is positive. The study recommended among others that MTN should allow data plan to operate like normal recharges of card.

Keywords: **Communication Industry, Customers, Image, MTN, Ekiti State.**

Introduction

Images or impressions of customers about organizations over time influence them positively/negatively towards such organizations. Evidently, continued customers' patronage of organization's product or service is not unrelated to the impressions directly or indirectly formed through contacts/interaction with concerned organisation. Oyesomi, Ahmadu, &

Solarin, (2015) wrote that it is important for any company to note that a good image is earned through good performance which must be sustained over time. This cannot be done under pressure, by command or by activities that are not rooted in truth or facts. This good image must be-attained through conscious efforts, and planned events to help satisfy their customers. Thus, be it manufacturing or service organizations, meeting customers' satisfaction and creating and maintaining mutual understanding and relationship with all concerned publics are undoubtedly paramount. With the service industry, meeting customers' satisfaction through quality service and sustained relationships perhaps appears to be more pronounced.

Over the years, the telecommunication industry has attracted more competitors. Beginning from the era of telegraph, through to telephone and at present mobile cellular phones, the telecommunication industry has grown considerably in Nigeria. A foremost telecommunication organization in the Nigerian society is Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN).

Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) is a service organization. It had its debut on the Nigerian shore in 2001. MTN Nigeria operates a GSM license granted her in September 2001. It has equally been awarded the 3G license in March 2007. As at December 2008, MTN controls 40:5% of the telecoms market share.MTN strongly believes in product innovation which plays an important role in keeping its brand very strong in Nigeria. MTN products are tailored towards different customers segments and a holistic value proposition. Its pricing plans have been targeted towards on-net calling preference, using off-peak capacity, per-second plans, disconnection calls to friends and family, XtraConnet which offers subscribers opportunity to stay closer to friends and family; XtraCool designed for the youth; XtraPro designed for dynamic professionals entrepreneurs, XtraSpecial designed specifically for the monthly subscribers, XtraProfit a prepaid plan designed for business centers owners; XtraValue which offers convenience and opportunity for specialized treatment. Other services MTN renders include MTN caller tunex reloaded, MTN Back-up, Video calling, Blackberry, fly connect, fastlink, SIM plus, DSTV mobile, Data Roaming, International Roaming and coverage (Adebisi, 2011). At present MTN is faced with stiff competitors and ever increasing teeming population of enlightened people.

Statement of Problem

Extant studies abound on global communication networks in the Nigerian society. Some of these studies examined the impact/influence of communication network providers/operators; others investigated preference of communication networks among subscribers. Still, some others attempted to concern themselves with assessing the effectiveness of service delivery of global system mobile telecommunication operators/providers, and customers satisfaction. For instance, Adebisi (2011) did a study on GSM Marketing Service Providers Operations and Customers Satisfaction in Nigeria. Similarly, Akeke, Akinruwa, & Akeke, (2016) investigated Customers' Preference of Mobile Phone Service Providers in Ekiti State. Although these studies examined key areas of global communication networks in Nigeria, none addressed images/impression of customers about these global systems of mobile communication, and in particular among customers in Ekiti State, Nigeria. With the ever competitive telecommunication environment and the teeming population of enlightened customers there

is the need for a study to be undertaken with the aim of investigating the images/impressions of customers about MTN organization. Consequently, the study sought to:

i. Find out the image/impressions customers have about MTN organization
ii. Examine the extent of the image/impression held by customers about MTN organization
iii. Ascertain whether MTN organization is prefer to other telecommunication organisations

Literature Review

The concept of image has been variedly defined. Some scholars have examined the concept from psychological point of view while others have looked at it from organizational/marketing perspectives. Dowling (as cited in Oyesomi, Ahmadu, & Solarin, 2015) defines image as a set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember and relate to it. Considering the concept from organizational/marketing perspective, Alvesson (as cited in Oyesomi, et. al. (2015) sees image as consisting of the picture that someone has of an organization and the impression that the organization communicates. Alvesson's reference to the picture that someone has of an organization seems to describe a summary of impressions formed over time from the interaction/contact with concerned organization; which also is a reflection of the impression the organization communicates. Perhaps, this position concurs with the definition given by Beniot & Hanczor, as cited in Nnewi, (2014) that image is the perceptions of the source held by the audience, shaped by the words and deeds of that actor, as well as the actions of others.

The definition by Moffit, (as cited in Nnewi, (2014) that image is a single impression shared by an audience, seems narrow. The image a person or customer has about an organization may probably be seen as the summation of impressions formed through interactions, contacts with such organization. The impressions being the attached meanings formed through interactions and contacts. This perhaps is in consonance with the submission of Dowling (as cited in Oyesomi, K. et.al. 2015) that image is the result of the interactions of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings and impressions about an object".

In essence, customer image is described as a composite of people's attitudes, behaviour and beliefs about an organization. It has been realized that not all customers' images originate directly from the activities of an organization. Some images are as a result of beliefs that the customer consciously or unconsciously develops over time. Such images are developed through the cumulative effects of many messages ranging from the media, impressions created, actions and in-actions of the internal publics of the organization and ideas from opinion leaders in the mind of customers (Oyesomi, K. et.al. 2015).

Image and Perception

Image and perception are probably two sides of the same coin. The former expresses impressions about an organization while the latter expresses the views of someone about an objects/organization. They can hardly be separated. Scholars have variedly defined perception. Williams, (2009) defines perception as our recognition and interpretation of sensory information and how we respond to such information. Perception allows us to take the sensory information in and make it into something meaningful

The whole perception process is made up by three stages, the exposure stage, the attention stage and the interpretation stage. The brain takes in the stimuli in the attention stage and interprets the stimuli, according to our previous experiences and desires, in the interpretation stage. Ultimately, these three stages form our perceptions. We live in a world today where we daily are exposed to millions of different stimuli; different smells, sounds, tastes, sights and textures. Our brain takes in and processes only a small number of all these stimuli (Solomon, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2006, as cited in Emma, 2010).

Image and Attitude

Image and attitude are interrelated concepts. While the former concerns itself with impressions formed over time about persons/organization/objects, the latter describes a predisposition towards persons/objects/organization. Attitude towards persons/organization may probably not be possible without already held beliefs/notion about person(s) or organization(s). The image or impression one has about persons/organization is not unrelated to ones cognitive experiences which altogether influences ones attitude.

Perloff, (as cited in Ashish, Ambudi, Brijesh, 2012), sees attitude as basically an imaginary construction that signifies an individual's personal perception as like or dislike. Attitudes are in different modes such as negative, positive or neutral views directed to an attitude object: that is, a person, event or a behavior. A strong attitude is quite defiant to change. The concept of attitude refers to the likelihood that a person will react with a particular response to a particular situation. Attitude has long been among the most important and fervently investigated points in consumer-behaviour research. Attitude includes both attitudes toward physical objects (e.g., products) and attitudes toward particular behaviours - meaning a consumer's plan for future behaviour can be termed a "behavioral intention".

Consumers blend cognitive and affective elements (that is, elements of belief and feeling) to form an image. While cognitive and affective components are disparate and unique concepts, they do coordinate in significant ways. Cognitive image refers to "the individual's own knowledge and beliefs about the object," while "affective appraisals relate to an individual's feelings towards the object". Affective image, after all, is a subjective, emotional response to cognitive knowledge regarding a tourist destination. Cognitive image is known to positively influence affective image even before any visit to the destination (Beerli, Martín; Cheng; Kim; Petrick; Tan, 2016 as cited in Sung-Bum & Ki-Joon, 2018).

The interrelatedness of perception and attitude calls for close examination of both concepts in the matter of influence generation toward an object/organization. Consequently, most studies have centred on how images have formed perception and how perception in turns has influenced attitude toward object/organization. Sung-Bum & Ki-Joon, (2018) in their study investigated country image and attitudes on Tanzanian tourists' intention to visit Korea, and also examine the moderating effects of destination and product familiarities in the relationship between country image and attitudes on future visit intention. The study found out that participants' cognitive image of Korea significantly influenced their affective image, in turn affecting attitudes toward country, products, and cuisine. Attitudes toward country, products, and cuisine, in turn, had positive effects on visit intention.

The study by Ashish, Ambudi & Brijesh, (2012) on consumer perception and attitude towards the visual elements in social campaign advertisement, found out that perception towards image of social advertisements differed quite significantly between the male and the female respondents. Congruence was found to be highly subjective, and although the respondents showed great approval of an advertisement As a result of contrasting shock element and sexual element in social advertisement.

Similar study by Oyesomi, Ahmadu & Solarin, (2015) examined perceived influence of customers' image on patronage: a focus on Eco Bank. The study revealed that about 52 of the respondents have positive image of the bank, this consequently influenced their patronage of the bank. The study by Oyesomi, et al. (2015) revealed the possibilities of increase patronage of service industry as a result of positive image by customers. Observably, the study by Oyesomi, et al. (2015) is relatively similar to the present study. However, like the other studies, the concern was not on customers' image alone but the perceived influence on patronage of organisation's product or service. The present study concerns itself in particular with customers' image of MTN as a telecommunication service organization.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the theory of organizational image management. The theory argues that a primary goal of integrated marketing communication (IMC) is the creation and maintenance of an organization's image. Although organizations are different from individuals in important ways, organizations can be and are treated in the same way as individuals by many theorists and practitioners. The view taken here is that an organization's image is the perception that stakeholders have about the organization (Van der Merwe, & Puth; as cited in Massey 2015)

Specifically, an organizational image is developed dialogically by the organization and its stakeholders over time. Maria (2004) agrees with the dialogical process by affirming that image of an organization corresponds to the mental model that the individuals who compose its several different publics create to represent it, whenever they think of it. It is like a concept or a description, containing cognitive, affective and sensorial information. The image is formed through the information that individuals receive about the organization, which they first receive and then organize in their 'data bank', in a very personal way. First, the individual realizes and identifies information about the organization and then stores that information in a certain position, where some pieces of information are more relevant than others. Some pieces are close to each other; others are more distant. What is important to know is that the concept that the public forms about the organization begins to function as an interconnected data bank. Whenever they think about the central nucleus of that concept (example, the name of the organization), several data are immediately brought to mind because such data constitute a very active part of the model representing the organization for those individuals (Maria 2004).

Flowing from the above, the relevance of the theory of organizational image management to the study is much more captured in the greater likelihood of organization maintaining positive image amongst their various public/customers. The conscious understanding that the concept or idea that the public forms about the organization constitutes data bank that triggers off reactions/attitude towards the organization may probably help influence organization to

ensure quality product/service delivery. As MTN ensures quality service delivery, customers whether directly or indirectly form positive images, which to a large extent may snowball into high customers' patronage.

Methodology

The study employed survey research design. This method was adopted because it focuses on people, the vital facts of their behavior, beliefs, opinion, attitude and innovation. The cluster sampling technique was used in this study. This technique ensured that only a part of the population needed be sampled. Three Local Government Areas were randomly selected from 16 Local Government Areas councils in Ekiti State. These were: Ado-Ekiti, Ikere, and Oye.

Two towns/villages were further randomly selected from each of the three Local Government Areas. These town/villages were: Odo, and Erinfun, from Ado – Ekiti; Ikole and Agbado-Ekiti from Ikere; Ijan-Ekiti and Ilemeso-Ekiti from Oye. To select individual houses in the town/villages, twenty-five houses were purposively selected from the entrance of each of the towns/villages. At individual level, individuals residing in the selected house/flat from 18 years and above were purposively selected as respondents.

The sampled size for the study was 150. The data collection instrument of the study was questionnaire: Out of 150 questionnaires distributed, 138 were correctly filled and returned. The administration of the questionnaires was done by the researchers and two assistants. The duration was four weeks.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Demographic variables are thus presented: gender distribution showed that females (76%) are more than the male (62%) within. Female gender was on the high side. For age distribution, 118 (86%) respondents fell within age bracket 18 – 29; 16 (11.7%) respondent were within age bracket 30 – 39; 2 (1.4%) respondents within age bracket 40 – 49, while 2 (1.4%) were within age bracket 50 and above. Age bracket 18 – 29 was on the high side. On level of education, Senior School Certificate Education (SSCE) was 4 (3%), Ordinary National Diploma (OND) and Advanced Level (A/L) was 34 (24.6%), first degree certificate was 86 (62.3%), postgraduate was 14 (10.1%). Fist degree certificate holders were on the high side. Occupation data revealed that, civil servants were 4 (3%), private sector was 12 (8.6%), self employed was 72 (52.2%) and others were 50 (36.2%). Self employed was on the high side.

Data on respondents and subscription to MTN revealed that 138 (100%) subscribe to MTN network. Touching the number of years of subscription, 1- 4 years were 54 (39.1%), 5 – 9 years were 64 (46.4%), 10 – 14 years were 8 (5.8%), 15 years and above were 6 (4.35%). Six (4.34%) of the respondents did not respond. 5 – 9 years of subscription was on the high.

Table 1: Respondents' Perception and MTN Services

Service Parameters	Very good **(%)**	Good **(%)**	Fair **(%)**	Very Bad **(%)**	Bad **(%)**	Total
MTN customer relations is	52 37.7	50 36.2	28 20.3	0 0	8 5.8	**138 (100%)**
MTN Tariff Charges is	8 5.8	58 42	56 40.6	4 2.9	12 8.7	**138 (100%)**

MTN data plan and charges is	20 14.5	62 45	46 33.3	4 2.9	6 4.3	**138 (100%)**
MTN bonus plan is	32 23.2	48 34.8	22 16	30 21.7	6 4.3	**138 (100%)**
MTN response to customer's complaint is	36 26.1	40 29	42 30.4	8 5.8	12 8.7	**138 (100%)**
MTN service network is	64 46.4	48 34.8	20 14.5	2 1.4	4 2.9	**138 (100%)**
MTN business environment is	62 45	50 36.2	24 17.4	2 1.4	0 0	**(100%)**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

From table 1, a greater percent (37.7%) perceived MTN customer relations as very good while 36.2% sees it as good. 20% sees it as fair while 5.8 sees it as bad. None sees it as very bad. On MTN tariff, 58 (42%) of the respondents perceive MTN tariff as good while 56 (40.6%) perceive it as fair. Few of the respondents 8(5.8%), 4 (2.9%) and 12 (8.7%) perceive MTN tariff as very good, very bad and bad respectively. A greater percent 62(45%) of respondents see MTN data plan and charges as good, 20(14.5%) of respondents perceive it as good, 46(33.3%) of respondents see it as fail while only 4(2.9%) and 6(4.3%) of respondents see it as very bad and bad respectively. On MTN bonus plan, a summation of views revealed that a greater percent 80(68%) of respondents perceive it as good and very good respectively while the summation of views revealed few percent 36(26%) perceive it as bad and very bad respectively. Only 22(4.3%) of respondents see it as fair. On how MTN respond to customers' complaints, a summation of the responses revealed that a greater percent 76(55.1%) see it as good and very good while 20(14.5%) of respondents see it very bad and bad respectively. 42(30.4%) perceive it as fair. A greater percent 64(46.4%) and 48 (34.8%) respondents perceive MTN service network as very good and good respectively. Very few percent 2(14.5%) and 4(2.9%) respondents perceive it as very bad and bad respectively. Only 20 respondents, representing 14.5%, perceive it as fair. On MTN business environment, summated responses revealed that greater percent 62(45%) and 50 (36.2%) MTN business environment is seen as very good and good respectively. 24 (17.4%) respondents see it as fair while 2(1.4%) see it as very bad. None sees it as bad.

From the analysis above the first two research questions were adequately answered. The first research question sought to find out the image/impressions customers have about MTN organization. Observably, the seven areas of quality service measurement of image formation present positive images/impressions. Respondents' summative images/impressions for MTN quality customers' relations was positive. A greater percent (73.9) of respondents have positive image/impressions about MTN customers' relation. Virtually for all the seven areas of quality service measurement of image formation, customers' images/impressions were positive.

Likewise, from the data presentation on table 1, the second question that sought to examine the extent of the image/impression held by customers was also answered. Again, the extent/degree of the images/impressions held by customers about MTN quality service

delivery was high. A greater percent (see table 1) of customers perceive/view MTN quality service delivery as very good and good respectively (touching on all the seven areas of measurement of image formation). Very few of the respondents perceive or see MTN quality service delivery as touching the seven areas of image/impressions formation as very bad and bad (see table 1).

Table 2: Preference of MTN to other networks

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	36	26.1
No	74	53.6
Undecided	28	20.3
Total	**138**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

As could be seen in table 2, a greater percent (53.6%) of respondents did not prefer MTN to other networks. Only 26% affirmed that they prefer MTN to other networks. 20.3% of the respondents were undecided. It could be safely inferred that MTN is not preferred to other networks.

The third research questions sought to ascertain whether MTN organization is prefer to other telecommunication organizations. From able 2, it was evidenced that MTN is not preferred to other network. In fact, a greater percent a greater percent (53.6%) of respondents did not prefer MTN to other networks. Only 26% affirmed that they prefer MTN to other networks.

Table 3: Reasons for preference of MTN to other networks

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Good data plan	6	4.3
Network is everywhere you go	16	11.6
Reasonable tariff charges	4	2.9
Bonus plans	4	2.9
Good relations and prompt response to complaints	6	4.3
No Response (No and Undecided)	102	74
Total	**138**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

From the above table, a greater percent (74%) were undecided about their reason for preferring MTN to other networks. 11.6% of the respondents stated that their reason for preference of MTN to other network is that network is everywhere you go. The other reasons for their preference of MTN to other networks as could be seen from the table attracted less percentages.

Table 4: Subscription to other networks apart from MTN

Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	120	87
No	18	13
Total	**138**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2019

As observed from table 4, a greater percent (87) of respondents subscribed to other networks apart from MTN. Only 31% answered in the negative. This suggests that MTN has few loyal customers.

Discussion

We were not surprised that MTN is perceived favourably by its customers. Virtually in all the index of measurement the views/images were positively tilted. This may perhaps be informed by its high interconnectivity advantage over others. At least in Nigerian, even in remote areas one can be connected compared to other networks. By implication, MTN continued goal to ensure quality service delivery, directly or indirectly help customers form positive images, which to a large extent may snowball into high customers' patronage. The customers are sure to continue patronage of MTN. This is however, to the extent of ensuring quality service in all its ramifications.

It is however surprising that a greater percent a greater percent (53.6%) of respondents did not prefer MTN to other networks. Only 26% affirmed that they prefer MTN to other networks. This finding does not support the findings of Olumuyiwa & Oluwumi (2017). In their study, MTN was ranked higher in preference to other networks – MTN, 42%, Glo 22.95%, Airtel 17.22%, Etisalat 15.57%, Visafone 9.84%. It is instructive to note that the follow up question on the reason for their preference was also consistent. In fact, a greater percent (74%) were undecided about their reason for preferring MTN to other networks. Only 11.6% of the respondents preferred MTN to other network because the network is everywhere. The other reasons for their preference attracted lesser percentages. The implication of this finding is that MTN as an organization is actually losing out with its customers. Although it seems to have of high interconnectivity advantage, other areas of services especially with the tariff and data plan system are not favourably seen by its customers.

The indecisiveness of customers' about reasons for MTN preference to other networks may be taken in a sense to support the organizational image theory. All stakeholders, customers inclusive must be planned for and satisfied accordingly at all times. Shortcomings in any form should be immediately addressed. Customers satisfaction at all times may perhaps help to ensure continued patronage by customers. Customers may subscribe more to other network when they notice any form of disservice.

The finding on table 4 is instructive. 87 % subscribed to other networks apart from MTN while only 13 % remained loyal subscribers. Evidently, with the ever increasing competition and enlightened citizenry, one would have expected all to subscribe to other networks at least one, apart from MTN. It may be taken that the harsh economic realities may probably inform just remaining loyal to one network. By implication, MTN as an organization may attempt to put a policy in place to identify and keep loyal customers.

In all, the fact that MTN fared favourably in virtually all fronts of the seven areas of measurement of images/impression formation may further be taken for its acceptance by customers. To wit, the more organizations ensure customers' satisfaction the more positive image/impression customers will have about that organization and by extension more patronage. This would further translate into more profit for the organization.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Customers indeed form images/impressions about organization through direct or indirect interactions with such organizations. To ensure continued positive of customers' image, organizations endeavour to create and maintain quality service and others necessary engagements that may help build positive image. In the study, the general customers' image of MTN is positive. However, a greater percent of the respondents were undecided about preference for other networks. Furthermore, a greater percent (87) of respondents subscribe to other network apart from MTN.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are given:

i. MTN should work more on it data bonus plan. A situation where data bonus is whisk off even when unused does not augur well
ii. Besides data bonus plan, data plan of rolling over does not go well with some customers. MTN should allow data plan to follow pattern of operation of normal recharges. If data should remain depending on customers' usage.
iii. Further research should be carried out on how factors like gender influence customers' image/perception/attitude towards MTN.

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