BRAND DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGIES AND SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF MTN NIGERIA IN SOUTH-SOUTH REGION

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ABSTRACT: This study examines brand differentiation strategies and sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria in the South-South region. The specific objectives are to investigate the effect of brand trust, brand image, brand awareness, and service quality on MTN Nigeria's sustainable competitive advantage. This study adopted a cross-sectional method for data collection and empirical analysis. A stratified random sampling technique was used. A sample size of 357 was selected out of 5000 staff of MTN Retail Network Centres. The sample size was calculated using Krejcie and Morgan's table and Bowley's allocation formula. The study adopted a 5-point Likert scale structured questionnaire. A test-retest reliability technique was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.7 was generated. The data collected was analysed using correlation and regression analysis via the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Findings showed that brand trust ($\beta = 0.258$, $p < 0.05$), brand image ($\beta = 0.111$, $p < 0.05$), brand awareness ($\beta = 0.567$, $p < 0.01$), and service quality ($\beta = 0.465$, $p < 0.05$) had a strong, significant, positive relationship with MTN Nigeria's sustainable competitive advantage. The study revealed that brand differentiation strategies were responsible for 78% of the changes in the sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria. The study recommends, among others, that telecommunication companies should offer a distinguishable brand that has a quality that customers can trust, create a distinctive brand image in the public domain to enable customers' brand acceptability, and increase market share through competitive performance.

Keywords: Brand Differentiation, Strategies, Sustainable Competitive Advantage, MTN Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

In today's world of digital communication, the telecommunication sector has emerged as the fastest-growing and most competitive market segment. It is the belief among researchers that the telecommunications business in the world has, in recent times, been among the most competitive in an economy (e.g., Muhammed & Oyinwola, 2019). In developed countries, telecommunication companies compete for market supremacy. As competition intensifies in the telecommunications sector, players are forced to craft superior strategies. Strategies that will help them gain a competitive edge over their competitors (Mosomi & Deya, 2018). Recent happenings in marketing

have shown that such superior strategies should be distinctive. Aimed at connecting people, creating possibilities, and changing lives by offering the best network, value, and services.

Studies have shown that an operator must continually redefine and reinvent its strategies to remain competitive in telecommunications (e.g., Danso, 2014). Research by Danso (2014) affirms that it is important for an organization to apply its strengths and distinctive competencies. This is to gain a competitive advantage over its rivals in any given environment. Telecommunication in Africa has opened up new vistas of business opportunities (Africa et al., 2020). Therefore, aggressive competition has been said to have deepened among the key players in the telecoms market, striving to claim superiority over each other. In Nigeria, competitiveness among telecommunication companies is a major challenge. The challenge has extended so much that telecommunication companies are faced with cutthroat competition. The Nigerian telecommunications market has seen a sharp increase in competition, which has made it necessary for operators to introduce several survival tactics to attract new consumers and keep the existing ones (Opele et al., 2020).

Moreover, the competition is getting fiercer by the day as operators have to compete desperately for the same potential subscribers (Mughele & Olatokun, 2012). The telecommunication companies operating in Nigeria are MTN Nigeria, Airtel Nigeria, Globacom, 9 Mobile Nigeria, and others operating in niche markets. Each of these companies has been operating in Nigeria for the past decades in the most turbulent and competitive business environment. Nigeria remains one of the most competitive GSM markets in Africa, and it has been affirmed by researchers that the Nigerian telecom sector is the fiercest in Africa (Dakare, 2015; Adio et al., 2018), with the four major companies fighting to retain and even attract more customers to increase their market share. MTN admits to the fact that the company operates in an increasingly competitive business environment (MTN Nigeria, 2019). However, because there are new players entering the market and existing ones expanding, MTN Nigeria keeps striving to maintain its competitive advantage.

Statement of the Problem

Even though the Nigerian communication sector operates in a highly competitive and rapidly changing business environment, MTN Nigeria sustains its competitive advantage, remaining in its strategic position as the topmost service provider in the South-South region. The company's success and strategies are puzzling in the face of today's competitiveness. Therefore, it may be helpful to investigate MTN's branding strategies in an attempt to unravel the company's sustained market leadership. It is against this background that this current study examined the effect of brand differentiation strategies and sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria in the South-South Region.

Objective of the Study

To explore the brand differentiation strategies employed by MTN Nigeria in the South-South region, the following objectives are examined.

i. Examine the effect of brand trust and sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.

ii.   Examine the effect of brand image and sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.
iii.   Examine the effect of brand awareness and sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.
iv.   Examine the effect of service quality and sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Conceptual Review

Conceptualization of Brand

When a product or service is branded, it invariably communicates to customers that the product or service is focused on providing solutions. Even if other businesses offer the same, the primary intent is to assert dominance. What is a brand? A brand can be any name, term, sign, symbol, design, or combination of these that is used to identify the goods or services of one seller from among a group of sellers (Abdurahman, 2021). Okocha and Emezue (2021) defined a brand as a means of representing and identifying a product or range of products. Besides, brands are intangible assets of companies, and the use of these brands to make good relationships with customers is proving a good marketing strategy (Sheikh et al., 2014). Therefore, developing a distinctive name, packaging, and design, or a combination of them, is a means of creating a brand that offers superior value. According to the MTN Integrated Business Report (2008), MTN is a well-established global brand of mobile operators in emerging markets.

The brand MTN Nigeria is well positioned as a network with the widest voice and data network coverage underpinning its brand theme, "*Everywhere you go*" (MTN Nigeria, 2019). For many firms, brands are among their most valuable assets (Rajavi et al., 2019). Rajavi et al. (2019) claimed that the value of the 100 most successful global brands alone stood at $4.4 trillion in 2018. Abdurahman (2021) averred that brands often provide the primary pointers of differentiation between competitive offerings, and it is critical to the success of a company. Companies benefit immensely from strong brands because they add value to companies and positively affect consumers' perceptions. It acts as a barrier to competition, improves profit margins, and provides a foundation for brand extension. Consumers also benefit as strong brands represent a form of quality certification, aid consumer decision-making, and create trust among them. Nowadays, people are no longer interested in products. Attention and focus are on unique and strong brands. It is important to know that a brand is not only something that evokes positive associations and is easy to pronounce and recall but also suggests product benefits and is distinctive.

Brand Differentiation

Brand differentiation is about being different in a distinctive way(s). A company must differentiate its offerings from those of its competitors. So that customers can identify their desired brand. Munasinghe and Dissanayake (2017) argued that the main goal of marketers is to differentiate their brands from other brands and to face the competition with the least resistance. MTN Integrated

Business Report (2008) claimed that the MTN brand is a key differentiator in the marketplace. Munasinghe and Dissanayake (2017) averred that differentiation is reflected in one of the older concepts but still finds validity in the empirical scopes and practice realities. Today, a brand has gone beyond the use of only a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of them to differentiate from its rival products. The act of offering better products, better design, and better service to unique customers compared to competitors is called brand differentiation. A brand must be perceived as different to win market share. Differentiation has to be perceived by customers as a benefit, while the price factor becomes no reason to buy (Munasinghe & Dissanayake, 2017). Some of the brand differentiation strategies are as follows:

Brand trust: The survival of any company is determined by the company's ability to create a brand that customers can rely on. One of the most important factors impacting customers' purchasing decisions is brand trust. This is a key factor that influences a company's sales performance. For sales performance effectiveness, the company's brand must possess quality. The ability to give the customer the desired satisfaction. Okpighe et al. (2021) averred that trust is seen as the degree of confidence that a customer has in exchange relationships. In today's business world saturated with the ambition of high profit, brand trust is key. One of the ways to generate a good sales performance is by reinforcing a brand trust perception of a consumer. Trust is a function of a strong brand—the confidence and assurance a customer has in a brand to perform on a promise. A fulfilled promise is what matters to the customers. According to MTN Nigeria (2019), the company offers the best value proposition in the Nigerian telecommunications market.

Brand image: The ability to create and maintain a strong brand image in today's competitive market is crucial. Brand image plays a vital role in building up a brand. It is a set of brand connections where everything is bonded in recollection to a brand and, more often than not, is achieved in a meaningful way (Anas et al., 2021). Brand image is known as a series of recognitions regarding a brand as affiliated with the consumers' minds (Cham et al., 2020). Developing a strong image requires creativity and hard work, as images cannot be implanted in people's minds overnight or spread through the mass media (Atidira et al., 2019). Due to intense competition, organizations develop a good image, which is important to maintain their long-term competitiveness (Enedy, 2015). It is important to know that (Atidira et al., 2019) brand image is a group of brand associations that are formed and embedded in the minds of consumers. It is imperative to know that brand image is a storehouse of trust that delivers on promises.

Brand awareness: Brand awareness is very important in competitive industries. The higher the popularity, the stronger the brand awareness for each of the firm's products. Brand awareness plays a fundamental role in the decision-making of the customer (Anas et al., 2021). In his opinion, Enedy (2015) states that brand awareness means the ability of a consumer to recognize and recall a brand in different situations. Nike's infamous "Just Do It" campaign is one of the best and has increased customer patronage of Nike's products (Marketing Evolution, 2018). Wardani and Gustia (2016) averred that a company will make every effort so that its brands are widely known. A well-promoted brand serves as a powerful marketing tool for products, services, concepts, and organizations as a whole (Muchina & Okello, 2016). However, Ishola (2022) maintained that a difference is worth promoting if it is important, distinctive, superior, communicable, pre-emptive, affordable, and profitable.

Service quality: For many years, service quality has been recognized as the foundation of every successful business in the world. Service quality is regarded as one of the critical elements of competitiveness (Opele et al., 2020). Service quality is the gap between customers' expectancy and actual performance. It is believed that the quality of service (QoS) supplied by some GSM operators in Nigeria has been terrible. Agubor et al. (2016) stated that in Nigeria, there have been subscribers' frequent complaints of the quality of service (QoS) rendered by the operators. The quality of service generally can be described as the level of satisfaction a customer or an end-user obtained from a service (Lawal et al., 2016). Munasinghe & Dissanayake (2017) affirmed that manufacturing companies are thinking not only to innovate but also to invest in service differentiation as customers are keen on services ever before. Service quality is an important variable for service providers to compete with their rivals (Moreira et al., 2017), as it helps to reduce costs by minimizing customer complaints and reducing the necessity for post-sale follow-ups.

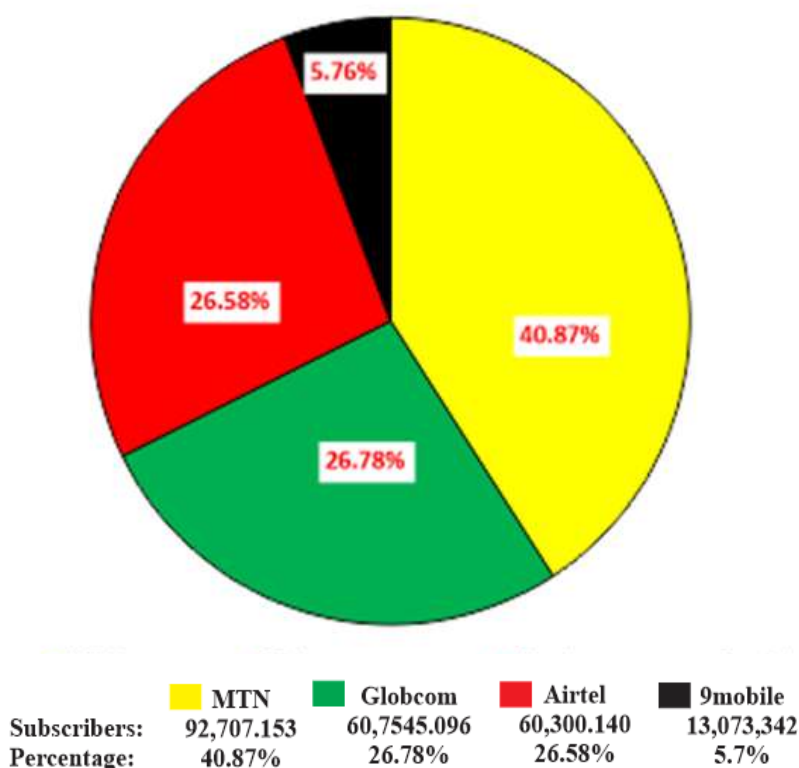**Sustainable Competitive Advantage**

The concept of competitive advantage describes the use of strategies by business organizations to gain a sustainable edge over competitors. Sustaining a competitive advantage is the challenge many businesses face in today's fast-paced world. According to Wairimu and Kirui (2020), competitive advantage is the benefit strategy of companies collaborating to create a more effective competitive advantage in their market. Competitive advantage is a firm's advantage over others in the industry (Mosomi & Deya, 2018). Firms require competitive strategies to address the competitive challenges they experience in the environment. Companies are required to choose and decide on strategies that can be employed to face competition (Wairimu et al., 2020). A company carries out strategies to establish good cooperative relationships and be able to compete effectively in the marketplace so that the company can dominate in competition (Setyawati & Imronudin 2020). The table and chart below show MTN Nigeria's competitive position.

Table 2.1:   Active Subscribers as at December 2021 and 2022

S/No.	Networks	Active subscribers in 2021	New Subscriptions in 2022	Total active subscribers in 2022
1.	MTN Nigeria	73.5 million	15.4 million	89 million
2.	Globalcom	54.9 million	5.3 million	60.3 million
3.	Airtel Nigeria	53.9 million	6.1 million	60 million
4.	9 Mobile	-	Marginal growth	12.8 million

Source: Daily Trust (2023)

Figure 2.1:   Market share of GSM Operators in Nigeria, February 2023

	MTN	Globcom	Airtel	9mobile
Subscribers:	92,707.153	60,7545.096	60,300.140	13,073,342
Percentage:	40.87%	26.78%	26.58%	5.7%

Source: Techeconomy (2023)

Figure 2.2:   Conceptual Model
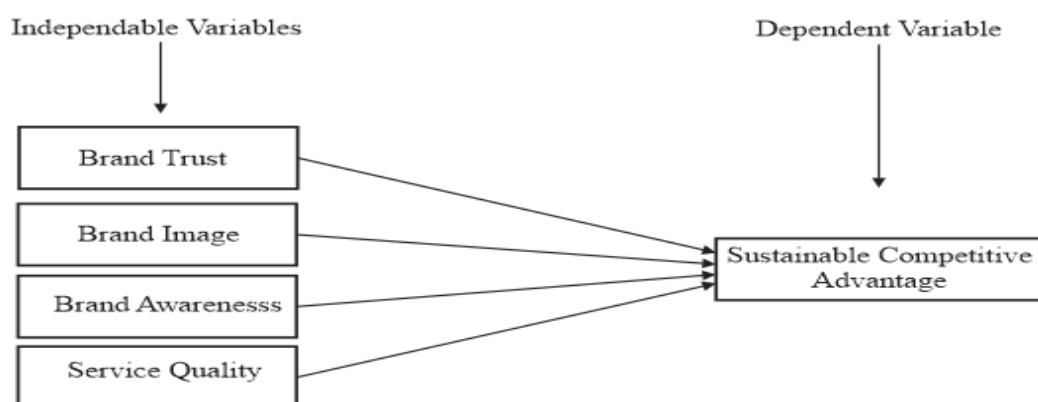
Research Model: Researchers (2024)

Brand Trust and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Brand trust is a crucial factor in creating a sustainable competitive advantage. Brand trust is the consumers' belief in a company's ability to deliver on its promises and maintain high-quality standards over time. As competition becomes stiffer daily, companies need to differentiate themselves from competitors. Brand trust, which is brand credibility, is created by augmenting the core product with distinctive features, such as performance, packaging, reliability, conformance, durability, serviceability, and aesthetic value. It is believed that as quality gets better, the competitive advantage also gets better, but if the quality of the product gets worse, the competitive advantage will also get worse. Danibrata (2019) asserted that companies that are capable of implementing product quality will be able to maintain a competitive edge over their competitors.

Ho₁: *Brand trust has no significant effect on the sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.*

Brand Image and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Brand image and sustainable competitive advantage are both important factors for the long-term success of companies. The objective of brand image is to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. By enhancing the public perception of a brand, companies can set themselves above and over competitors and create a more loyal customer base. This leads to increased sales and profitability for the company in the long run. To maintain this competitive edge, companies must build an image that will appeal to the customers' emotions. They must continually innovate and adapt to changing market conditions; once consumers associate a brand with a positive emotion, loyalty and engagement increase. Consumers rely more heavily on emotions than product and price when choosing between brands (Marketing Evolution, 2018).

Ho₂: *Brand image has no significant effect on the sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.*

Brand Awareness and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Brand awareness and sustainable competitive advantage are two business factors that are connected and interwoven. Both have a significant impact on a company's attractiveness. Together, these business concepts are fundamental for companies seeking to thrive in the marketplace. Brand awareness, however, is the level of familiarity and recognition that consumers have with an individual brand. Building quality awareness (visibility) in a competitive marketplace is imperative. This is due to the positive relationship between brand awareness and sustainable competitive advantage. To achieve a competitive edge over competitors, it is crucial to launch proper brand visibility campaigns. Danso (2014) stated that the biggest telecommunication operator in Ghana adopted the strategy of sustained advertising campaigns as a competitive strategy.

Ho₃: *Brand awareness has no significant effect on the sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.*

Service Quality and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Service quality can be a key factor in companies' gaining sustainable competitive advantage. The ability to consistently provide quality service is essential when attempting to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Providing high-quality services can improve customer satisfaction and loyalty, leading to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Quality service allows companies to build trust with customers, which can create a sustainable, virtuous cycle of increased competitive advantage. According to Danso (2014), to compete successfully in markets where products are the same or very similar and prices are the same, service is often the only competitive advantage available. The implementation of operational excellence, customer insights, and innovative excellence can advance this competitive advantage. Service quality can be used as a way to service differentiation, attract new customers, and increase market share (Moreira et al., 2017).

Ho4: *Service quality has no significant effect on the competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria Communications Plc in South-South, Nigeria.*

Theoretical Review

Brand Identity Theory (BIT)

Brand identity theory (BIT) is a marketing theory that aims to explain the practice of corporate branding. At its core, the theory suggests that brands are an asset capable of creating value. Brand identity is central to consumer-based brand equity. The concept of BIT has evolved through contributors from various researchers and scholars such as David Aaker, Jean-Noel Kapferer, Kevin Lane Keller, Jennifer Aaker, and David Buss. The brand's identity is the fundamental means of consumer recognition and symbolises the brand's differentiation from competitors. It fuels recognition and amplifies differentiation. This theory is centred on the idea of symbolic meaning. The term "brand identity" refers to the symbolic meaning that consumers assign to a brand. When carefully crafted, brand identities can bring sustainable competitive advantages like differentiation and loyalty. Both of these increase the company's overall performance. MTN Nigeria, a Nigerian telecommunications company, has successfully benefited from product branding, enhancing its competitive edge in the industry. The company leverages its existing products to build customer relationships and position itself well in the market.

Porter's Theory of Competitive Advantage

The theory was developed by Michael E. Porter of Harvard University in 1979. Michael Porter is a renowned American academic and business strategist. The core idea of Porter's theory is to identify a firm's relative competitive advantage to create a strategy that will maximise the firm's profitability. Porter argues that the goals and strategies in firms vary throughout the world and it is important that the right goals and strategies are applied to meet the expectations of shareholders, managers, and employees in a firm (Keter, 2012). The theory explores how businesses gain competitive advantage through the determinants of industrial attractiveness. Numerous studies have demonstrated its efficacy in creating successful competitive strategies. Porter's theory can

help MTN Nigeria assess the competitive landscape in the Nigerian telecommunications industry. With a substantial market share and competitive pricing, MTN Nigeria has strong bargaining power. However, the threat of new entrants is low due to high investment costs. Competition is fierce, and existing competitors are adopting new technologies for better results.

Resource-Based Theory (RBT)

One of the most basic and relevant theories in the studies of competitive advantage is the resource-based theory (RBT). This theory was put forward by Penrose in 1959 in his work titled "The Theory of the Growth of the Firm." Edith Penrose proposed this theory on the effective management of firms' resources, diversification strategy, and productive opportunities. Others who contributed to this theory are Birger Wernefelt, Jay Barney, and Margaret Peteraf. The RBT has become a prominent fundamental in strategic management, a concept that states that a business's competitive advantage comes from the resources it possesses. The RBT is a framework used to determine strategic resources with the potential to deliver comparative advantage to a firm (Ishola, 2022). MTN Nigeria uses RBT to gain a competitive advantage in telecommunications. The company invests in valuable assets like brand awareness and customer loyalty, creating multiple areas of competitive advantage. RBT also offers insights into MTN Nigeria's competitive advantage and presents opportunities for improvement.

Empirical Review

An empirical review supports this current study as it underpins the subject matter: brand differentiation strategies and sustainable competitive advantage of MTN Nigeria in the South-South region. Chigwende and Govender (2020) conducted a study on corporate brand image and switching behaviour in the case of mobile telecommunications customers in Zimbabwe. The study affirms a relationship between the image structure of mobile network service providers and the changing behaviour of customers, and customer satisfaction affects their trust. Okocha and Emezue (2021) focused on the effect of corporate branding on the performance of manufacturing firms in Enugu State, Nigeria. The objective is to determine the effect of brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality on a firm's performance. This study concludes that the brand enables consumers to differentiate between products and services that meet their needs. This study suggests that manufacturers should acquire brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality to ensure that customers return and recognize the brand. Mugo and Macharia (2021) investigated the influence of innovation strategies on competitive advantage in telecommunication companies in Kenya. The research objectives are based on product innovation, process innovation, technology innovation, and business innovation that impact the competitive advantage of Kenyan telecommunication companies. The study concludes that when used appropriately, new strategies can provide a platform for long-term competitive success. This study recommends that companies create and maintain a commitment to new ideas to be effective in the telecommunication sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a survey research design and collects cross-sectional data for empirical analysis. The study's population consisted of 5,000 MTN Retail Network staff in South-South

region. The sample size was calculated using Krejcie and Morgan's table and Bowley's allocation formula. This study used a stratified random sampling technique to select a sample size of 357 respondents. This technique involved dividing the population of MTN Retail Network Centre staff into smaller groups known as strata across the South-South region. The sample size was determined at random from each of the strata. Moreover, Sharma's (2017) concept was strictly followed, which stated that a random sample from each stratum should be taken in a number proportional to the stratum's size when compared to the population. In the proportionate random sampling, each stratum had an equal sampling fraction. This technique was used in the study since the entire population is heterogeneous, which was further broken down into homogeneous groups. Using this technique, the study ensures that the sample represents all the segments of the study population without being biased.

A structured questionnaire was used to elicit information from respondents; a 5-point Likert scale was used. Out of the three hundred and fifty-seven (357) copies of the questionnaire that were administered, only three hundred and forty-six (346) copies of the questionnaire were retrieved. This indicates that the questionnaire has a response rate of 97%. This is because the respondents showed interest in the study. Thus, the analysis of data in this study is based on the 97% (346) success rate of the sample size. A test-retest reliability technique was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. *Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.7 was generated*. The data collected was analysed using correlation and regression analysis via the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25.

The general form of the equation to predict $SCA = \beta o + \beta_1 BT + \beta_2 BI + \beta_3 BA + \beta_4 SQ + \varepsilon$ Where:
SCA   =   Sustainable Competitive Advantage

BT   =   Brand Trust

BI   =   Brand Image

BA   =   Brand Awareness

SQ   =   Service Quality

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 3.1: Intercorrelations and Descriptive Analysis of the Studied Variables

	Brand trust	Brand image	Brand awareness	Service quality	Sustainable competitive advantage
Brand trust	1	.075	.453**	.016	.531**
Brand image		1	.127*	.538**	.453**
Brand awareness			1	-.084	.660**
Brand awareness				1	.482**
Sustainable competitive advantage					1

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

Table 3.2: Regression Analysis of Brand Differentiation Strategies and Sustainable

Competitive Advantage

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-17.371	1.200		-14.472	.000		
Brand trust	.294	.032	.258	9.176	.000	.792	1.263
Brand image	.140	.038	.111	3.672	.000	.680	1.470
Brand awareness	.701	.036	.567	19.732	.000	.758	1.319
1 Service quality	.566	.037	.465	15.377	.000	.684	1.461

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainable competitive advantage

Table 3.3: Fitness of the Model

ANOVA[a]

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	240.490	4	60.123	313.552	.000[b]
1 Residual	65.386	341	.192		
Total	305.876	345			

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainable competitive advantage

Table 3.4: Model summary

Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.887[a]	.786	.784	.43789	.786	313.552	4	341	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Brand trust, Brand image, Brand awareness, Service quality
b. Dependent: Variable: Sustainable competitive advantage

Brand Trust and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Brand trust exhibits a significant positive relationship with sustainable competitive advantage (ß = 0.258, $p < 0.05$). The result supported the H_1 test result (0.000 < 0.05). This finding supports

Dirisu et al.'s (2013) conclusion that there exists a significant positive relationship between improved quality and organisational performance. Quaye et al. (2022) confirm the prediction that customer advocacy is positively connected to brand loyalty through a sequential mediation of brand trust, brand relationship, and quality. There is a substantial correlation between the strength of consumer-brand relationships and brand trust. By understanding this connection better, companies might be able to boost their customers' loyalty to their brand and obtain a sustainable competitive advantage. This has important implications for companies seeking to differentiate themselves from competition by building quality into their brand.

Brand Image and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Brand image shows a significant positive correlation with competitive advantage ($ß = 0.111$, $p < 0.05$). This finding supports the H_2 test result ($0.000 < 0.05$). Chiguvi et al. (2020) support the finding that an image differentiation strategy is a means of gaining a sustainable competitive advantage. Similarly, Cham et al. (2020) asserted that brand reputation would play a determining role as a competitive strategy. The findings suggest that universities with a strong brand image tend to attract more students and funding, as well as have greater levels of student loyalty and engagement. A positive reputation can help build trust and credibility with prospective students and parents, which can ultimately translate into increased enrolment and retention rates. This study provides new insight into the numerous benefits associated with cultivating a positive brand image.

Brand Awareness and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Brand awareness correlates positively with the firm's competitive advantage ($ß = 0.567$, $p < 0.01$). The findings support the H_3 test result ($0.000 < 0.05$). This is consistent with Agaba et al.'s (2019) findings that a brand awareness campaign is strongly linked to a firm's competitive advantage. Brand awareness and sustainable competitive advantage are two significant concepts in a brand's marketing strategy. The findings are congruent with those of Parashar and Rastogi (2018), who found that brand awareness plays an important role in differentiating and communicating the brand identity in a way that consumers understand what the brand stands for. According to Mwaura and Mang'ana (2023), the customer's ability to remember and identify the brand is important for the purchasing decision. These findings suggest that a company with proper brand awareness will always gain a competitive edge in maintaining a high customer base. Brand awareness campaigns will help companies persuade, inform, and educate their prospective customers. The results could be used to inform customers who are familiar with a brand to make a repeat purchase, recommend the brand to others, and resist switching to competitors.

Service Quality and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Service quality shows a strong positive correlation with competitive advantage ($ß = 0.465$, $p < 0.05$). The findings support the H_4 test result ($0.000 < 0.05$). This is in agreement with Mutua's (2017) findings, which claimed that customer service affects organizational outcomes. One possible explanation is that providing high-quality service improves a firm's competitive advantage significantly. Nekmahmud and Rahman (2018) demonstrate that service quality correlates positively with customer satisfaction in mobile service usage. According to Warraich et

al. (2013), the study has a practical implication for policymakers in Pakistan's telecommunication sector in terms of understanding customer behavioural intents properly to customers presenting their firms' service quality. This study showcases how empathy in customer service, as well as the need for personalized attention, is important. This is an important implication for the telecom industry to do well in terms of quality service.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To acquire a sustainable competitive advantage in the Nigerian telecommunication sector, it is important to consider developing a strong brand identity and enhancing brand recognition and reputation. It is important to deliver exceptional and consistent customer experience with unique value propositions and analyse the performance of existing institutional policies and frameworks to develop strategies for the future. Based on the findings and conclusion, the study recommends that telecommunication companies should:

i. Create a distinguishable brand, one that is quality and reliable and that customers can trust, tailored to satisfying their needs.
ii. Create a distinctive brand image in the public domain to enable customers' brand acceptability and increase market share through competitive performance.
iii. Embark on consistent and extensive brand awareness campaigns through personal selling, public relations, publicity, and strategic advertising to promote, inform, and educate customers concerning the company's distinguishable brand.
iv. Offer their customers quality of service that is customer-oriented and quick responses to customers' complaints in a friendlier manner.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted, and data were collected from MTN Retail Network Centres of MTN Nigeria in the South-South region. The researchers' main limitation in the study was the sample selection and data collection. The secrecy of some respondents hindered the researchers' effort to gather relevant information necessary for the research work. Negative and uncooperative attitudes of some respondents also lead to giving false information or incomplete responses. Moreover, the escalation of transportation fares across the country as a result of the subsidy removal by His Excellency, Sen. Bola Ahmed Tinubu (GCFR), posed a challenge while collecting data. Nevertheless, with these challenges, the researcher ensured that they did not affect the research study beyond expectations.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest whatsoever that could impair the research findings. This study is strictly academic in nature, and its sole purpose is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. All views obtained in the course of this academic exercise are treated with the utmost confidence.

Suggestion for Future Research

The study covered only staff of MTN Retail Network Centres in the South-South Region of Nigeria; other studies could be carried out to cover other regions.

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