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RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND PATRONAGE OF CONVENIENCE STORES IN C ALABAR

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Abstract
The study examined the effect of relationship marketing and patronage of convenience stores in Calabar. In deed the dynamic approach to selling has moved to relationship based in a way. The study reviewed related literature based on the objectives. The study adopted a survey research design with the survey of a structured questionnaire based on five point likert scale. It was used to measure trust, commitment and competence as the independent variables. Systematic sampling procedure was adopted while the Topman's formula was used to get the sample size. The use of multiple regression analysis was used to test the formulated hypotheses. The result of the analysis revealed that all the three variables (trust, commitment and competence) were statistically significant to induce patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis.

Key Words: *Commitment, Competence, Customer Patronage, Relationship Marketing, Trust,*

Introduction
Today's consumers are very sensitive to market, price and product information and as kings within the business space it remains the desire of every convenience store operator to maximally satisfy the numerous desires of consumers in order to improve their overall competitive advantage and their market share. Going by the above, a key objective of convenient store operators is to increase their market share within the environment in which they operate (Al-Hawary, 2013). In a bid to achieve the above, several marketing philosophies, strategies and techniques to increase market share by attracting new customers and also retaining existing ones are adopted (Das, 2009). One of the most widely adopted marketing strategies according to Odion (2003) is relationship marketing. The adoption of this marketing strategy is owed to the fact that it builds mutually satisfying long-term relationships with customers, suppliers, distributors and other marketing partners in order to satisfy and retain them. According to Kotler and Keller (2006) relationship marketing evolved from direct response marketing in the 1960s and emerged in the 1980s when companies began to place emphasis on building long-term relationships with their customers in the belief and understanding that it is more profitable to keep and improve relationships with current customers than acquiring new

ones. Thus, at the core of relationship marketing is the notion of customer attraction and customer retention (Smith & Cross, 2001).

Supporting the above, Uchenna (2020) opined that early studies on long-term relationships between some companies and customers have shown that the cost of retaining existing customers is far below what it takes to attract new ones. Relationship marketing attempts to gain customer patronage by focusing on building long-term relationships with customers, placing importance on a customer's life-time values to the store rather than the profit made in a single transaction. Furthermore, relationship marketing emphasizes share of customer rather than market share which is often a yardstick for success in transactional marketing (Lacobucci, 2000). As a result, customized offerings could be made to each customer, and in the process added value is created. A convenient store is a retail outlet where consumers purchase items with ease. They are often located at close proximity to consumers' reach. Furthermore, convenient store operators are fast adopting relationship marketing owed to the realization that it is cheaper to keep existing customers than acquire new ones and more so, the longer a relationship lasts the more profitable it is for the firm (Lyn, 2005). Based on the above assumptions, this study aims to determine the influence of relationship marketing on patronage of convenience stores in Calabar metropolis as relationship marketing dimensions such as trust, commitment, communication, and competence would be x rayed to ascertain their influence on customers' patronage.

Statement of the problem

The Technological advancements and innovations that occasioned the birth of the 21st century has intensified competitiveness within the market space. This remains true as business organizations find it almost impossible to introduce product into the market without such product having to compete for patronage from other brands. This dilemma has led business organizations to commit huge resources in designing and adopting several marketing communication and promotional strategies with the intension of gaining competitive advantage as well as increasing their overall market share through improved customer patronage (Uchenna, 2020). However, most of the committed resources are often termed to be wasted because such programs often fail to gain the desired outcome, as consumers are increasingly aware of the various marketing stimuli targeted towards them, thereby choosing not to respond to such stimuli's. Thus, in a bid to resolve the dilemma above, most business organizations have resorted to abridge their marketing strategies by building mutually satisfying long-term relationships with customers, suppliers, distributors and other marketing partners in order to satisfy and retain them. This is owed to the fact that early studies on long-term relationships between some companies and customers have shown that even though consumers are perceived to be rational beings they also are empathic towards human relations. In line with the above assertion, Smith and Cross (2001) maintained that consumers will respond more to the product offerings of an organization if mutual relationships are established.

Based on the above assertion, this study seeks to determine the influence of relationship marketing on patronage of convenience stores in Calabar metropolis. Specifically, it intends to:

1. examine the influence of trust on customer patronage of convenience store in Calabar Metropolis.
2. determine the influence of commitment on customer patronage of convenience store in Calabar Metropolis.
3. evaluate the influence of competence on customer patronage of convenience store in Calabar Metropolis.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses in their null form were formiulated for the purpose of this study:

H_{01}: Trust does not have any significant effect on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

H_{02}: Commitment has no significant effect on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

H_{03}: Competence Trust does not have any significant effect on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

Literature Review

Concept of Relationship Marketing

According to Chatterjee and Kamesh (2019) relationship marketing is a form of marketing that developed from direct response marketing in the 1960s and emerged in the 1980s in which emphasize is placed on building long-term relationship with customers. Relationship marketing is oriented towards strong, lasting relationships with customers. Relationship marketing as attracting, maintaining and, in multi-service organizations, enhancing customer relationships (Anyadighibe et al., 2023). This definition provides a platform for analyzing consumer relationships as well as that of business-to business. Customer bonding, which is another term for relationship marketing is defined by Smith and Cross (2001) as a systematic way of maximizing customer loyalty that makes the most of mass media to create awareness and brand identity and of data base-driven marketing to build customer relationships. This definition clearly moves the concept of relationship marketing closer to the everyday concerns of consumer marketers. It also unlocks the notion of bonds- the ties that cement the relationship between a product and its customers. Relationship marketing involve methods and tactics to develop long-term relationship with customers in order to retain them. This implies that an organization adopting relationship marketing philosophy must exceed customer satisfaction in order to retain them and develop a healthy relationship with their customers. According to Odion (2003), relationship marketing is the use of the wide- range of marketing, sales, communication and customer-care techniques and processes to identify named individual customers, create a long-lasting relationship between them and the company.

Morgan and Hunt (2014) define relationship marketing as all marketing activities directed towards establishing developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges. Relationship marketing involves cultivating the right kind of relationships with the right constituent groups. Relationship Marketing emphasizes building long-term relationships with customers rather than on individual transaction and involves

understanding the customers' needs as they go through the life cycle. It emphasizes provision of a range of products or services to existing customers as the need arises (Odion, 2003).

Dimensions of Relationship Marketing

According to Sheehy (2019). The dimensions of relationship marketing include:

1. Trust: Trust is very essential in relationship development and it has been observed as main factor that leads to the customer satisfaction and which turned into continuous purchase intention. More the level of trust between the parties more will be willingness of customer to remained with same service provider. A firm's ability to meet customer promise builds level of trust (Tabrani et al., 2018). Long-lasting firm-customer relationship is not possible without having the trust because of intense competition for customers among organizations. Higher the level of a firm's responsiveness, dependability, competency and integrity higher will be the trust of customer. Cheshin et al. (2018) established that trust is a key variable that strengthens the relationship. Trust is an essential component of relationship marketing strategy where people form the basis of their relations and relationships that are based on trust develop strong bonds between members and grow into cherished (Anyadighibe, Awara, Cobham & Ekom, 2023).

2. Commitment: Commitment is an essential sphere in the subject of marketing where the nature of exchange transaction has been evolved into relational mode and now commitment is one of the indispensable dimensions of relationship marketing. Commitment is related to how much customer feels sense of attachment and belongingness with an organization. Beal and Sabadie (2018) elucidated that commitment is the reason that induce customers to put some extra effort and create the feelings of satisfaction to be the part of an organization. Imouokhome *et al.* (2020) stated that commitment is the critical relationship marketing tool that allow firms to gain competitive superiority and encourage customer to use and patronize them. Sirdeshmukh et al. (2018) revealed that commitment is the sensation of the customer for which users are willing to pay extra to avail the service. Commitment is the strength of relationship with a firm and high level of commitment leads to high level of loyalty towards the company.

3. Competence: Competence is one of the most important resources of organizations. It is through specialization, the customer's orientation is defined, and how to establish successful marketing relationships. The competence factor is a key element in achieving high levels of performance. Ameri & Dutta (2005) define competence as "the use of information, evaluating and then organizing it to be applied by specialists in order to satisfy the needs and desires of their customers and to enhance their loyalty." Competence can be defined as performance that can be observed in the function. It may be defined as a set of criteria that can be achieved by a worker in a job.

Concept of Customer Patronage

Customer Patronage in clear terms is the acquisition of a product or service for direct or indirect use. People patronize organizations products at one time or the other. Patronage often times precedes loyalty because a customer who patronizes a service and is fully satisfied with such service would become loyal to the service provided. Therefore, there is a strong relationship between patronage and loyalty. Patronage is burn out of a desire to be committed to an organization either based on its service quality or perceived service qualities. Hence, the extent to which a customer will patronize the services of an organization depends on how the customer perceives the services offered by the organization and how the customer also thinks and feels that the condition of the service environment is consistent with his / her personality.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework as shown below was developed for this study

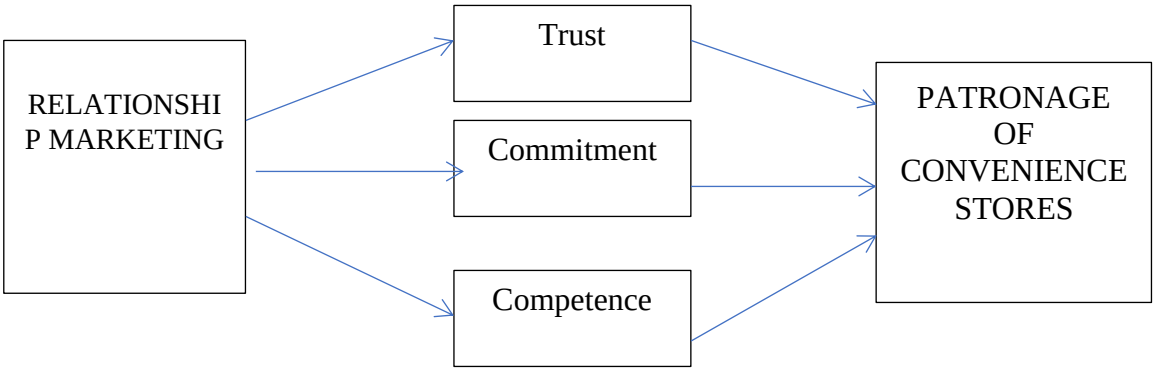

Figure 2: Conceptual framework
Source: The Researcher

The above conceptual model seeks to empirically reveal the effect of relationship marketing dimensions such as trust, commitment and competence on the patronage of convenience store. However, the above effect remains subject to statistical validation.

Theoretical framework

The theories upon which this study is anchored upon is the Relationship marketing theory

The Relationship Commitment Model

The Relationship and commitment model was propounded by Sharma and Patterson (2000), this model shows the determinants of relationship commitment. The model consists of three factors, namely communication effectiveness, technical quality and functional quality, all affected by trust in the relationship which in turns affect relationship commitment. Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990), maintains that trust is simply the reliance on or confidence in, the process or person. Hence, the greater the level of trust the stronger the relationship commitments. Sharma and Patterson (2000) also defined trust as the belief that the services provider can be relied on to behave in such a way that the long- term interests of the buyer will be served. Morgan and Hunt

(2014) further maintained that trust has a positive relation with the extent through which the firms share similar values. According to Sharma and Patterson (2000), service quality is divided into two main components, namely technical quality and functional quality. Technical quality is related to the actual outcomes or the core service as perceived by the client. The competency of the professionals in achieving the best return on investment for their client at acceptable levels of risks is viewed and technical quality is relevant to the promised service. Sharma and Patterson (2000) further argued that, functional quality is concerned with 'what' is delivered and `how` the service is delivered. It is concerned with the interaction between the service provider and service receiver, and is assessed in a highly subjective manner. According to them, trust had a great effect on how quality is delivered, both in terms of functional and technical quality. The greater the quality perceived, the stronger is the relationship commitment.

Methodology

The study adopted the survey research design. Etuk (2012) asserts that research design is the framework or the blue print for effective collection, measurement and analysis of data. The design provides the study with relevant data from the sample population. The population of the study is the total number of elements the researcher intends to study and for the purpose of this study customers of Coslow and Madobi Convenient stores constituted the population of the study Sampling techniques are procedures adopted to systematically select the chosen sample in a specified way. Therefore, the purposive or judgemental non probability sampling technique was considered appropriate for this study because according to Etuk (2010) the technique permits the researcher to select the sample that fits his /her purpose of study. Hence, in determining the sample size from an unknown research population, the topman formula is adopted. Therefore, the Topman's formula is represented below as

$$n = \frac{Z^2 P.Q}{E^2}$$

Where n = Sample size;
Z= confidence interval
P = Probability of positive response.
Q= Probability of negative response.
E= amount of error that can be allowed.

Therefore, P is represented as 80%. While Q is represented as 20%, while Z is represented as 96 and E is represented at5%
Substituting into the above formula,

$$n = \frac{1.96^2(0.80\ X\ 0.20)}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{3.8416\ X\ 0.16}{0.0025} = \frac{0.614656}{0.0025}$$

$$n = 245.8\ approximately\ 246$$

Therefore, the sample size for this study is 246 customers of Coslow and Madobi Convenient stores.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Regression Model Summary showing the influence of Trust, commitment and competence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.532[a]	.283	.275	2.46317

a. Predictors: (Constant), Trust, Commitment, Competence

Table 2: ANOVA[a] influence of trust, commitment and competence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	580.700	3	193.567	31.904	.000[b]
	Residual	1468.264	242	6.067		
	Total	2048.963	245			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Trust, Commitment, Competence

Table 3: Regression Coefficients[a] influence of trust, commitment and competence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-statistics	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.685	.671		4.002	.000
	Trust	192	.074	.150	2.595	.010
	Commitment	.526	.060	.482	8.800	.000
	Competence	.289	.074	.224	3.885	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer patronage

The multiple regression analysis conducted above was aimed at determining the influence of relationship marketing dimensions such as trust, commitment and competence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis. Based on the above the model summary in table 1 shows that relationship marketing dimensions such as trust, commitment and competence has a significant influence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis. This remains statistically evident as the model produced an (r =.532[a], R^2 =.283, Sig = .000). Further revealing the individual contributions of the various relationship marketing dimensions to the regression model above, table 3 revealed that brand trust (.46), brand trust (B= .150, Sig=.010), commitment (B=.482, Sig=.000) and competence B=.224 Sig=.000) all contributed immensely to the overall regression model of which commitment and competence had the most significant contribution to the overall regression model. Based on the above, the alternative hypotheses of all 3 hypotheses stated above are accepted while their null hypotheses remain rejected because. Their individual p – value are lower than .05 significance level. Hence, the above give credence in the acceptance of all 3 alternative hypotheses and the rejection of their corresponding null hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H_{o1}**:** Trust does not have any significant effect on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

From the multiple regression analysis conducted above, the influence of relationship marketing on customer patronage has been ascertained as the first hypothesis reveals that trust has a significant influence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis. This finding is supported by Gefen, (2002) who opined that trust is the foundation of a business, and a business transaction between two parties or more would not occur if there is no mutual trust. According to Munusamy et al (2010) trust is one of the most critical factors in seller - consumer relationship, and it is an important element defining the strength of the relationship. Trust is essential to maintaining long-term relationships, and it is defined as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Mukherjee and Nath, (2003) opined that trust is the catalysts in a variety of transactions between sellers and buyers so that customer satisfaction can be realized as expected. Kim and Tadisina (2003) assert that trust is very important in conditions without boundaries where all consumers from various ethnic groups can interact with the Retailer according to expectations. To Yau et al. (2000) trust is one of the dimensions that determine the extent to which the integrity and promise offered can be perceived by consumers. Further supporting the above finding, a study conducted by Pantja and Sutanto (2017) on the effect of trust, satisfaction, and commitment on customer loyalty at the Alfamart Retail in Surabaya, East Java – Indonesia revealed that trust has significant effect on customer loyalty in Indonesia. Another study conducted by Nischay, et al (2015) on the effect of customer trust on customer loyalty and repurchase intention: the moderating influence of perceived corporate social responsibilty (CSR) revealed that a significant relationship exist between Customer trust and Repurchase intention, but when perceived CSR is used as moderator between customer trust and customer loyalty so the relationship become stronger. The results of the current study also reveal the strong positive relationship between customer trust and re-purchase intention, but when perceived CSR is used as moderator the relationship between customer trust and re-purchase intention become stronger.

Hypothesis Two

H_{o2}: Commitment has no significant effect on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

The second hypothesis reveals that commitment has a significant influence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Municipality. This finding is supported by Chao, et al., (2013) whom opined that commitment in a business relationship is a psychological sentiment of the mind, which basically form an attitude concerning continuation of a relationship with a business partner. In any relationship, commitment is a vital factor and customer purchasing transaction is not an exception (Morgan & Hunt, 2014). According to Doma (2013) an increased level of commitment will lead to increase loyalty and an increase in acquiescence and a decrease in the propensity to leave are key outcomes of high commitment. Further supporting the above finding, Soon-Chee and Maria (2019) in their study on customer loyalty and the effects of commitment towards suppliers in Malaysian Electrical and Electronics Manufacturing Industry revealed that

commitment significantly mediates four relationships between product quality and customer loyalty, trust and customer loyalty, cooperation and customer loyalty, and communication and customer loyalty. In line with the above premise, Thompson and Thompson (2003) opined that businesses need to show customers that they are committed while offering customers the core service benefit. If these issues are addressed correctly, it could lead to the customer developing long-term relations with the business, which will then create loyalty.

Going further, Mehdi et al (2015) in their study on the mediating role of customer commitment in the effect of trust, customer satisfaction and social bounds on customer loyalty revealed that insurance corporations need to adapt their strategies to enhance loyalty, as customer satisfaction alone is not enough to ensure loyalty. To achieve the goal, it was suggested that they should also focus on building good relationships with their customers. Strong, mutually beneficial relationships between service providers and their customers build loyalty through repeat purchases, with financial rewards for the business. Before any customers will conduct business with an organization, however, they must be able to trust the provider. In return, customers who have committed themselves to the organization will warrant maximum efforts to maintain the relationship with the service provider, which could further assist in fostering customer loyalty. The results of this study thus confirm the dominant role of trust on affective commitment, social bonds on affective commitment and satisfaction on affective commitment. But other hypothesized relationships were not confirmed.

Hypothesis Three

H_{o3}: Competence Trust does not have any significant effect on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Metropolis

The third hypothesis reveals that competence has a significant influence on customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar Municipality. This finding is supported by Harahap et al., (2020) who opined that employees must have the ability and knowledge in their field of work in order to be able to provide professional services to customers. In line with the above premise, Wu et al. (2015) found that competent front-line employees will be able to communicate and understand customer needs so as to make customers believe that the company can provide reliable and accurate service quality. Going further, Ninpradith et al. (2018) reporeted that the competence of an employee has a direct positive effect on the level of service quality and customer satisfaction. Based on the above, employee competence has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, employees' competence plays an important role in providing service to customers and can influence customer perceptions of service quality and satisfaction (Brady & Cronin, 2001). More so, Delcourt et al., (2013) reported that employees' competencies such as employee emotional competence and intercultural competence have a direct and significant effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Hence, with the competencies possessed by employees, employees will be able to meet customer needs and develop relationships with customers so that customers are satisfied through their patronage of goods and services. (Vargo & Lusch, 2014).

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the finding above, it is pertinent to note that relationship marketing remains a vital marketing strategy needed by organizations to encourage customers to patronize their products and turn them to loyal customers. Based on the above, there remains a wide adoption of relationship marketing as a marketing strategy across several sectors of the economy. This wide adoption is owed to the fact that organizations are fast realizing how expensive it is to loss customers to competition. Based on the above, the dimensions of relationship marketing such as trust, commitment and competence remain crucial in acquiring and retaining customers. This is so because, without trust no mutual exchange can exist between the customer and the organization. Commitment on the other hand is between the organization and the customers, this is because it remains pivotal for stores to sell products that consistently satisfy the needs of the customer. This is because a satisfied customer would always strive to be committed in maintaining the relationship already established with an organization. Employee competence on the other hand significantly influence customer patronage because most customers depend on employees for product information that guides their purchase decision. Hence, this study concludes that relationship marketing significantly influences customer patronage of convenience stores in Calabar metropolis.

Based on these findings, it was recommended that:

1. Operators of convenience stores should endeavour to build mutual trust with their prospective customers by offering quality products to them. When this is achieved customer trust is gained thereby facilitating mutual relationship between customers and the store operators.
2. Convenience operators should ensure that they remain committed in providing customers with quality goods and services. This commitment is often rewards by customers in return as they tend to impulsively reciprocate such commitment by remaining loyal to the firm's product offering as against that of competitors.
3. Operators of convenience stores should ensure that their sales persons are well trained and are always abreast with truthful product information. This is because most consumers rely on them for product information needed to make purchase decisions.

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