

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT AND SALES PERFORMANCE OF TELECOMMUNICATION FIRMS IN PORT-HARCOURT.

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ABSTRACT

It is pertinent for firms who want to engage celebrities to endorse their products or services to look out for certain attributes in celebrities before using them for their adverts, because certain attributes could determine the effectiveness of the campaign. The study aims to investigate the relationship between celebrity endorsement and sales performance of telecommunication firms in Port-Harcourt. The dimension of this study is celebrity expertise while the measures are new customers acquired and timeliness. This study adopted cross-sectional survey research design. The population consisted of the four telecommunication companies in Port-Harcourt, which are MTN Nigeria, GLOBACOM, AIRTEL, and 9MOBILE. Data was collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire and validated for the study. Cronbach's Alpha reliability for major constructs ranged between 0.70 and 0.92. This study adopted the quantitative method of data analysis which means that the gathered data from the retrieved research questionnaire was analysed statistically and in three phases namely descriptive analysis, univariate analysis and bivariate analysis. The findings revealed that celebrity endorsement has a significant relationship with sales performance of telecommunication firms in Port-Harcourt. In view of the foregoing, we recommend that telecommunication companies should adopt effective celebrity endorsement policies and ensure that they take the expertise of the ambassadors very seriously.

Keywords: Celebrity endorsement, Expertise, Sales Performance, New customers acquired, Timeliness.

INTRODUCTION

Advertisement is "the art of persuasion that is mainly concerned to create awareness about what is being offered with ultimate objective to persuade towards buying. Since the last thirty years, it has been seen that marketing environment changed significantly and witnessed the involvement of celebrities in advertisement. Theory and practice prove that the use of super stars in advertising generates a lot of publicity and attention from the public (Ohanian 1991). The billions of dollars spent per year on celebrity endorsement contracts show that celebrities, play an important role for the advertising industry. Celebrity endorsement according to Solomon (2009) is the use of famous athletes, movie stars, music icons and television stars in promoting or advertising of goods and services. It is also significant to know that celebrities can also play a devastating role that can lead to the collapse of celebrity to endorse, the credibility of the person should be considered since any mishap can affect the buying behaviour of customers (McCracken, 1989). It is really worth mentioning that organizations spend a lot on brands by involvement of celebrity to endorse. Celebrities are well recognized personalities having a strong attractive and impressive power to pursue the audience either by their likeliness, attractiveness, trust or by their congruency with brand which leads in creation of strong brand image and value in viewer's minds.

According to Kotler (2009), endorsement is a channel of communication where celebrities act as spokespersons of a brand and by extending their popularity and personality to certify the brand's claim and position, while Jeyapalan (2015), defined celebrity endorsement as one of the advertising techniques organizations adopt to create alertness and gain favourable feedback from consumers about their products and services, through the use of different sports and

entertainment as effective and profitable tools. In today's business environment, the endorsement of celebrities has been identified as one of the most successful advertising strategies used by organizations due to the level of intense competition among brands. In Nigeria particularly, the use of celebrities in advertisements to promote products and services was not rampant until a couple of years ago. Recent studies have shown that advertisers believe that a celebrity's qualities and meaning could actually be transferred to their brand which could aid positive campaigns. In the face of the ever changing business environment, organizations need to thrive and survive by adopting updated marketing/advertising strategies like celebrity endorsement. Hence this study investigates the relationship between celebrity endorsement and sales performance of telecommunication firms in Port-Harcourt.

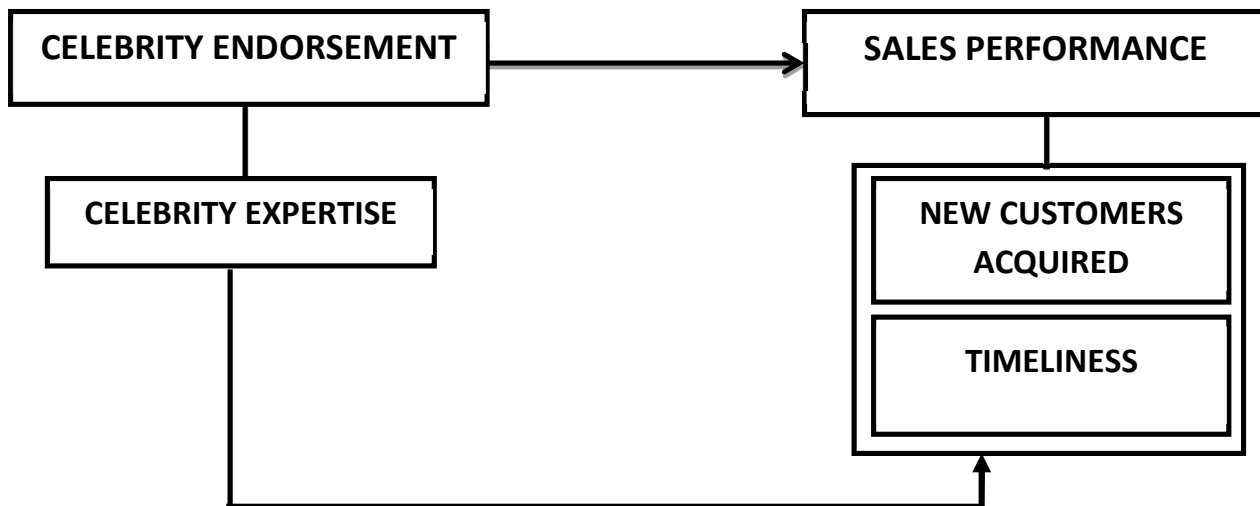


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the relationship between celebrity endorsement and sales performance

Source: Researcher Desk 2019.

Theoretical Framework

The baseline theory upon which the concept of celebrity expertise endorsement is drawn is the stimulus-response theory of behaviour, which is also known as the "hypodermic needle theory", "transmission belt theory", or "magic bullet theory". During the early decades of the twentieth century, communication scholars derived the stimulus-response model from a questionable interpretation of the psychological and sociological theories prevalent at that time (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982). The stimulus-response model is associated with the assumption that the mass media has powerful effects (Frank, 2008). Frank, Lowery and DeFleur (1995) summarized the basic assumptions behind the stimulus-response or hypodermic needle theory as follows: (1) people in a mass society lead socially isolated lives, exerting very limited social control over each other because they have diverse origins and do not share a unifying set of norms, values, and beliefs; (2) similar to higher animals, human beings are endowed at birth with a uniform set of instincts that guide their ways of responding to the world around them; (3) because people's actions are not influenced by social ties and are guided by uniform instincts, individuals attend to events (such as media messages) in similar ways; and (4) people's inherited human nature and their isolated social condition lead them to receive and interpret media messages in a uniform way. In the context of the consumer market, marketers present stimuli that enter the buyer's black box and produce certain choice/purchase response (Dukumor, 2016). Most times, marketers make attempts to try to figure out what is inside the buyer's black box and how these stimuli are

changed to responses. Marketing stimuli consists of the four Ps of marketing which are product, price, place, and promotion. Other stimuli which can affect decision making and possible responses may include major forces in the buyer's micro and macro environment. Every activity forms an idea and image that may influence the perception of a customer about a purchase decision.

The Concept of Celebrity Endorsement

Celebrities are the personalities that are well known in public either because of their credibility or of their attractiveness or because of both of these. To leverage this, advertisers use celebrities in their advertisement to increase the effectiveness and heighten the credibility of commercials (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014). Audience view celebrities as very important, prestigious and unique thus this brings in the perception of practicing what they do and identify themselves with celebrities to have an image similar to them (Mwendwa & Hellen, 2014). According to Eyitayo (2017), the general belief among organizations and advertisers is that advertising messages represented and delivered by celebrities provide a higher degree of appeal, attention and possibly message recall and retentions than those delivered by non-celebrities. Marketers also claim that celebrities especially those with credibility and good reputation affect the credibility of the claims made, increase the memorability of the message by consumers, and may provide a positive effect that could be generalized to the brand or product being advertised (Cooper, 1984). Daha, Acheampong, Bakare, & Ramanathan(2018) also noted that celebrities, due to their relevance and popularity, are believed to have characteristically, the ability and power to influence buyers to swap their loyalties to the endorsed brands. Celebrities could also have the power to make the advertisement more memorable in the minds of the customer even though there may not be an immediate need to purchase the product at that particular point in time. A message will most likely reach the consumers' mind because of the characteristic features of the celebrities such as familiarity, likeability, credibility, attractiveness, trustworthiness and other characteristics.

Advertisers go for a careful selection of celebrities because if any aspect goes wrong in celebrity endorsement selection process, the celebrity endorsed advertisement campaign may collapse (Mwendwa & Hellen, 2014). Celebrities like film stars and cricketers have not only been successful in gathering huge public attention, but also in increasing sales volume (Mwendwa & Hellen, 2014). They also stated that because the celebrity is benefiting from the brand, the consumer will also benefit thus this perception increases the sales or consumer's attachment to the product. Celebrity endorsement usually impacts the feelings of the customers and the position they have concerning the advertisement (Bondrea & Ștefănescu-Mihăilă, 2014a) and the brands, thus enhancing the purchase intentions and the sales. Celebrities are expensive due to their notable reputations and their capacities to target audience. Most advertisers insist that their celebrity endorser should have charisma and current popularity which is why we see more movie and television stars, athletes, real-life heroes, and musicians acting as brand ambassadors in the market.

Expertise as a Dimension of Celebrity Endorsement

The term expertise is defined as "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (Hovland et al., 1953). In order to persuade recipients of information endorser's expertise has encouraging effect on receivers (Ohanian, 1990). Belch and Belch (1994) said that information receivers have strong belief upon the person who is practically having related knowledge, expertise in advocating area. Endorser with high knowledge and skills has strong power of recommendation as compare to the endorsers with low expertise (Ohanian, 1990).. If the celebrity advocating the product has strong knowledge and experience, then he/she will ultimately have differential power to pursue due to strong believability. Hence we hypothesize.

Expertise is whether or not the target audience perceive that the endorser as a valid source of assertions, that he or she has experience and knowledge in the area of the product category

(Andreas et al, 2015). Celebrity endorser's expertise is a true sign of professionalism and has encouraging effect on receiver's loyalty (Ohanian, 1990). According to Speck, Schumann and Thompson (1988) celebrities, who are seen as an expert in a specific area, engender higher brand recognition than celebrities who are seen as non-experts. The level of the expertise of a celebrity would most likely determine the effectiveness of the advertising campaign. According to Eytayo (2017), the expertise of a celebrity provides consumers with a more concrete information on the product offering, which can then lead to a favourable attitude towards the brand (Magnini, Honeycutt and Cross, 2008), while Ohanian (1990), concluded from physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, seeing expertise as the characteristic which is associated with the intent to purchase a product which is being endorsed.

The Concept of Sales Performance

Sales performance is the measurement of sales activity against the goals outlined in the sales plan. The simplest method of tracking sales performance is to establish sales goals for your team and for individual team members and then evaluate performance, either monthly or quarterly. You can then improve performance using new processes and sales tools. The achievement of acceptable sales results is an essential requirement of companies' performance as well as a requirement which enables salespeople to achieve their individual objectives (Ines & Pedro, 2010). Sales performance can be said to signify a result of behavior which is evaluated in terms of its contribution to the company's objectives and is determined by factors the salesperson can control, for example sales experience, active listening or adaptive selling (Johlken, 2006). A sales organization's effectiveness is the consequence of many influences, both internal (management, salespeople) and external (working environment) and refers to some indicator of the result for which the salesperson is partially responsible and which is also influenced by a series of factors which the salesperson cannot control, known as non-personal factors or organizational and environmental variables (Grant & Cravens, 1999; Baldauf et al., 2001a b; Piercy et al., 2001; Roman et al., 2002; Ines & Pedro, 2010).

According to Komal et al (2014), selling is a critical organizational activity, at the core of which is each salesperson's competency and performance at the front-line of any selling process, also, in the current buyer-driven and unpredictable markets, the salesperson often has minimal control, and there is no rational script or process that can be followed. Sales performance management (SPM) is the practice of monitoring and guiding personnel to improve their abilities to sell products or services. A key objective of the sales performance management process is to educate and motivate salespeople to set goals and satisfy customers (Margaret, 2013).

Measures of Sales Performance

New Customers Acquired: Customer acquisition can be defined as the process of persuading a consumer to purchase the goods or services of a company. The cost that is associated with the customer acquisition process is an important aspect for a business to evaluate in combination with how much value having each customer typically brings to the business. Using appropriate customer acquisition strategies is very necessary and helps companies to grow, and acquire the right customers in a cost effective way. New companies or those with less established products especially need to place a greater focus on customer acquisition. As companies mature, they can shift their focus to customer retention. According to Drucker (1973) the sole purpose of any business is to create a customer. Customers are assets that need to be acquired before they can be managed for profits (Levitt, 1986). Customer Acquisition is a sensitive aspect of a business and can make or mar an organization (Vashishta & Sharma, 2016). According to Kotler & Armstrong (2009) customer acquisition is defined as finding the right customers that provides a profitable return.

The marketing team should know that in order to maintain or increase sales levels, new customers are needed to replace those who have been lost or who may have migrated to competing firms. The team should never reach the point where they can relax, believing the company has acquired enough customers. Companies face a continuing struggle on two fronts: (1) keeping acquired customers and (2) finding new customers to acquire. The number of new customers required to maintain a company's status quo or to grow sales levels depends on how well a firm retains its current customers. For instance, a firm that loses 5% of its customers every year will need to gain at least that many new ones during the year. Long-term marketing success is based, in part, on acquiring new customers. To do so, a sequence of marketing goals needs to be met, beginning with making consumers aware that the company or brand exists. Next, potential customers should be moved from awareness to more positive emotions like liking and preference, and eventually to the point of making the purchase. Then, post-purchase feelings should be addressed, including offering reassurance and support by suggesting that the customer has made a wise choice and should consider repeating that choice in the future. Acquisition of new customers is becoming more challenging by the day in today's highly competitive market environment. Consumers are frequently overwhelmed with product choices and are tuning out the ever-growing barrage of traditional company-driven marketing communications (Bughin et al., 2010), hence the need for the extra effort to always try to gain the attention of customers and remain relevant to them.

Timeliness: Timeliness represents how quickly the work of a sales representative is produced. Grading the performance of an employee is one of the most important aspects of sales management. Ability to determine who is exceeding his or her preset goals that were set is very important in determining who is eligible for promotions. Furthermore, figuring out which employees are struggling will also help managers to note where additional guidance is needed. Performance reviews may be greeted with disdain from the employees, but these are essential for any company to grow. Knowing when to evaluate a sales staff can become as important as the actual grading of their achievements (Riddleberger, 2013). Annual performance reviews mainly tend to focus on short-and long-term goals from prior years and whether the employee qualifies for a raise or promotion. Evaluating which benchmarks were hit by the salesperson can help the manager offer advice or criticism. While they are often standard practice, reviews do not typically occur frequently and often do not affect day-to-day operations for employees, according to Entrepreneur.com. By rating sales representatives' performance more frequently the manager has more of a chance to act on what he or she has learned.

Rating the performance of employees who live in a constantly changing world should happen in accordance with the speed at which the business operates. Quarterly reviews might work for a company that makes larger sales, while more frequent assessments might be necessary for businesses that sell more often (Riddleberger, 2013). Also, reducing the length of an assessment may help to save time and resources because not every aspect of the business needs to be discussed with every employee. Longer reviews may not help the employee, and extending the process may lead to management holding the performance test more infrequently. Back in 2011, the Harvard Business Review (HBR) educated us on exactly what timely manner meant. **One hour-** when companies reached out to prospects within an hour, they were seven times more likely to qualify the lead. The Lead Management Study from InsideSales.com cites even more startling stats: "The odds of contacting a lead if called in **5 minutes** versus **30 minutes** drop **100 times**. The odds of qualifying a lead if called in **5 minutes** versus **30 minutes** drop **21 times**." (Maksymiw, 2014). In other words, whether a firm is prospecting a lead from an inbound program or from their website, sales needs to be proactive and follow up timely. According to Maksymiw, the following are a few ideas to help sales representatives get ahead of the clock.

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Ensure Tight Alignment with Marketing: One of the issues with sales timeliness may be a symptom of poor alignment between marketing and sales organizations. If sales representatives are not proactively engaging marketing qualified leads, it may stem from a disagreement on the definition of a qualified lead. Most companies have service level agreements in place ensuring that sales representative engages with marketing-generated leads in a certain timeframe along with defining different stages and processes. Shared goals, processes, definitions and metrics can help ensure that the right foundation is in place, so sales person can stick to the game plan.

Be Attentive to Buying Signals: Companies are missing various signals day in and day out. They are getting new funding, expanding their offices, winning new patents, hiring new executives and adopting new technologies. Staying on top of those changes would kill any opportunity of being timely. But staying on top of those changes can help representatives become more relevant. In fact, James Oldroyd of Sungkyunkwan University in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) article cites one of main reasons sales representatives fail to hold the attention of prospects within a timely trend: many sales teams are "focused on generating their own leads rather than reacting quickly to customer-driven signs of interest." Consider using a tool that identifies events or an app that pulls internal and external data together in one perspective.

Make it Relevant: Many companies use marketing automation to gather information about their prospects' interactions – whitepaper downloads, page visits, video views, etc. – or digital body language. Before predictive analytics was really applied to marketing, tracking digital body language was the only way to supervise engagement and intent. With changes in the way companies are buying new products and services, it is clear that there is room for improvement in this area. A predictive lead scoring approach can help solve these problems. Predictive lead scoring works by taking all of the comprehensible information about a prospect or account to identify the most likely buyers based on intent, not just engagement. Since behavioral interest does not align with intent, traditional lead scoring only works half the time, prohibiting sales representatives from being truly proactive. A predictive approach to lead scoring can help guarantee that lead scores are always important, allowing sales representatives to focus on what they should do i.e. Proactively engaging the most lucrative leads and closing deals.

Empirical Review

Celebrity Endorsement and Sales Performances

In a study conducted by Andreas et al (2015) on celebrity endorsements impact on brand image and sales- a case study of Volvo cars, Sweden, an adductive study with qualitative data was used and they identified several important factors in order to increase a firm's brand image and sales. These factors include likeability and having a congruent image between the brand and the celebrity. They stated that by following these and successfully achieving their performance indicators, Volvo have managed to significantly increase both brand image and sales, indicating the impact this marketing strategy might generate. Another study carried out by Chung et al, (2012) on the economic value of celebrity endorsements: Tiger Woods' impact on sales of Nike golf balls, using two different approaches, reduced form and structural form, found out that there are substantial celebrity endorsement effects. They determined that from 2000-2010, the Nike golf ball division reaped an additional profit of \$103million through an acquisition of 9.9 million sales from Tiger Woods' endorsement effect, and as a result, approximately 57% of Nike's investment of \$181 million endorsement contract was recovered just in US golf ball sales alone.

The work of Eyitayo (2017) on celebrity endorsement and consumer purchase intention of AIRTEL customers in Abeokuta South Local Government Area, using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics revealed that celebrity endorsement has a significant relationship on consumer purchase intention of AIRTEL customers in Abeokuta South Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

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Syed & Raja (2014) carried out a research work on the influence of celebrity endorsement on consumer purchase intention for existing products: a comparative study. The results of the study revealed that endorsement through local and Indian celebrities has similar and not much significant influence on purchase intention in Pakistan with no major difference by country origin of celebrity.

Celebrity Expertise Endorsement and Sales Performance

An endorser with perceived expertise is always considered to be more important and believable to the audience than information provided by a product endorser with less expertise (Brunsberger & Munch, 1998). Dukumor (2016) also opined that consumers' attitude to the product or brand may become unfavourable if the endorser promoting the product or the brand in the advertisement is perceived as giving the wrong information. In a study carried out by Zhao et al (2015) on a computational approach to measuring the correlation between expertise and social media influence for celebrities on micro blogs, found out that there is a strong correlation between expertise levels and social media influence scores. Furthermore it was discovered that different expertise levels showed influence variation patterns: (1) high-expertise celebrities have stronger influence on the "audience" in their expertise domains; (2) expertise seems to be more important than relevance and participation for social media influence; (3) the audiences of top expertise celebrities are more likely to forward tweets on topics outside the expertise domains from high-expertise celebrities (Zhao et al, 2015).

In another study carried out by Thomas & Johnson (2017) on the impact of celebrity expertise on advertising effectiveness: the mediating role of celebrity brand fit, using path analysis to evaluate the hypotheses, found out that celebrity expertise has got a very significant influence on purchase intention indicating that the practitioner should focus on celebrity's field of expertise before deciding on the endorsement. Also, in a study carried out by Dukumor (2016) using regression analysis did reveal that celebrity expertise has a weak but positive influence on consumer patronage in the telecommunication industry in Port Harcourt, however, the study also revealed a no relationship/influence between celebrity expertise and consumer patronage. Based on these lines of reasoning, the study put forward the following hypotheses:

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between celebrity expertise and new customers acquired.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between celebrity expertise and sales growth.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is to investigate the relationship between celebrity endorsement and sales performance of telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt. The study adopted a survey research design. The population of this study are the four (4) telecommunication companies operating in Port Harcourt. The study thus took a census. Eighty (80) managers from the four (4) telecommunication companies, in a sample frame of twenty (20) managers per company constitute the test units of the study.. The study adopted a structured questionnaire designed in the Likert 5-point scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree to collect primary data from the respondents. However, only questionnaire retrieved from seventy -four (74) respondents were utilized in the final analysis of the study. The instrument was subjected to academic scrutiny to determine its validity while its internal consistency was ascertained via Cronbach's Alpha test of reliability, with a threshold of 0.70. Table 1 below presents a summary of the result of test of reliability. Data was analysed using the Spearman Rank Order Correlation with aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0.

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Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha of the Study Variables

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	No. of Items
Celebrity Expertise endorsement	.920	3
New Customers Acquired	.780	3
Timeliness	.813	3

Source: SPSS 22.0 Output based on 2019 field survey data

RESULTS

Table 2: Correlation Matrix for the relationship between Celebrity Expertise and New Customers Acquired

			Celebrity Expertise	New Customers Acquired
Spearman's rho	Celebrity Expertise	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.592**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.008
		N	70	70
	New Customers Acquired	Correlation Coefficient	.592**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.
		N	70	70

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

Source: SPSS 22.0 Output based on 2019 field survey data

The result as shown in the correlation matrix in table 2 revealed that celebrity expertise has a moderate and positive correlation with new customers acquired, with r. value of .592 and a significant value of .008 which is less than ($<$) 0.01 significant level, consequently, the null hypothesis one (H_{01}) 'there is no significant relationship between celebrity expertise endorsement and new customers acquired' was rejected.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix for the relationship between Celebrity Expertise endorsement and Timeliness

			Celebrity Expertise	Timeliness
Spearman's rho	Celebrity Expertise	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.533**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.004
		N	70	70
	Timeliness	Correlation Coefficient	.533**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.
		N	70	70

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

Source: SPSS 22.0 Output based on 2019 field survey data

The result as shown in the correlation matrix above revealed that celebrity expertise has a moderate and positive relationship with timeliness, with r. value of .533 and p value of .004 which is less than 0.01 significant level, consequently, the null hypothesis two (H_{02}) 'there is no significant relationship between celebrity expertise endorsement and timeliness' was rejected.

Discussion of Findings

This research has examined the relationship between celebrity endorsement and sales performance of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt, through empirical literature and data generated by the respondents of this study. This study therefore found that celebrity expertise endorsement is strongly and significantly related with sales performance, given the correlation results displayed in tables 2 and 3 respectively. This finding is backed up by the source credibility

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theory which suggests that the efficacy of the message communicated by an endorser depends on consumers' perception of the brand endorser's expertise among other qualities (Amos, Holmes & Strutton, 2008). The endorser's expertise is akin to the source's qualification, which directly influences the level of conviction in order to persuade consumers to purchase that which is endorsed. Expertise has a positive influence on both new customers that are acquired and the timeliness of sales, as we have seen in this study. When a consumer perceives that a celebrity endorser has a high level of expertise, he or she is more likely to be persuaded by the message (Speck et al., 1988; Ohanian, 1991; Amos et al., 2008). Therefore, a celebrity with high expertise is assumed to be more persuasive (Ohanian, 1991; Erdogan, 1999) than a celebrity with low levels of perceived expertise.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study concludes that there is significant relationship between expertise as a dimension of celebrity endorsement and sales performance of telecommunication firms in Port-Harcourt. In view of the foregoing, we strongly recommend that telecommunication companies should adopt effective celebrity endorsement policies and ensure that they take the expertise of the ambassadors very seriously.

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