

SALESFORCE CREATIVITY AND CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF AUTOMOBILE DEALERS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to explore the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. Five (5) research questions and hypotheses were developed to address the objectives of the study. The study adopted the positivist research philosophy and correlational research design. The population of this study comprised all the 168 registered automobile dealers in South-South Nigeria. A sample size of 118 salesforce personnel was used for the study. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamen formula. A structured questionnaire was used as the main instrument for data collection. The data collected were analyzed statistically while the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r) and the regression analysis were used to test the hypotheses. The bivariate and multivariate analyses were done with the aid of the SPSS version 24.0. The findings revealed that salesforce expertise is a significant predictor of customer preference and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. Salesforce creative thinking was also reported to be a significant predictor of customer preference and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. Based on these findings, it is concluded that salesforce creativity is a significant predictor of customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The study confirmed that environmental factor such as competitive environment has significant moderating effect on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. Therefore, it is recommended that automobile dealers in Nigeria especially those that are experiencing poor level of customer patronage should hire sales personnel who are creative in their approach to work as they would use their creativity to increase the level of customer patronage of their products.

Keywords: *Salesforce creativity, salesforce expertise, salesforce creative thinking, customer patronage, customer preference, repeat patronage, environmental factor, competitive environment.*

INTRODUCTION

In the automobile industry where there are different brands of automobile products competing for the consumer income, attracting customers and increasing their level of patronage become the most important priority for the automobile dealers. Customer patronage is crucial to the growth and survival of automobile dealers in Nigeria. It is the most significant factor that distinguishes successful firms from unsuccessful firms (Ramly et al, 2004). An automobile dealer can be said to be successful if the firm enjoys an increased level of customer patronage in the midst of competition. Kotni (2016) noted that increased level of customer patronage brings about massive sales and profitability. Automobile dealers want to improve their level of customer patronage because it is a sure way of achieving business growth and survival. An automobile dealer that is able to consistently improve its level of customer patronage stands a better chance of surviving in its industry. Such dealer can be assured of massive growth in revenue which will enable it to expand its business operations and increase its assets base (Craig, 2010). However, in order for automobile Dealers to consistently increase their level of customer patronage in the midst of competition, they need to hire and assemble creative salesforce.

Salesforce creativity is the development of new and useful ideas on how to quickly sell their company's products and services (Amabile, 1998). It involves the implementation of innovative ideas to speed up sales and increase the sales turnover of their dealer's products and services (Shin & Zhou, 2003). Salesforce plays an important role in the growth and survival of their organization. Most sales managers try to assemble salesmen who are creative. Grewal et al (2009) stated that creative salesforce are more likely to discover the hidden needs of customers and advice marketing managers on the best ways to effectively and creatively satisfy these needs and ultimately improve the sales performance of the dealer. Khattak et al (2017) posited that creative salesforce are result oriented and they bring meaningful ideas on how their dealer's products and services can be quickly converted into cash.

Salesforce creativity is regarded as the foundation for achieving sustainable competitive advantage (George, in Zhang & Gheibi, 2015). This is why automobile dealers always look out for creative sales personnel when hiring their workforce. However, a sales person can display higher level of creativity if he or she possesses the three components of creativity namely expertise, creative thinking skills and intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1996). According to Amabile (1996), the expertise component of creativity includes the individual knowledge, technical proficiency and special talents in the target domain. Creative thinking implies the ability of a person to see things from more than one angle and be able to question the existing working models. Examples of creative thinking skills are lateral thinking, thinking out of the box, cognitive thinking skills, communication skills, and problem solving skills. If problems are solved in the usual manner, then it prevents new ideas from penetrating. The third component intrinsic task motivation implies that creativity requires a certain level of internal force that pushes a person to persevere in the face of challenges in creative work (Shalley & Gilson, 2004). It is a kind of motivation that comes from individuals' involvement and interest in the job itself (Amabile, 1996). Examples of intrinsic task motivation include the job excitement, job satisfaction and challenging job (Shalley & Gilson, 2004). These elements of intrinsic task motivations trigger creativity in the individuals which is essential for dealer to gain sustainable competitive advantage.

Salesforce creativity is an essential quality that can help to increase the level of customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. According to Zhang and Bartorl (2010), salesforce creativity is the most decisive factor that makes the difference in firms' marketing performance. He explains that a dealer with creative salesforce will perform better in the market than those with less creative salesforce. This is because such dealer will leverage on the creativity of their salesforce especially their high level of expertise and creative thinking skills to increase the level of customer patronage, make more sales and increase their market share in the midst of intense competition. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

Major challenge facing dealers in the Nigerian automobile industry is how to increase their level of customer patronage in the midst of competition and a fragile macroeconomic environment. The intense competition in the automobile industry presents a limited scope for volume growth while higher cost pressures and the impact of regulation continue to weigh heavily on the overall marketing performance of dealers in this sector. The weak economic growth coupled with the high inflation rate, high unemployment rate as well as the currency pressures do not favour or encourage consumer spending on automobile vehicles (Jiang & Gallupe, 2015). Given the challenges in the Nigerian environment, some automobile dealers have been compelled to increase their level of customer patronage through the recruitment of creative salesforce (Mumford, 2000). For instance, automobile dealers such as Toyota and Lexus were reported to have hired more talented and creative salesforce to market their product worldwide. However, ever since these dealers hire

creative salesforce, it is still not clear whether they have used their creativity to increase their level of customer patronage as empirical studies that examined the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria are limited. This has created a gap in literature which this study intends to fill.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers is shown in figure 1 below:

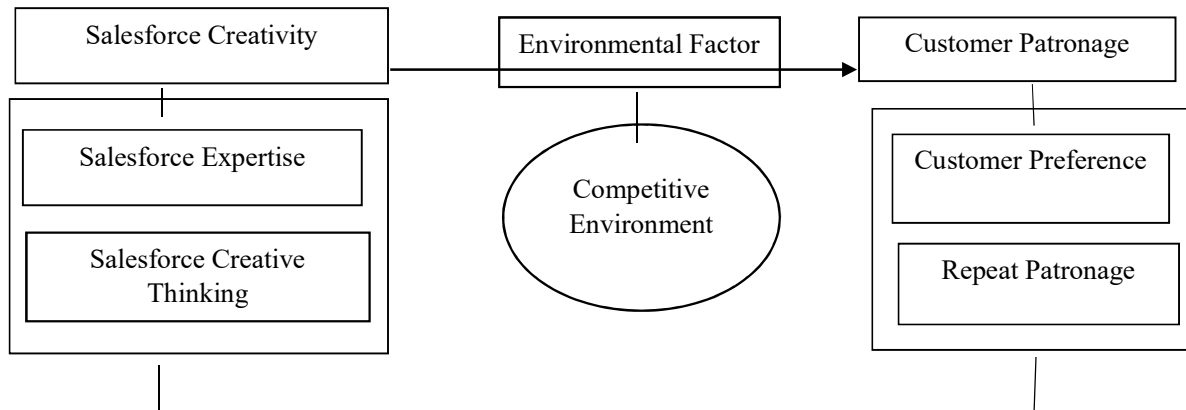


Fig 1: Conceptual framework of salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. find out the relationship between salesforce expertise and customer preference of automobile dealers;
2. ascertain the relationship between salesforce expertise and repeat patronage of automobile dealers;
3. determine the relationship between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers;
4. ascertain the relationship between salesforce creative thinking and repeat patronage of automobile dealers;
5. find out the moderating effect of competitive environment on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following questions were developed to address the objectives of this study:

1. To what extent does salesforce expertise relate to customer preference of automobile dealers?
2. To what extent does salesforce expertise contribute to repeat patronage of automobile dealers?
3. To what extent does salesforce creative thinking influence customer preference of automobile dealers?
4. To what extent does salesforce creative thinking enhance repeat patronage of automobile dealers?
5. To what extent does competitive environment moderate the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated in this study:

- Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between salesforce expertise and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria.
- Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between salesforce expertise and repeat patronage of automobile dealers.
- Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers.
- Ho₄: There is no significant relationship between salesforce creative thinking and repeat patronage of automobile dealers.
- Ho₅: Competitive environment has no significant moderating effect on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Salesforce Creativity

According to Bailin in Pirola-Merlo and Mann (2004), creativity refers to a judgment of the novelty and usefulness (or value) of something. It is the development of new and useful ideas (Amabile, 1998). Creativity is central to innovativeness, but the two concepts are not synonymous. Innovation is a successful and intentional implementation of creativity, which is more subjective and context specific by its nature (Miron et al, 2004); while creativity is limited to idea generation alone (Anderson et al., 2014). Creativity exists both at the individual and team level. Individual creativity is the development of novel (unique) and useful ideas, processes, or procedures by a person to solve a problem or get work done (Amabile et al, 1997); while team creativity is the extent to which a team's ideas in response to a problem solving task are both novel and useful (Pirola-Merlo & Mann, 2004). Pirola-Merlo and Mann (2004) stated that when individuals work together to solve problems creatively, the creativity of the team as a whole will be influenced by the creativity of the individuals that make up the team.

Within the context of salesforce, creativity is the development of new and useful ideas on how to quickly sell company's products and services (Amabile, 1998). Shin and Zhou (2003) defined salesforce creativity as the implementation of innovative ideas to speed up sales and increase the sales turnover of their dealer's products and services. Amabile (1997) stated that expertise, creative thinking skills, and motivation, when mixed together, identify the level of creativity within a salesman. The expertise component includes memory for factual knowledge, technical proficiency, and special talents in the target domain. Creative thinking means that an individual is able to see things from more than one perspective and is able to question the existing working models. If problems are solved the way they always have been solved, it blocks creativity and prevents new ideas from penetrating. Creativity requires a certain level of internal force that pushes the individual to persevere in the face of challenges in creative work (Shalley & Gilson, 2004). The task motivation component determines what a person will actually do (Amabile et al, 1996). However, combining contributions from the individual team members may lead to richer, more creative ideas at the team level. Yet, sales team creativity results not just from combining individual ideas.

Dimensions of Sales Creativity

Creativity is a multidimensional concepts which revolves around expertise, creative thinking skills and intrinsic task motivation (Amabile, 1997). These dimensions of salesforce creativity are discussed below:

Salesforce Expertise

Expertise refers to an expert skill or knowledge in a particular field (Botaris, 2004). All jobs require some specialized expertise, and every salesman needs to develop the ability and expertise on the job (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). However, developing the expertise is the only criteria to be a successful salesman or sales team. Without developing expertise, a salesman or sales team may fail in their selling duty (Miron et al, 2011). Some salesmen or sales team are technically proficient but lack the support to execute their ideas (McDermott, 2001). Developing expertise is not the only areas which salesmen or team should focus on; rather emphasis should also be placed on their integrity. A salesman or team must have the ability to analyze and diagnose complex market situation and find solution to the sales problem (Anderson et al, 2014). These tasks require the display of expertise. A salesman or team can be technically good, yet still fail because of their inability to rationally process and interpret market information. A salesman or team should therefore build on their expertise in order to equip sales managers to fulfil their roles successfully (McDermott, 2001). Historically, salesmen or teams are more concerned with improve their level of expertise (Mintzberg, 2004). Recently, however, the shift towards greater selling competition and the rise of trans-national firms have changed this. It is increasingly common for salesmen or sales team to provide general knowledge in addition to training for selling post.

Salesforce Creative Thinking

Creative thinking occurs when an individual is able to see things from more than one perspective and is able to question the existing working models (Amabile, 1997). With respect to salesforce, creative thinking is the ability of salesforce to think about a sales problem in a different and new way (Ramamoorthy et al, 2005) and use their imagination to generate new idea to solve selling problem. Examples of creative thinking skills include communication skills, problem solving skills, writing skills, visual art skills, open-mindedness (Mumford et al, 1997). If problems are solved the way they always have been solved, it blocks creativity and prevents new ideas from penetrating (Amabile, 1997). For salesmen or sales team to succeed, they must accept the selling challenges, start visualizing and be curious, and engage in art, music or theatre and question. Kalyar (2011) stated that a salesman can be said to have a creative thinking skills if he looks at things from a unique perspective. West and Farr (1990) posited that a salesperson or sales team can explore creative thinking by gathering selling materials, intensely working over the materials in his or her mind, stepping away from the selling problem, allowing the idea to come back naturally, and testing the idea in real world and adjusting it when necessary. A salesperson can improve his or her creative thinking by dreaming, his own ideas, creating his own ideas, making out time for cohesive creative thinking, learning to pitch ideas and bounce ideas, and bouncing ideas off others (Pirola-Merlo & Mann, 2004).

Concept of Customer Patronage

Customer patronage is the behaviour whereby a customer buys a product or service of a particular company despite the fact that there are other similar brands in the market (Simons, 2016). Kabuoh et al (2020) defined customer patronage as the impulses desire and consideration within the consumer which induce the purchase of goods from certain outlets or dealer. Customer patronage provides a foundation for an established and growing market share (Andrew et al, 2015). Every consumer has motives or reasons why he or she patronizes a particular brand (Chibuzor & Isibor, 2022). The reason could be rational or emotional (Chiu & Lin, 2011). When a consumer patronizes a particular brand without any reasoning, he or she is said to be influenced by emotional buying motives. Those motives include the appearance of the brand, performance of the brand, quality of the brand, recommendations from influencers, prestige, and habits. When a consumer patronizes a particular brand after considering the possible benefits through logical reasoning, one can say that the consumer is influenced by rational buying motives. The motives include convenience, low price

offered at the dealer, availability of credit facilities, salesperson efficiency, reputation of the dealer, past experience in using the brand (Chiu & Lin, 2011).

Measures of Customer Patronage

Customer patronage can be measured using various indicators. However, in this study, customer patronage is measured using customer preference and repeat patronage. These measures are discussed below

Customer Preference

Consumer preference is a marketing term meaning a consumer likes one thing over another (Vikraman & Ganesan, 2011). Bennett et al (2006) defined customer preference as a consumer's decision to choose one product, service or organization over other similar products, services and organizations. It involves making a choice based on certain criteria which the customer attaches importance to (Cohen & Neira, 2003). In most cases, customer preference is seen as the subjective (individual) tastes, as measured by utility, of various bundles of goods. They permit the consumer to rank these bundles of goods according to the levels of utility they give the consumer. Customer preference is a function of the utility (satisfaction) which the customer derived from using the service of the organization. Vikraman and Ganesan (2011) noted that customer preference occurs where there are choices that a customer has to choose from. It involves making a choice of which organization, product or service to patronize. Usually, customer prefers those organizations, products and services that give them satisfaction. It demands that the customer ranks the different organizations, products or services according to the level of utility and decide on which one to choose (Goodman et al, 2005). Wilson-Jeanselme and Reynolds (2012) noted that customer preference is not dependent on the consumer's income or his/her capacity to pay for the goods or services; rather it refers to consumer like or dislike for an organization, product or service based on their performance.

Repeat Patronage

Repeat patronage is a decision to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service in the future (Vargo & Lusch, 2010). Ehrenberg (2008) defined repeat patronage as a customer's decision to buy a product again based on his or her positive past experiences of using the product. Repeat patronage leads to a long-term relationship between a dealer and the customers. It will bring a number of benefits to the customers such as fellowship, personal recognition, preferential treatment, discount, credit facilities, and time-saving (Chin, 2014). The possibility of a customer switching service provider in the light of the distinguished image of the available alternatives is low (Jones et al, in Garga & Bambale, 2016). To the dealer, repeat patronage can make an organization to increase sales, achieve market share growth and increase its revenue (Sharp & Sharp, 2008). The decision to re-patronize a product or service of a firm is a function of the satisfaction customers derived from using the product or service. When customers are satisfied with the quality of product or services, they would probably make repeat patronage in the future. East in Garga and Bambale (2016) argued that customers who are satisfied with a particular offer are more likely to engage in repeat purchase of the same offering but dissatisfied customers are likely to switch.

Environmental Factor

Competitive Environment

Competitive environment is made up of dealers that offer similar products and services. To remain competitive, an automobile dealer must find out who are its major competitors, what are they doing differently, the impact of what they are doing differently and develop strategies to gain a competitive advantage over them. Competition is often seen as a game in which one player wins and the other loses. In this game, a move by a player many cause a counter moves by the other players to protect

themselves from the danger posed by the initial move (Azhar in Babatunde & Adebisi, 2012). Automobile dealers are mutually watching out for the moves of their competitors. Such move may be in form of innovation in their competitors' products or services which will prompt the other players to upgrade their products or services to meet the new reality or development and to prevent loss of their customers to their rivals (Papatya & Papatya, 2011). This scanning of the industry keeps an automobile dealer competitive by changing with the actions and reactions of their competing firms (Sawyer et al, 2000). The desire to be the market leader or to corner a leader's market share leads to rivalry among dealers in the same industry. When the rivalry is strong, the level of competition is higher but when it is weak there is likely to be a lesser competition among the firms (Azhar, in Babatunde & Adebisi, 2012).

Theoretical Review

This study was anchored on the theory of creative individual action. The theory of creative individual action was developed by Ford in 1996. The theory states that an individual's creativity is a function of three characteristics namely; sense making, motivation, and knowledge and ability (Ford, 1996). Sense making is the process whereby a person reads meaning to his or her experience. It involves making an interesting point when addressing issue of concern (Ford, 1996). Motivation is a state or condition of being induced to act in certain profitable ways to actualize predetermined goals or objectives (Abah & Nwokuwu, 2016). Knowledge refers to the awareness, familiarity or understanding of something such as facts, skills or objects while ability is state of being able to do something (Ford, 1996). These three characteristics determine whether an individual engages in creative or habitual action. The theory argues that if these three characteristics are observed in an individual, they will propel the individual to either engage in creative or habitual action at any given situation.

The theory of creative individual action is relevant in explaining the importance of salesforce creativity in increasing the level of customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The theory argues that if believes that salesman creativity is a function of sense making, motivation, and knowledge and ability. These three factors determine whether a salesman engages in creative or habitual action. The theory argues that if these three characteristics are observed in a salesman, they will propel him to take creative action at any given situation. Every salesman must find himself in a difficult situation one day in the course of performing his job. Such situation will require him to take creative action to come out of the situation successfully. The theory of creative individual action highly provide support for this study because it explains the factors behind salesforce creativity in an organization and how such creative action enhance the level of customer patronage of automobile dealers.

Empirical Review

A number of related empirical studies have been conducted on salesforce creativity and customer patronage of firms. For instance, Weinzimmer et al (2011) empirically examined the relationship between creativity and firm-level performance. Their study adopted the quantitative research approach and the descriptive survey research design. The researchers collected their data from managers and employees of engineering firms in Sweden using questionnaire. After analyzing the data collected using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation, percentage and frequency tables and influential statistic like the regression analysis, the researchers found out that employee creativity has a significant positive relationship with profitability of engineering firms. The study found a significant relationship between employee creativity and firm growth. The study concluded that employee creativity is a significant predictor of firm-level performance. The relationship between creativity and firm-level performance were found to be moderated by action orientation.

Dul and Ceylan (2014) empirically examined the impact of a creativity supporting work environment on firm's product innovation performance. Their study adopted the survey research design where data were collected from managers and employees of 103 firms in Netherland. The researchers used a structured questionnaire as their instrument for data collection while the percentage and frequency tables, mean, standard deviation and Pearson Product Moment Correlation for data analysis. The finding showed that firms with creative e supporting work environments introduce more new products to the market and have more new product success in terms of increased sales of new products. The study also revealed that new product partly moderate the relationship between creativity work environment and new product success.

Gong et al (2013) carried out a study to determine the relationship among core knowledge, employee creativity and firm performance with the moderating effect of riskiness orientation, firm size and realized absorptive capacity. The researcher employed the descriptive survey research design and used a structured questionnaire to collect data from 150 employees in 148 high technology firms in China. After analyzing the data collected using percentage and frequency analysis, mean, standard deviation, bar chart, pie chart, and the SPSS version 21.0, the researcher discovered that employee creativity has a significant positive relationship with firm performance. The study also reported that firm size significantly moderate the relationship between employee creativity and firm performance in China.

Siddiqi and Qureshi (2016) examined the impact of employees' creativity on the performance of the firm. Their study adopted the survey research design and used a google form of questionnaire to obtain data from 70employees of manufacturing firms in India. The data collected for their study were analyzed using percentage and frequency tables, mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using factor analysis, person correlation coefficient and regression analysis. The findings of their study revealed that employees' creativity has significant impact on the performance of the firm. The study also revealed that if employees are empowered, they would use their creative skills to improve the market share and overall performance of their firm.

Ahmed and Sigamony (2020) explored the effect of employee creativity on project performance in Pakistan. Their study adopted the descriptive survey research design where data were collected from 273 employees in project-based organization in Pakistan. The researchers used a structured questionnaire as their main instrument for data collection while percentage and frequency tables, mean and standard deviation as well as Pearson Correlation Coefficient, ANOVA and regression analysis were used for data analysis. The findings revealed that employee creativity has a significant positive relationship with project performance of project-based organizations in Pakistan. The study also revealed that knowledge sharing significantly mediate the relationship between employee creativity and project performance of project-based organizations. The study equally revealed that openness to experience significantly moderate the relationship between employee creativity and project performance of project-based organizations.

Atwongyeire (2019) examined the influence of employee creativity on job performance in Uganda. The study adopted the correlational research design and used a structured questionnaire to collect data from 62 employees of FutureLink Technologies and Nansana Municipal Council. The researcher analyzed the data collected using percentage and frequency tables, and used the Pearson' Product Moment Correlation and SPSS to test the hypotheses. The findings showed that employee creativity has a significant positive relationship with job performance of employees in FutureLink Technologies and Nansana Municipal Council. The study also revealed that creation of new ideas, products and processes have significant effect on job performance.

Elidemir et al (2020) examined innovative behaviours, employee creativity, and sustainable competitive advantage. Their study adopted the survey research design where data were collected from 323 frontline employees (front office, food and beverage, housekeeping, guest relations, sales, and marketing) and immediate managers of 4-Star and 5-Star hotels using a structured questionnaire. After analyzing the data collected and testing the hypotheses using SPSS Amos, and confirmatory factor analysis, the researchers found out that high-performance work practices indirectly predicted sustainable competitive advantage via innovative behaviour. The study also revealed that employee innovative behaviour can generate substantial returns to their organization when competing with quasi-homogenous end-products.

Gap in Reviewed Literature

From the studies reviewed, three major gaps were noted. First, it was observed that a significant number of studies have been conducted on employee creativity and organizational performance but none of these studies specifically focused on salesforce creativity and relate the concept to customer patronage of firms in Nigeria. Secondly, it was observed that none of the previous studies conducted on employee creativity and firm performance moderate the relationship between the two variables using environmental factor such as competitive environment. Thirdly, it was observed that most of the published empirical studies conducted on employee creativity focused on engineering firms, software dealers, alcoholic manufacturing dealers and hotel firms while empirical studies that examined the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria are absent. Considering the gaps created in literature, this study attempts to close the gaps in literature by exploring the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria showing the moderating effect of environmental factor (competitive environment).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the positivist research philosophy and the correlational research design. The population of this study comprised all the 168 registered automobile dealers in South-South Nigeria (www.directory.org.ng). A sample size of 118 salesforce personnel was used for the study. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamen formula. A structured questionnaire was used as the main instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was structured using the modified four (4) point Likert scale-type which range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree to Strongly Disagree. The instrument was validated through face and content analysis while its reliability was determined using Cronbach Alpha method. A total copy of 118 questionnaires was distributed to the respondents (sales personnel) of automobile dealers in South-South Nigeria. Out of the 118 questionnaires distributed to the respondents, 98 copies were collected and after editing of the questionnaire collected, 90 copies were considered useful for analysis. The data contained in the useful questionnaires were analyzed statistically while the hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) and the regression analysis. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r) was used for the bivariate analysis while the moderated regression analysis was used to analyze the moderating effect of environmental factor on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers (i.e. the multivariate analysis).

The regression model

$$Y = \beta_0 + c' (\beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 X_{ii}) + bX_4 + \epsilon_i \dots\dots\dots \text{equation (1)}$$

Where Y = Customer Patronage (Dependent variable),

β_0 = constant (showing customer patronage in the absence of salesforce creativity),

ϵ_i = error term, $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$ = beta parameters of predictor variable (salesforce creativity) under study,

X = Independent variable (Salesforce creativity)

X_i = Salesforce expertise

X_{ii} = Salesforce creative thinking

X_4 = Environmental factor (moderating variable),

c' = beta estimate of the predictor variable (salesforce creativity)

b = beta estimate of the moderating variable.

The bivariate and multivariate analyses were performed with the aid of the SPSS version 24.0.

Empirical Results and Discussion

The results of the bivariate analysis carried out between salesforce creativity and customer patronage were presented in this section. The data collected on salesforce creativity (expertise and creative thinking) were correlated with those obtained on customer patronage (customer preference and repeat patronage) using Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r). The SPSS software program version 24.0 was used to compute the r value for each hypothesis. The results of the bivariate analysis are presented in the tables below:

Table 1: Result of bivariate analysis between salesforce expertise and customer preference of automobile dealers

			Salesforce Expertise	Customer Preference
Pearson (r)	Salesforce Expertise	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.725**
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.	.001
		N	90	90
	Customer Preference	Correlation Coefficient	.725**	1.000
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.001	.
		N	90	90

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2 tailed)

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 levels (2 tailed)

Source SPSS-generated Output

Table 1 shows the result of the bivariate analysis carried out between salesforce expertise and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The result indicates that salesforce expertise is strongly and positively correlated to customer preference of automobile dealers ($r = .725^{**}$) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as signified by the symbol **. As a result of this, we then reject the null hypothesis (H_{01}) and accept the alternate hypothesis which states that there is significant relationship between salesforce expertise and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Table 2: Result of the bivariate analysis between salesforce expertise and repeat patronage of automobile dealers

			Salesforce Expertise	Repeat Patronage
Pearson (r)	Salesforce Expertise	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.596**
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.	.001
		N	90	90
	Repeat Patronage	Correlation Coefficient	.596**	1.000
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.001	.
		N	90	90

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2 tailed)

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 levels (2 tailed)

Source SPSS-generated Output

Table 2 contains the result of the bivariate analysis carried out between salesforce expertise and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The result shows that salesforce expertise has a moderate positive correlation with repeat patronage of automobile dealers ($r = .596^{**}$) and the symbol ****** indicates that this correlation is significant at 0.01 level. Based on this result, we then reject the null hypothesis (H_{02}) and accept the alternate hypothesis which states that there is significant relationship between salesforce expertise and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Table 3: Result of the bivariate analysis between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers

			Salesforce Creative Thinking	Customer Preference
Pearson (r)	Salesforce Creative Thinking	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.622**
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.	.001
		N	90	90
	Customer Preference	Correlation Coefficient	.622**	1.000
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.001	.
		N	90	90

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2 tailed)

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 levels (2 tailed)

Source SPSS-generated Output

Table 3 presents the result of the bivariate analysis carried out between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The result shows a strong positive correlation between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers ($r = .622^{**}$) and the symbol ****** indicates that this correlation is significant at 0.01 level. Based on this result, the null hypothesis (H_{03}) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. This means that we then accept that there is significant relationship between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Table 4: Result of the bivariate analysis between salesforce creative thinking and repeat patronage of automobile dealers

			Salesforce Creative Thinking	Repeat Patronage
Pearson (r)	Salesforce Creative Thinking	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.603**
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.	.001
		N	90	90
	Repeat Patronage	Correlation Coefficient	.603**	1.000
		Sig. (2 tailed)	.001	.
		N	90	90

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2 tailed)

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 levels (2 tailed)

Source SPSS-generated Output

Table 4 depict the result of the bivariate analysis carried out between salesforce creative thinking and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The result shows that salesforce creative thinking is strongly and positively correlated to repeat patronage of automobile dealers ($r = .603^{**}$) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as indicated by the symbol ******. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{04}) is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. This implies that we then accept that there is significant relationship between salesforce creative thinking and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	Change Statistics		
							df1	df2	Sig. Change
1	.612 ^a		.543		.502	48.177	2	4	.000
2	.658 ^b	.524	.697	3.02543	.418	16.122	1	3	.000

a. Predictors (Constant), normal, salesforce creativity

b. Predictors (Constant), normal, salesforce creativity, environmental factor_x_normal

Source SPSS Generated Output

Table 4.5 shows the result of the multivariate analysis carried out on the three variables (salesforce creativity, customer patronage and environmental factor). From the table, the direct effect of salesforce creativity on customer patronage is given in model 1 while the moderating effect of environmental factor on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage is given in model 2. The R Square in model 2 is .524 which implies that the moderated model shows a strong fit. The R Square Change value is .418 which implies that there is 41.8% variation in the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage by adding environmental factor variable and this variation is statistically significant at 0.05 level, showing a significant moderating effect. Based on this result, we then reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis which states that environmental factor has significant moderating effect on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

This study found a significant relationship between salesforce expertise and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding was derived from the result of the bivariate analysis carried out on two variables in the first hypothesis. The result revealed that salesforce expertise is strongly and positively correlated to customer preference of automobile dealers ($r = .725^{**}$) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as signified by the symbol **. As a result of this, we then rejected the null hypothesis (H_{01}) and accepted the alternate hypothesis which states that there is significant relationship between salesforce expertise and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Wang and Miao (2015) which reported that salesmen who have the required skills and knowledge are likely to persuade customers to buy their products. Kuester and Hildesheim (2016) also agreed with this finding when they stated that customers are more likely to prefer and patronize those products whose salesforce display high level of expertise on the field.

This study also found a significant relationship between salesforce expertise and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding emanated from the result of the bivariate analysis carried out on the two variables in the second hypothesis. The result revealed that salesforce expertise has a moderate positive correlation with repeat patronage of automobile dealers ($r = .596^{**}$) and the symbol ** indicates that this correlation is significant at 0.01 level. Based on this result, we then rejected the null hypothesis (H_{02}) and accepted the alternate hypothesis which states that there is significant relationship between salesforce expertise and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding is supported by Elidemir et al (2020) which reported that competent salesforce can persuade customers to re-buy their products and remain loyal to the brand. Wang and Miao (2015) also supported this finding when they stated that companies with

competent and experienced salesforce will experience repeat patronage of their products since their salesmen have the potentials to persuade customers to repeatedly purchase their products.

A significant relationship was reported between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding emerged from the result of the bivariate analysis carried out on the two variables in the third hypothesis. The result showed a strong positive correlation between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers ($r = .622^{**}$) and the symbol ** indicates that this correlation is significant at 0.01 level. Based on this result, the null hypothesis (H_{03}) was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This means that we then accepted that there is significant relationship between salesforce creative thinking and customer preference of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding is supported by Gong et al (2013) who noted that salesforce with creative thinking skills will persuade people to buy their products and this will increase customer preference for their brand. Weinzimmer et al (2013) also agreed with this finding when they stated that customers are more likely to prefer those products whose salesmen can devise new ways to persuade them.

This study discovered a significant relationship between salesforce creative thinking and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding was obtained from the result of the bivariate analysis carried out on the two variables in the fourth hypothesis. The result revealed that salesforce creative thinking is strongly and positively correlated to repeat patronage of automobile dealers ($r = .603^{**}$) and this correlation is significant at 0.01 level as indicated by the symbol ** . Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{04}) was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This implies that we then accepted that there is significant relationship between salesforce creative thinking and repeat patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Steinerowska-Streb and Glod (2019) which reported that creative thinking skills enable salesmen to persuade people to make repeat purchase of their products.

Finally, it was reported that environmental factor significantly moderate the relationship between salesforce creativity and marketing performance of automobile dealers in South-South Nigeria. This finding emanated from the result of the multivariate analysis carried out on the three variables in the fifth hypothesis. The result revealed that the value of R Square Change is .418 which implies that there is 41.8% variation in the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers by adding environmental factor variable (competitive environment) and this is statistically significant at 0.05 level, showing a significant moderating effect. Based on this result, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This means that we then accept that which states that environmental factor (competitive environment) has significant moderating effect on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This study examines salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The study showed that creativity is important to all sales personnel because it influences their ability to win customers for their company. The empirical results of this study confirmed that salesforce expertise is a significant predictor of customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The study also found salesforce creative thinking to be a significant predictor of customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. Based on these findings it was that salesforce creativity has a significant relationship with customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria. The study equally revealed that environmental factors such as competitive environment has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between salesforce creativity and customer patronage of automobile dealers in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher provides the following recommendations for the study:

1. That, automobile dealers in Nigeria especially those that are struggling to increase their level of customer patronage should hire salesforce who are creative in their approach to work as it would help to increase their level of customer patronage.
2. That, automobile dealers in Nigeria particularly those that are experiencing low level of customer patronage should recruit talented salesforce who are professionals and have the required skills and knowledge on the job as this would help to improve their marketing performance.
3. That, salesforce in automobile dealers in Nigeria should continuously develop their skills and talents in order to become more creative in the course of performing their duties and improve the marketing performance of their dealer.
4. That, salesforce in automobile dealers in Nigeria should question the existing working models in their dealer in difficult times and come up with new ideas that will help attract new customers and increase their level of customer patronage.
5. That, salesforce in automobile dealers in Nigeria should think out-of-the-box in order to solve problem in difficult times especially when every other solutions within the stipulated rules have failed to turn the situation around.
6. That, salesforce in automobile dealers in Nigeria should learn, listen, understand, question, justify and pay close attention as this would help to improve their creative thinking skills and increase their level of customer patronage.
7. Finally, it is recommended that salesforce in automobile dealers in Nigeria should improve their communication skills as it would to enable them persuade customers to buy their products and increase sales.

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