

Relationship between Digital Marketing Strategies and Customer Engagement of Airline Operators in Rivers State

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Abstract: *The study investigated the relationship between digital marketing strategies and customer engagement of airlines in Rivers State. Descriptive research design was adopted in accessing the research subjects. While the population of the study comprised of 4000 passenger traffic of airlines in Rivers State, a sample size of 400 was determined with the help of Taro Yamen formular. Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient was used to test the various hypotheses. The results indicated a significant positive and strong relationship between digital marketing strategies and customer engagement. Based on the findings in the study, it was concluded that the dimensions of digital marketing strategies (social media marketing, content marketing, mobile application) significantly relate to the measures of customer engagement. We, therefore, recommends that, owners and managers of airlines in Nigeria should understand and develop a holistic approach of implementing an overall digital marketing strategies programme, as this research has confirmed its strategic importance in improving customer engagement. They should also coordinate and synchronise various social media platforms with traditional promotional activities for the purpose of achieving a successful integrated marketing communication. This research has proffered solution to contemporary issues confronting the aviation industry.*

Keywords: Digital Marketing Strategies, Customer Engagement, Social Media, Mobile Application

INTRODUCTION

There are myriads of definitions on digital marketing strategy, each depending on the objective of the study, writer's intent as well as field of discipline (Li and Calantone, 2000). It is a process that is sued to identify, anticipate and satisfy customers using internet technology. To Kaur (2012), it refers to all the activities of advertising, promotion that is geared towards deciding the look and feel of the product, how it will be sold and sent to the customer. Smith and Chaffey (2005) defined it as achieving marketing objectives trough applying digital technologies. Strauss and Frost (2001) defined it as the use of electronic data and applications for planning and executing the conception, distribution and pricing of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals. Similarly, Joseph (2012)

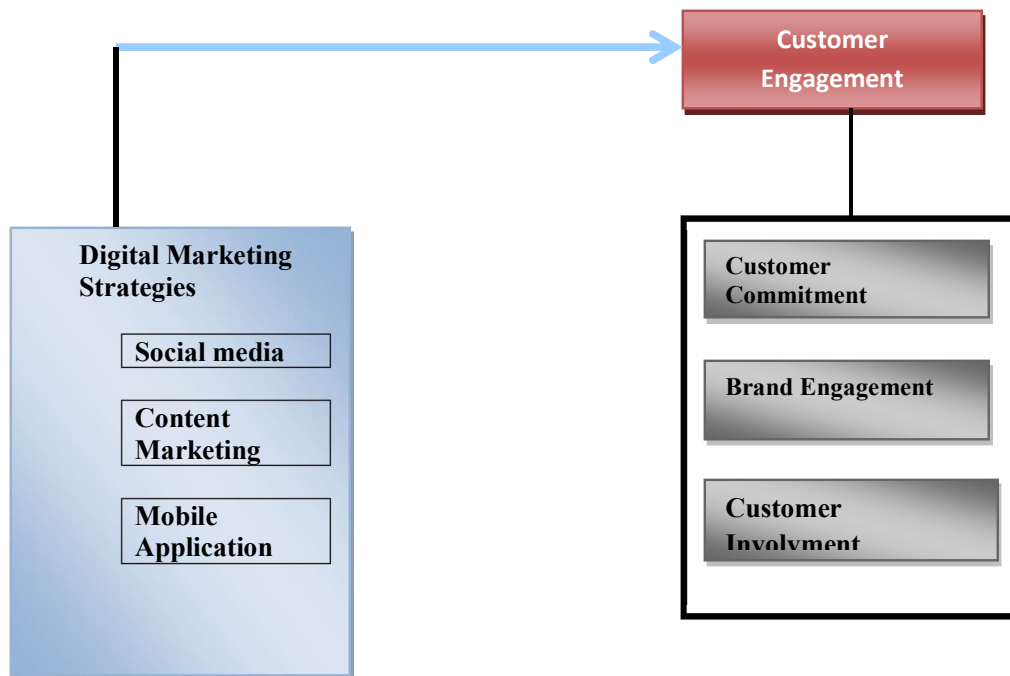
conceived digital marketing as a modern business practice associated with buying and selling goods, services, information and ideas via the Internet and other electronic means. Furthermore, digital marketing entails engaging in business with firm's suppliers and customers through electronic means. Rotich and Mukhongo, (2015) defined digital marketing as business activities that is carried on the Internet, not only on buying and selling, but also servicing customers and collaborating with business partners.

A good number of studies have been carried out in the area of digital marketing strategies in different industries. Akin, (2010) investigated the usage of mobile marketing services and evaluation of potential future applications. The author adopted SMS and mobile apps as sub-variables of mobile

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marketing, and their effect on customer patronage and loyalty. The authors used mobile website and SMS as mobile marketing strategies as they affect purchase intention and customer referral. Nielsen Smartphone (2018) Analysed mobile marketing adoption by using search engine marketing as its dimension. The group demonstrated the relationship between search engine marketing and user re-purchase intention. Roach (2009) examined consumer perception of mobile phone marketing. The author used direct marketing innovative approach in their bid to improve customer satisfaction. In view of the

above reviewed studies and other related ones, this research combined social media marketing, content marketing, mobile application search engine optimization, as dimensions of digital marketing strategies with the intention of evaluating their influences on customer engagement e-loyalty, e-WOM. The research further introduced technological orientation as a moderating variable, to investigate its influence on the relationship between digital marketing strategy and customer fulfilment as it relates to airline operators in Nigeria.



Hypotheses

In view of the specific objectives and research questions, the following null hypotheses was tested in the later part of this research.

H₀₁: Social media marketing has no significant relationship with customer engagement of airline operators in Rivers State.

H₀₂: Content marketing has no significant relationship with customer engagement of airline operators in Rivers State.

H₀₃: Mobile Application has no significant relationship with customer engagement of airline operators in Rivers State.

Concept of Digital Marketing Strategies

As a construct, the renowned marketing expert, Kotler (2003), posit that digital marketing is the use of marketing tenets in communicating firms’ products and/or services to their customers using the internet.

Relatedly, digital marketing strategies could as well be seen as the use of internet or other electronic media platforms in communicating firm’s offerings such as products, services, ideas,

and information (Li & Calantone, 2000). Conceiving the concept from the interactive functions of digital marketing; the authors contended that digital marketing strategies entails the use of internet facilities to increase the interactive activities between customers and an organization. In another context, Barker, et al, (2013) defined digital marketing as online and off-line marketing interactions using electronic platforms such as digital platforms, electronic mails, websites, and other features of telecommunication technology.

Whatever internet platform that is used, the essence of digital marketing is to increase the marketing interaction between an organization and their customers (John, et al, 2019). The authors are of the view that digital marketing it allows business organizations to strategically align their marketing offerings with the ever-increasing changes noticeable in customers' demands, expectations, and behaviours; and it is also an effective and efficient way of serving firm's large customer based from a one-spot location. Thus, the internet, which serves the basic e-marketing tool, has appreciatively improved over the years, providing all companies with opportunities that were not hitherto available to them (Rotich and Mukhongo, 2015).

Progressively, the use of digital marketing as a tool in integrating marketing activities as well as enhancing firms' performance has witnessed some twists. Initially, it was designed to help firms gain sustained control of both their diverse marketing activities as well as their large customer base. Put differently, it was designed to empower marketers. However, the dawn of social media and online communities have gradually allowed customers to possess the power of using, sharing, interpreting as well as managing digital marketing activities. As

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement strategy is an association among consumers and organizations by mean of various communication endeavours, incorporated by the organization. Customer engagement is basic for the survival of firms in today's technologically connected society. The

Strauss (2012) succinctly puts it, the power has shifted from companies to their individual customers as the internet users now has a tool to share, discuss, inform and control the way they perceive the marketing message together with other people, who appear to be more credible than the company itself. Thus, the digital marketing strategies of a firm, depending on how effective, efficient, and the content, could either benefit or mar the survival propensity of most organizations (Strauss, 2001).

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following paragraphs give a brief review of literature regarding customer engagement: Doorn et. al. (2010) discussed the concept of customer engagement behaviours, which we defined as the customers' behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers.

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customer engagement behaviours comprised of massive conduct of behaviours comprising a word-of-mouth (WOM) activity, recommendations, helping different clients, blogging, composing reviews, and even captivating in legal programs. The authors developed a conceptual model of the antecedents and consequences-customer, firm, and societal of customer engagement behaviours and discussed how it differs from customer attitudes such as trust satisfaction and commitment. Enginkaya and Esen (2014) focused on defining and measuring online customer engagement by gathering data from customers who are using internet in

Customer Commitment

Customers experience similar types of commitment that employees of an organization experience (e.g., Amine, 1998; Tsiros and Mittal, 2009). Customers can form an attachment to a brand or provider resembling affective commitment. Affective commitment has been defined as an emotional feeling that exhibits the psychological closeness a customer has with a brand or business (Amine, 1998). Research has identified several outcomes of consumer affective commitment including a greater desire to repeat purchase and remain with the brand, invest in the brand, and have a greater propensity to spread positive word of mouth recommendations (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Wetzels, De Ruyter, and Van Birgelen, 1998).

Brand Engagement

Brand engagement' in the present research is defined as 'the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions. The concept of 'brand interactions' refers to customers' contact-based interactions with a focal brand, as opposed to indirect brand interactions that may occur, for example, by observing a brand through mass communications (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantello, 2009). Examples of

shopping. An online customer engagement scale was developed and used. It was found that client's engagement could be clarified with trust, commitment and in a reputed dimensional way. The analysis scrutinized evaluation and other aspects of online client engagement. Khan and Inbaraj (2014) identified the role of mobile apps in engaging customers. Today, gadgets like smart phones and tablets, mobile apps, stages like online networking, and data advances have given another intending to the idea of business-client correspondence and client engagement.

Additionally, outcomes associated with high commitment include demonstrations of prosocial behaviours and less withdrawal when commitment is conceptualized as feelings of positive attachment measured by a willingness to exert effort for, have pride in, and identify personally with an organization (Meyer and Allen, 2002; Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982; Macey and Schneider, 2008). It is argued that customers are able to make relationship-based evaluations that are superior to evaluations of tangible attributes of a product or service (Bowden & Corkindale, 2005; Pullman and Gross, 2003). Feelings of attachment and emotional connectivity have a greater influence on the formation of customer preference.

customers' 'cognitive' brand-related activity include the individual's level of concentration and/or engrossment in the brand, while 'emotional' activity may be represented by a customer's level of brand-related inspiration and/or pride (Schaufeli, Mart'inez et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002). Further, customers' 'behavioural' brand-related activity may be expressed through a customer's level of energy exerted in interacting with a focal brand (Patterson et al., 2006).

Customer Involvement

Customers will be more involved when they are searching for more quantitative and qualitative product information (Scullin et al., 2004). In this case the customer is choosing to actively seek out and evaluate additional attributes to make a purchasing decision. Therefore, the decision-making process is prolonged based on information gathering and preference evaluation. Lower involvement decisions tend to occur during impulse buying decisions or when an ample amount of information is provided, alternatives are

readily available, low risk or cost is perceived, and when past purchases lead to a clear favourite for future purchases (Scullin et al., 2004; Stanton, Miller and Layton, 1994). The extent to which a customer is involved can impact levels of commitment or developing an emotional attachment to a business that might impact subsequent behaviours such as being more responsive to marketing efforts. Therefore, customers are more willing to engage themselves with other efforts and opportunities that a business might offer.

Technology Acceptance Model

The theory upon which the present study was anchored is the Technology Adoption Model (TAM) propounded by Fred Davis in 1989. While this theory has been widely used in technology adoption studies, its strength lies on the simplicity of its model. The idea of the TAM model is the combination of theory of reason notion (TRA) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Basically, the TAM model was developed to determine user acceptance of a wide range of computing technologies (Dans, 1989). According to this author, two theoretical constructs were found useful in conceptualizing the TAM model. They are: perceived usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of use (PEOU). Both constructs according to this affects the intention to use a system. The author defined PU as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance. More so, PEOU was defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort.

In relating this theory to the present study, underscores the importance of the use of digital marketing in shaping and directing subscriber purchase behaviour on one hand, and performance of the organisation on the other hand. The rate of adoption of digital marketing tools such as social media marketing, content marketing, mobile application, search engine optimization, and the rest of them; may be determined by PU and PEOU. This however goes a long way to determining their intention to patronize a particular marketer. The adoption behaviour determines the degree to which subscribers decide to use these technologies in their various activities. This is of primary concern to companies because if the adoption rate is not positive and favourable, then communicating product information and services to consumers via these systems may be hampered; hence, produces less result. It is however in view of this association; the researcher adopted the TAM as part our theoretical foundation.

METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for the study is the cross-sectional research design. The population of this study comprises. The population figure 4000, this research adopted Taro Yamen formula in determining the sample size of 400 passengers. The questionnaire was the instrument for data collection, while Correlation Coefficient was the analysis for data collection.

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RESULTS

Test of Hypothesis One

H₀₁: Social media marketing has no significant relationship with customer engagement of airline operators in Nigeria.

Correlation Analysis showing the relationship between Social Media marketing and Customer Engagement

		Correlations	
		Social Media Marketing	Customer Engagement
Spearman's rho	Social Media Marketing	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.914
		N	.000
			332
	Customer Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	.914
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000
		N	.000
			332

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2021, SPSS 20 Output

Decision: Table above reveals a spearman rank correlation coefficient of 0.914 and probability value of 0.000. This result indicates that there is a strong and positive and significant relationship between social media

marketing and customer engagement towards airline operators in Nigeria. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis, because the PV (0.000) <0.05 level of significance.

Test of Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: Content marketing has no significant relationship with customer engagement of airline operators in Nigeria.

Correlation Analysis showing the relationship between of Content Marketing and Customer Engagement

		Correlations	
		Content Marketing	Customer Engagement
Spearman's rho	Content Marketing	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.932*
		N	.000
			332
	Customer Engagement	Correlation Coefficient	.932*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000
		N	.000
			332

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2021, SPSS 20 Output

Decision: Table above reveals a spearman rank correlation coefficient of 0.932 and probability value of 0.000. This result indicates that there is a strong and positive and significant relationship between content

marketing and e-loyalty towards airline operators in Nigeria. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis, because the PV (0.000) <0.05 level of significance.

H₀₃: Mobile application does not significantly relate with customer engagement of airline operators in Nigeria.

Correlation Analysis showing the relationship between of Mobile Application and Customer Engagement

		Correlations	
		Mobile App	Customer Engagement
Spearman's rho	Mobile App	Correlation Coefficient 1.000	.920*
		Sig. (2-tailed) .	.000
		N 332	332
Customer Engagement		Correlation Coefficient .920*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed) .000	.
		N 332	332

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2021, SPSS 20 Output

Decision: Table above reveals a spearman rank correlation coefficient of 0.920 and probability value of 0.000. This result indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between mobile app and

customer engagement towards airline operators in Nigeria. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis, because the PV (0.000) <0.05 level of significance.

CONCLUSIONS

Digital-driven technologies have come to stay based on our findings. Therefore, organisations that want to remain competitive may need to key into the trend and outsmart others. Specifically, social media marketing has been confirmed to be a veritable business tool to not just create followership, but also improve customer engagement. It has helped

to facilitate online transactions and positive reviews from customers. This is because customers are disposed to systems that are user-friendly and entertaining. However, digital marketing strategies is greatly affected by the prevailing orientation of the organisation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made available for customers/passengers of airline in Rivers State for effective implementation.

1. Owners and Managers of airlines in Rivers State should understand and develop a holistic approach of implementing an overall social media programme, as this research has confirmed its strategic importance in improving customer fulfilment.
2. Strategists of airline firms should pay adequate attention to digital content

- creation and deployment especially on all digital fonts. This study has made us understand the strategic prowess of digital contents in impacting on customer engagement.
3. Lastly, given the research evidence we have so far with respect to the rate at which customers prefer friendly and entertaining websites, we therefore advice management to optimise their search engine systems; which in-turn improves user loyalty and positive WOM.

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